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Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present and Future

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Article abstract

This paper explores the writing of women's labour history in Canada over the last thirty years. Three interconnected forces have shaped the contours of this intellectual production: the course of feminist, Left, and labour organizing; trends in international social theory; and directions in Canadian historiography. Feminist challenges to the initially 'masculinist' shape of working-class history, along with more recent calls to integrate race and ethnicity as categories of analysis, have produced important shifts in the overall narrative of Canadian working-class history and in the dominant paradigms used to examine labour. As a result, gender has been more effectively, though certainly not completely, integrated into our analysis of class formation. More recent post-structuralist theoretical trends, along with the decline of the Left and labour militancy, have called into question some fundamental suppositions of women's and working-class history, creating an unsettled and uncertain future for a feminist and materialist exposition of class formation in Canada.

GENDER, FAMILY & SEX

Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present and Future

Joan Sangster

AS WE ENTER the 21st century, working people have reason to be pessimistic about their fate in the new millennium. Despite technological advances, a communications revolution, and a globalized economy, labour remains alienating for many workers, hazardous, and lacks the remuneration necessary for a decent standard of living. In "post-Fordist" North America, even the better paid, if routinized work in industry has been replaced by lower-paid service work in multiple jobs, with far less job security. Moreover, age-old patterns of capital accumulation and women's exploitation seem to be irrepressible. At the turn of the century, many immigrant women toiled in their homes, doing sweated labour, providing piece work for the competitive garment industry. In 1999, an exposé of sweated labour in Toronto uncovered a similar contracting out system, exploiting Asian women who were paid below the minimum wage, unable, due to family responsibilities, to work outside the home, fearful of being deported if they protested their conditions of work.

Pessimism about the "state of work" at this juncture might be tempered by our recognition, as historians, of the ever-present possibilities of change over time, in both predictable and unpredictable ways, and of the prospect of resistance to the

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current order. Yet, the prevailing political moment does not look auspicious in this regard. Union membership has not increased dramatically in the last decade, and the shift to a "Mcjobs" economy, along with the globalized downgrading of labour, militates against unionization. Many governments within Canada have been eroding union and workers' rights, and organized workers, who one would expect to be the strongest opponents, have not been able to mobilize to reverse these trends.[1]

Moreover, despite indications that women, after years of feminist organizing, have made some important gains in areas such as reproductive rights, other signs of progress represent a double-edged sword. The slightly narrowing wage gap between particular male and female workers, some contend, has emerged in part because men's wages are decreasing overall. Moreover, as the example of the Asian garment workers indicates, patterns of sexual and racial subordination remain firmly fixed within the social organization of work. The repercussions for women extend far beyond the workplace, affecting their psyches and physical health, their ability to construct lives of sexual and familial safety and pleasure, their hopes, or lack of them, for their childrens' future.

Behind this rather bleak backdrop lurks the suspicion that this *is* a turn for the worse, and that other possibilities may have existed. In a more optimistic political climate, thirty years ago, feminist activists, including academics, harboured hopes for a reinvigorated working-class movement, transformed by feminism and committed to a broadly based politic of liberation for oppressed peoples. An intellectual and political space was created, which, though never dominant in the academy and the community, fostered new critiques of history and society and thus also hope for a different future. Out of this climate emerged the first attempts to create a Canadian feminist working-class history.

Certainly, past research and praxis were never unproblematic; there were weaknesses we saw at the time, and those we recognized in retrospect. Class and gender analyses sometimes chafed uneasily against each other; race and colonialism were inadequately addressed. Working-class and women's history, two allies with potentially different interests at heart, experienced very real tensions, just as women activists in the labour movement and on the Left found masculinist barriers circumscribing their political work.

Our pasts, both written and lived, however, must be assessed for their insights and advances, as well as their limits and failures. As we face a new century, it is a propitious time to re-examine past attempts to create a thoroughly gendered analysis of Canadian working-class history since the "renaissance" in women's and labour history in the 1970s.[2] We need to explore the ways in which class and gender

[1]Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to the Social Contract* (Toronto 1993).

[2]While recognizing that labour and working-class history sometimes mean different things, I have used the terms interchangeably. I am concentrating on feminism and working-class history, as lack of space prevents me from addressing whether a class analysis permeated women's history, but the latter *is* a question needing critical inquiry.

were problematized, how interpretive strategies changed over time, and were ultimately complicated by theoretical challenges such as critical race and post-structuralist theory. Is it fair, now, to echo the claims of academics in other nations that working-class history, and especially its "unhappy marriage" with feminism,[3] is in crisis, if not a state of decline?

This attempt to re-examine our histories/historical writing must be related to the course of feminist and working-class politics within Canadian society, to the political and intellectual evolution of the historical profession, and to changing trends in social theory within the wider academy. Nor were these three factors separate; they were closely intertwined. As E.H. Carr argued many years ago, history is inevitably influenced by the historian and her social and political context, by the way in which culture and society are reacted to, and lived out through the historian's outlook and writing.[4] While this might also be characterized in Foucauldian terms as a "history of the present," an exploration of the construction of history within the prevailing political discourses, I am influenced less by a relativist claim that history is a discursive — and ultimately unknowable — construct, more by an attempt to both locate my own and other histories in their social context, analyzing those systems of thought which have masked, or offered emancipatory potential to the working-class and women.

Problematic Possibilities

Labour and women's history did not originate, but were rejuvenated in the 1970s. This renaissance was encouraged by political and social movements of the time, as well as by the opening up of previously élite universities to a new cohort of youth, including more women, who had high ideals, and were quick to cast a critical eye on their elders.[5] The New Left and student radicalism, a resurgence of interest in social history and Marxist writing (long shunned in Canadian academe), Québec's Quiet Revolution and the civil rights and anti-war movements all fostered new interest in the history of workers, radical, and socialist movements. At the same time, a revitalization of feminist writing and organizing sparked new attention to women's history. Attempting to understand our current place in society aroused a keen interest in the past; like other oppressed groups, women sought out a history which did not denigrate them by omission, stereotyping or trivialization. Nor were

[3]On the earlier "unhappy marriage" between feminism and marxism debates see Lydia Sargent, *Women and Revolution* (Boston 1981).

[4]E.H.Carr, *What is History?* (London 1961), chap 2. Carr actually referred to the historian as "he," not a surprising reference in that period.

[5]Douglas Owram, *Born at the Right Time: a history of the baby boom generation* (Toronto, 1996); Patricia Jasen, "In Pursuit of Human Values (or Laugh when you say that): The Student Critique of the Arts Curriculum in the 1960s," in Paul Axelrod, John Reid, ed., *Youth, Universities and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Montréal 1989), 247-74.

these two political incentives always separate. Schooled in the women's movement, but sympathetic to the Left, one early practitioner of Canadian women's labour history remembers embracing this project because it allowed her to "combine activism and research."[6]

Labour history in English Canada already had a history. In previous decades, a few lonely materialists like Clare Pentland and social democrats like Harold Logan had preserved the study of class relations and the labour movement. But very few authors had combined an interest in women and labour, save for writers located outside of academe.[7] Unlike the American and British scenes, where scholars Alice Henry, Ivy Pinchbeck and Alice Clark had produced historical or social science investigations of labouring women, this field was open territory in Canada.

What came to be called the new labour history emerged in the 1970s, combining the established focus of the so-called old labour history (very recently reinvigorated in the late 1960s)[8] in the study of trade unions and labourist/CCF politics with novel interest in the social, intellectual and cultural dimensions of working-class experience, and in radicalism located outside social democratic politics. Influenced by historians E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, by neo-Marxist and socialist-humanist writings, by a desire to study class relations as they were lived out in daily life, the new labour history changed the terrain of Canadian historical writing.[9] In French Canada, where an old labour history was less evident, the landscape was different again. Two schools of research emerged (and persisted), one exploring the conditions of working-class life, the other, labour institutions and radicalism.

[6]Linda Kealey, personal communication to author, 9 August 1999.

[7]One early scholarly exception was Jean Scott, "The Conditions of Female labour in Ontario," *Toronto University Studies in Political Science,* 1 (1892), 84-113. Articles on women workers did appear in the Left and progressive press; for example, Irene Biss Spry, Irene Forsey and others wrote for the *Canadian Forum.* Labour historian Joanne Burgess has recalled the influence of Spry on her own intellectual path towards working-class history. Joanne Burgess to author, 31 August 1999.

[8]Gregory S. Kealey suggested two overlapping cohorts of the 1960s and 1970s: the first doing more "institutional" but certainly novel topics, and a second cohort, more interested in 19th century class formation, class, culture and marxism. See Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montréal 1995), 125. Earlier in the 1960s, two historians made tentative suggestions about integrating class into historical scholarship. See S. Mealing, "The Concept of Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review,* 46 (1965), 201-18; J.M.S. Careless, "Limited Identities in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review,* 50 (1969), 1-10. It is important to note that the latter article discussed region, class and ethnicity, but not women.

[9]Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto 1986), chap. 11.

Moreover, Québec historians, unlike English ones, were centrally concerned with the relationship of the working class to the nation and nationalism.[10]

The designation of working-class history as either "old" or "new," with the new primarily concerned with working-class culture, always oversimplified what was actually written. The "old" supposedly concentrated on the formal institutions of labour, but in English Canada, the "new" also wrote about the state, trade unions, political campaigns, and so on. An emphasis on culture did not reign supreme in the new labour history, even if some of its advocates urged the study of class relations *through* the lens of culture. Nonetheless, defensive critiques of the work of the new labour history quickly surfaced within English-Canadian academe; opponents charged these writers had a "idolatorous" fascination with esoteric aspects of working-class life; they "dreamed of" resistance and class struggle when there was none; they "glorified Communism,"[11] and unfairly neglected the 20th century. Interestingly, some recent feminist critiques of the new labour history repeat similar affirmations about the overemphasis on class resistance found in this writing, perhaps indicating the dangers of historiographical reification and over-generalization.[12]

Critics of the new working-class history generally had little use for utopian ideals and "foreign" theories from abroad, supposedly tainting solid Canadian traditions of pure empiricism and polite reformism. Yet, such antagonistic responses were themselves ideological and sometimes rested precariously on vast

[10]For a comparison of English and French labour history see Joanne Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and Québec," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1990),149-67. By the 1970s there had emerged a number of sociological and historical works on Québec labour. Jean Hamelin and Yves Roby, *Histoire economique du Québec, 1851-90* (Montréal 1971); Andrew LeBlanc and James D. Thwaites, ed., *Le Monde Ouvriere au Québec; bibliographie retrospective* (Montréal 1973); Noel Belanger, *et al.*, ed., *Les Travailleurs Québéçois, 1851-96* (Montréal 1975); Fernand Harvey, *Le mouvement ouvrier au Québec* (Montréal 1980). Many of these Québec historians, along with Jacques Rouillard and Joanne Burgess, connected with English colleagues through the new journals like *Labour/Le Travail.*

[11]Terry Morley, "Canada's Romantic Left," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 110-19.

[12]Karen Dubinsky, *et al.*, "Introduction," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto 1992), xvii. The only text cited is Bryan Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Canada* (Montréal 1979). Who gets cited (or omitted) creates its own powerful rendition of historiography. This lends some credence to the postmodern claim that the construction of historiography is just that: a construction. See Keith Jenkins, "Introduction," to Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London 1997), 19. The claim that resistance was an important theme in early labour history (as it was in Black history, or more recently, gay history) has a ring of truth, but it need not be totalized or assumed to reside in one Marxist text. For example, if you want to criticize a preoccupation with resistance, why not cite Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-49* (Toronto 1974).

generalizations about a range of politics and writings.[13] Ultimately, critics probably objected less to the study of culture (cultural topics are currently popular, and we hear few complaints), far more to the Marxist assumptions of class conflict underlying this work. Broader political lessons were at stake, between established social democratic ideas and tactics and New Left challenges to the labour and academic establishment.

It is true that new works in labour history drew consciously on international theoretical debates (yet references to *au courant* theory — certainly not Marxism — are taken for granted today), and having cut their teeth on student and anti-war protests, some authors were not immune to issuing declarations about the superior virtue of their quest for holistic views of "society, culture, work" rather than the older, narrower emphasis on unions and "institutions."[14] What is especially noteworthy is that these contentious debates centred very little — if at all — on gender. The issue of gender made its way into this contest when it was introduced as evidence that class, or at least class consciousness, did not really exist. Since the working-class was fractured by different experiences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and region, David Bercuson argued, class was obscured and a unitary class consciousness lacking.[15] If all working-class Canadians were not "one for all" like the Musketeers, then class was all for nought. This was certainly not what some of us intended as the message of our work on women that Bercuson cited, nor did Marxists generally explore class as singularly unified and/or imbued with revolutionary consciousness. The earlier call to explore the "limited identities" in Canadian history was thus used to suggest that class consciousness was a fabrication of Marxist minds — though an essentialized gender experience was not. Some echoes of this critique are still heard; a recent study of Calgary labour similarly searches for a "single" working-class consciousness, uncomplicated by gender and ethnic differences, and, not surprisingly, finds it did not exist.[16]

[13]Kenneth McNaught "E.P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 62, 2 (1981),141-68. McNaught discredited the works of some of the "new" labour historians, then promptly lauded the work of his own students like David Bercuson. A few critiques of so-called culturalism also came from within the new labour history. See Ian McKay, "The Three Faces of Canadian Labour History," *History Workshop Journal*, (1987), 172-9, and his "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," *Labour/Le Travail*, 8/9 (1981-2), 185-241.

[14]Russell Hann, G. Kealey, L. Kealey, P. Warrian, *Primary Sources in Working Class History* (Kitchener 1973), Introduction, 9-21. See also Bryan Palmer (response to Morley), "Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 594-616.

[15] David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 95-112.

[16]David Bright, *The Limits of Labour: Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883-1929* (Vancouver 1998), 41.

Where did these debates about class leave women's labour history and feminism? It is revealing that it is difficult *not* to write about working-class and women's history as if they were "two separate tribes," to use an American interpretation of their relationship.[17] There were initially some fundamental differences between the two, for women's history, by its very definition, assumed gender to be the central defining category of historical analysis, while for labour history, class was the definitive analytic framework. Trying to create a gendered working-class history, or a women's history centrally informed by class and race, have proven to be far more difficult than we imagined. However, I think it is significant that, early on, few feminist historians championed the Bercusonian critique. Instead, we re-doubled our efforts to explore working-class history as women lived it, altering the concentration on male realms of work and politics.

Neither the study of class formation, or the term "working-class history" need be ethnocentric, masculinist endeavours. But for the first decade, even longer, these adjectives have been pertinent to Canadian labour history. One of the first major collections of the new labour history contained not one article on women.[18] Reinterpretations of the Winnipeg General Strike, labour radicals, and the founding of the Canadian CIO, all published in the early 1970s, generally ignored women.[19] Two seminal studies followed by Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer. Though differently positioned politically, they examined workers' responses to 19th century industrialization, with a proclivity to centre on skilled male workers and their actions in the public sphere.[20]

Many of the dominant themes and paradigms in both the old and new labour history cast men in leading roles. Industrialization, proletarianization, and unionization were often explored, with forms of production employing male workers taken as the norm, or at least perceived to be the most important focus of study. Under the influence of Harry Braverman and David Montgomery, the workplace, the labour process, and managerial attempts to de-skill the (male) worker also took centre stage, though women were subsequently added to the discussion, particularly

[17]Richard Oestreicher, "Separate Tribes? Working-Class and Women's History," *Reviews in American History*, 19 (1991), 228-9.

[18]Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1976). This should be contrasted to the first book on women's history in the same series, which did have articles on working-class women. See Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, eds., *The Neglected Majority* (Toronto 1977).

[19]David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg* (Montréal 1974); Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977); Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-56* (Toronto, 1973).

[20]Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal 1979); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-92* (Toronto 1980).

in later Canadian collections.[21] As Sonya Rose has argued, a long-standing ideological investment in "separate spheres," a remnant of 19th century ideology, but incorporated into Marxism and the social sciences, lingered on in 20th century analysis. The public world of production tended to be associated with men, politics and work; the private world of family, nurturing, and unpaid work, with women.[22] Nor were these two equal in importance. Even socialists and communists throughout much of the 20th century saw women's true liberation coming when they *entered* the world of social production and joined the working-class struggle, leaving behind the private realm.

But all this has been said before. Indeed, twenty years ago, a critical article by Joan Kelly called for a feminist theory of "double vision," integrating, rather than separating, the spheres of production, sexual and social life.[23] Subsequent critiques of Braverman by feminist labour historians suggested that labour process theory rested on the experiences of male, not female workers. Acute analyses of labour historians' accent on the male artisan, the shop floor and industrial work, on unions dominated by men, began to figure in reviews of Anglo-American working-class history. Even the very periodization of working-class history, as Susan Porter Benson argued, utilized a time frame based on the impact of capital on male, rather than female, workers.[24]

Yet, the tendency to feature male not female versions of work continued through the 1980s as important Canadian studies were done of metalworkers, bushworkers, steel workers, sailors, and miners — and more![25] Given the prevailing

[21]By the time a Canadian book was published on the labour process, critiques of Braverman, including feminist ones, were taken into account. Essays on paid and unpaid women workers were found in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Montréal 1986).

[22]Sonya Rose, "Gender and Labour History: The nineteenth-century legacy," *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), Supplement, 145-62.

[23]Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago 1984), chap. 3.

[24]For feminists critiques of Braverman see Veronica Beechy, "The Sexual Division of Labour and the Labour Process: a Critical Assessment of Braverman," in S. Wood, ed., *Degradation of Work? Skill, Deskilling and the Labour Process* (London 1982), 54-73. Note, as well, Susan Porter Benson, "Response," to David Montgomery in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 32 (Fall 1987), 31-8.

[25]Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-80* (Toronto 1987); Laurel Sefton McDowell, *Remember Kirkland Lake: The History and Effects of the Kirkland Lake Gold Miners Strike, 1941-2* (Toronto 1983); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-35* (Toronto 1988); Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montréal 1989); Al Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (1985), 23-60; For metalworkers, loggers and rail workers all together, see *Labour/Le Travail*, 6 (1980). A review essay in 1987 noted the three faces of labour history to be: the labour process, institutions, and working-class culture, with gender even not mentioned as a theme. Ian Mackay, "The Three Faces of Canadian Labour History."

silence in Canadian history on the working class, these were significant studies, and by the late 1980s some gestured at gender, noting how the masculinity of workers, or family relations were important. However, the prevailing prototypes of labour history persisted, in some cases even into the 1990s.[26]

Despite these masculinist inclinations in labour history there were openings and possibilities for meaningful alliances with feminism, and perhaps more so in Canada than in the US for Canadian political traditions encompassed stronger democratic socialist traditions, and a more concerted socialist influence on the reborn women's movement of the 1970s.[27] Nor were Canadian activists troubled by the split in the American women's movement, still apparent in the 1970s, over one of the most crucial issues for labour: the contest between protective labour legislation and the Equal Rights Amendment.[28]

As well as these broader political influences, women's and working-class historians shared overlapping occupational experiences, challenging the mainstream of the historical profession, not only with ideas, but with the prospect of opening up a men's club to women and people from more plebian backgrounds. A few female faculty members (there were few then) first introduced women's history courses in the early 1970s, and by 1975, a new professional grouping, the Canadian Committee on Women's History reflected the changing persona of the profession.[29] The Canadian Committee on Labour History, its fraternal partner, had been established four years earlier, though only it, as far as we know, was infiltrated by the RCMP searching for radicals.[30]

Second, women's and working-class historians were often engaged in research probing common questions and themes, such as the effects of industrialization and urbanization on society, the creation of consciousness and ideology, the unfolding of resistance. And both groups included historians who linked their research to political commitments they felt no need to hide under false declarations of objec-

[26]In his 1998 study of the nascent Calgary labour movement, David Bright, *The Limits of Labour* concentrates on the traditional (male) spheres of productive and public work, unions and politics. However, one might make an argument that it is still acceptable to write about male workers, and to focus on the formal institutions of labour.

[27]On the weakness of socialism in the US movement at this time, Ellen Ross, "Women's History in the U.S.," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 182-8. On the Canadian movement, Linda Adamson, Linda Briskin, Magaret Macphail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto 1988).

[28]Dennis Deslippe, *Rights not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois 2000), chap.5.

[29]If Marxists were men unwelcome in the profession because of their ideas, women had been just plain unwelcome. On earlier attitudes towards female faculty (and Marxists) see Michiel Horn, *Academic Freedom in Canada* (Toronto 1999), 215-6, 259-60.

[30]Steve Hewitt, "Intelligence at the Learneds: The RCMP, The Learneds and the Canadian Historical Association," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 8 (1998), 267-86.

tivity. As Deborah Gorham and others remember, it was the women's movement, events like the Berkshire Conference, or books like *Sexual Politics*, that stimulated their feminist commitment to women's history.[31] Like some working-class historians, they were interested in international theoretical debates, and in deconstructing (never a word used then) the unstated political assumptions about what was even deemed "worthy" of study in Canadian history. "Whose history" and "whose nation" they asked, does mainstream history represent —and possibly defend?[32] History was to make radical connections to the present. "From the beginning," remembered Susan Mann, "women's history has harboured the premise that oppression ... is the common lot of the female half of humanity. Once documented, that oppression would become an intellectual and political weapon, first to change the past then to change the future."[33]

Third, the new working-class history provided an important opening for feminist research, by rejecting — a least in rhetoric — the emphasis on formal institutions, and calling for studies of the family, community, and leisure, even if this approach was stronger in English than in French Canada. Culture, as Bryan Palmer notes, was never the simple "object of inquiry." The broader point was to open up "the way that class mattered in Canadian society ... [and] the actual activities of men and women as they lived out their lives" beyond the workplace and conventional politics.[34] The goal of linking working-class and women's history was thus placed more squarely at the centre than at the margins, since women always were more likely to be found in back yards, dance halls or in fleeting, unskilled employment, rather than in trade union offices.

Canadian women's history in these early years has been somewhat (mis)characterized as concentrating on "articulate, white middle-class"women, primarily social reformers.[35] Understandably, in the midst of a re-birth of feminism, some

[31]Deborah Gorham, "Women's History: Founding a New Field," in Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver 1997), 273-97.

[32]L. Kealey, R. Pierson, J. Sangster and V. Strong-Boag, "Teaching Canadian History in the 1990's: Whose 'National' History Are We Lamenting?" *Journal of Canadian Studies*, (Summer 1992), 129-31.

[33]Susan Mann [Trofimenkoff], quoted in Marlene Shore, "Remember the Future: The Canadian Historical Review and the Discipline of History, 1920-95," *Canadian Historical Review*, 76, 3 (September 1995), 449.

[34]Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto,1992), 13.

[35]K. Dubinsky *et al.*, in Iacovetta and Valverde, eds., "Introduction," *Gender Conflicts*, xiv. I made a similar statement in piece written much earlier on working-class women's history and should have known better because the existing research on working-class women allowed me to write the article. Joan Sangster, "Canadian Working Women," in W.J.C. Cherwinski and Greg Kealey, eds., *Lectures in Canadian Working-Class History* (St. John's 1985), 59-78. A recent version of this overgeneralization is: "many historians of Canadian

researchers were fascinated by a previous generation of reformers and suffragists. And before being disparaging, we should recall that these were days long before Nellie McClung graced the Heritage Minutes on our TVs. Moreover, middle-class reformers never comprised the singular concern of feminist historians. Another current of women's history, exemplified by the "non-professional" collective which produced *Women at Work* in 1974, was centrally concerned with working-class women,[36] as were some Québécoise historians.[37] Given further focus by Wayne Roberts' *Honest Womanhood*, this brand of women's history promoted working-class women as the subject, and Marxist and feminist theory as the practice.[38] Moreover, even in the early writing on women reformers, class was not totally absent, perhaps because of the parallel influence of Marxist thought in working-class history. Carol Bacchi's suffragists, for example, were defined very much by their class interests, while the agenda of Barbara Robert's immigration reformers was shaped by their class and "Anglo" or "white" identity. Wayne Roberts and Alice Klein were critical of the manner in which the working girl was constructed as a problem by her middle-class "betters" — a theme taken up again in work in the 1990s.[39]

Fourth, and very significantly, the emergence of both women's history and labour history occurred in the midst of a reawakening of the Canadian Left, in various configurations from the left caucus of the NDP to ultra-left Trotskyist and Maoist groups. Though small, they had a significance beyond their numbers, and this had repercussions for academic thought and endeavours. Political and academic life were never symbiotic in any simplistic sense, and relations between the

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women have given lavish attention to the winning of female suffrage between 1916 and 1919 as the critical watershed in the construction of modern feminism." This neither describes the range of research in women's history, or the dominant interpretations of suffrage. Nancy Christie and Michael Gavreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-40* (Montréal 1996), 116.

[36]Janice Acton, *et al*, *Women at Work: Ontario, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1974). See also early collections from BC such as Barbara Latham and Poberta Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1984).

[37]For example, one book produced in the early 1980s was literally divided into works on working-class women and feminists. Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, eds., *Travaillueses et feministes* (Montréal 1983).

[38]Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women, 1893-1914* (Toronto 1976).

[39]Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto 1982); Barbara Roberts, "A Work of Empire: Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration," in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto 1979), 185-201; Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: the 'Problem' and Problems of Working Women - Toronto, 1896-1914," in Janice Acton *et al.*, *Women at Work*, 211-60. The latter theme is taken up by Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City* (Toronto 1995).

women's movement and feminist scholars were sometimes difficult and strained. Nonetheless, this political climate did have an important effect on the questions explored by historians.

Indeed, both political organizing and academic writing fostered theoretical innovations producing a new hybrid, "Marxist-feminist" theory. There were innovative attempts to join feminism and socialism analytically, transforming the Anglo-American Left, for some time stymied in its analysis of "the woman question." Heidi Hartmann's dual systems theory kicked off a debate on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, as two mutually reinforcing, but distinct systems of exploitation and oppression.[40] Critiques followed, often working towards a more integrated analysis of these systems, until a distinctly socialist-feminist theoretical stance came to argue strongly that we should search for a "historically specific analysis of capitalist patriarchy ... looking at the multiplicity of relations of power based on class, race, ethnicity and gender."[41]

Inspired by these debates, works explored the role of patriarchy and capital in shaping the sexual division of labour, the relationship between the realms of reproduction and production, especially *vis à vis* women's domestic labour, and the interplay of economic structure and ideology in shaping class and gender relations. Both Marxist structuralism and socialist-humanism were used as guideposts — and foils — against which to probe women's oppression. This theoretical agenda also preoccupied Canadian political economists and sociologists such as Pat Armstrong, Hugh Armstrong, and Patricia Connelly, whose pathbreaking work was utilized by historians in an academic milieu increasingly characterized by a vibrant interdisciplinarity.[42]

Historians embarking on these new paths were thus never alone. Class formation, working women and trade unions were seen as important research areas *and* a crucial field of political action by a much larger group of academic/activists. Books like *Union Sisters* and *Hard Earned Wages*, appealing to a broadly-based

[40]There are many early works in this genre. See, for example, Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York 1979); Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London 1980); Shelia Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London 1973). Some early Canadian interventions were Charnie Guettel, *Marxism and Feminism* (Toronto 1974); Dorothy Smith, *Feminism and Marxism* (Vancouver 1977).

[41]Linda Briskin, "Identity Politics and the Hierarchy of Oppression," *Feminist Review*, 35 (1990), 103-4.

[42]For examples of early work, Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto* (Toronto 1978); Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards a Feminist Marxism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 10 (1983), 7-43; Pat Connolly, *Last Hired, First Fired* (Toronto 1979); Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto 1980). On early feminist political economy see Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, eds., *Feminism and Political Economy* (Toronto 1987).

audience, explored contemporary women's struggles in the labour movement and in non-traditional work, while a text such as *Feminists Organizing for Change*, advocated a socialist-feminist praxis for the women's movement. Both were legacies of this period.[43] And it is no accident that some of us writing working-class women's history were spending our spare hours organizing strike support committees; we felt no need to hide the fact that an interest in socialist and feminist theory and praxis informed the questions we asked of the past.

For making similar declarations, Marxists had been vehemently denounced as romantics and ideologues. Though parallel fears were voiced by conservative thinkers that feminist scholarship would be biased, ideological and partial, women's history was never immersed in the same intense political debates as working-class history. Perhaps it was difficult to construct a critique of women's history when we were only making the entirely reasonable claim that 50 per cent of the population deserved some historical attention. Perhaps too, women were such outsiders, and in such short supply in academe that we felt more inclined to stress sisterhood and commonality, rather than explore our intellectual differences — a particularly Canadian tendency which may have later inhibited constructive criticism and debate.

It is important to recall how this political and theoretical context framed the first decade, and more, of writing on labour and women's history. The labour movement was not yet cowed by neo-liberalism, and a number of key struggles involving women workers, from the Fleck strike in Ontario to SORWUC organizing in BC, highlighted their increased participation in the working-class movement.[44] Both an academic and activist Left were intent on bringing to light women's and labour's buried past.

Expanding and Complicating Possibilities

These fortuitous conditions, however, did not necessarily immediately transform our analysis of class formation. The history of women as workers, paid and unpaid, and a gendered history of class formation, not to mention the question of race, were only partially integrated into working-class history. In fact, I have asked myself if I am nostalgically ignoring a macho culture within working-class history that continued to marginalize women. Did we face a hard-drinking, cigar chomping group of men intent on playing Big Bill Haywood and stubbornly defending the masculine boundaries of the discipline? I don't think so. Labour history generally welcomed feminist research exploring gender and class. Though *some* (usually, but

[43] Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters* (Toronto 1983); Jennifer Penney, ed., *Hard Earned Wages* (Toronto 1983); Adamson, Briskin and Macphail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*.

[44] Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," *New Left Review*, 141 (1983), 51-71; Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver 1979).

not always male) practitioners saw class as definitive, gender a crucial additive, they were always willing to contest this issue with those of us who disagreed. If tensions were there, between class and gender, feminism and socialism, debating "who was on top," in which theory, and why, they were not necessarily negative: they could be productive. Moreover, within History Departments, some of us doing women's history were profoundly isolated to a degree that a new generation of feminists can hardly imagine. I found intellectual encouragement from labour historians, and from political friends and colleagues from other disciplines who were interested in Marxist and feminist theory.[45]

Perhaps, I also wondered, the integration of feminism into working-class history encountered few denunciations from more conservative critics such as David Bercuson because we were an inconsequential "fraction" that never even got gender on the negotiating table. It is true that, even after a decade, as Bettina Bradbury charged in a retrospective in 1987, our attempts to integrate women into working-class history were still circumscribed. Using household and family as examples, she argued that more substantive attention to gender was essential if we were to achieve that holistic picture of working-class life that the new labour historians had always acclaimed.[46]

Bradbury's own work on the family economy, however, had already contributed immensely to a recasting of working-class history.[47] Indeed, two distinct patterns were emerging in research and critique. On the one hand, women were being integrated into existing themes in labour history, and, on the other hand, some reflective assessments of the field began to argue for shifting the paradigms of working-class history, using new perspectives and creating syntheses that moved

[45]While I recognize that some feminist graduate students still feel isolated, I think there is a far more accepting atmosphere for feminist work and female colleagues in many institutions, the product of twenty years of feminist activism. I never had one female professor in all my years in university; I encountered no other students doing women's history; I experienced instances of dismissal from fellow students; and there were not yet any jobs advertised in women's history. There were no email networks like the CCWH one to remind me I was not alone. I had a supportive, respectful PhD thesis supervisor, Richard Allen, a true blessing in those times. Graduate students in sociology and political science, with longer traditions of Marxist debate, were more likely to be politically and intellectually interested in women's history.

[46]Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (1987), 23-44. Joanne Burgess argues that this goal remained even more remote in Québec, given the lack of *rapprochement* and integration of the existing two "schools" of labour history. See Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities."

[47]For example, Bettina Bradbury, "The Family Economy and Work in an Industrializing City: Montréal 1871," *CHAR* (1979), 71-96; "The Fragmented Family; Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-85," in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto 1982), 109-28; "Pigs, Cows, Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival Among Montreal Families, 1861-91," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (1984), 9-46.

away from the conceptual subordination of gender to class. Alice Kessler-Harris' call to see gender, like class, as a "historical process", and to emphasize the "reciprocal and changing relationships" of work, household and community was symptomatic of this shift.[48]

By the early 1990s, a feminist labour history had substantially elaborated on the earlier masculinist story of work. Using sources including government documents, the census, union collections, accounts of strikes, company records, reformers' archives and oral history, and drawing very decidedly on wider Anglo-American debates and research, new territory was explored. Certain female jobs and workplaces were analyzed, as was the creation and tenacity of a sexual division of labour. Given the desire of the renewed women's movement to challenge the "female wage ghetto," this accent on uncovering the basis of the gendered division of labour was understandable. The interaction between gender and technology was explored less, though later works in labour studies, influenced by the information revolution and globalization, did begin to analyze technology, gender, and class.[49]

[48]Alice Kessler-Harris, "A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis and the Question of Class," in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb 1989), 217-34. See also her later, "Treating the Male as the 'Other': Redefining the Parameters of Labor History," (from a paper given in 1991) *Labor History*, 34, 2-3 (Spring-Summer 1993), 190-204. Calls for new syntheses of labour history were heard more often in the US than in Canada, perhaps because Canadians, sensitive to Québec and regional interests, knew the difficulties of attempting such "centralizing" initiatives.

[49]The following lists denote examples only. The literature is vast enough that I have not attempted to cite all of relevant works in this section of the paper. On female occupations and the sexual division of labour, see Graham Lowe, "Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office," *Labour/Le Travail*, 10 (1982), 11-37; Margaret McCallum, "Separate Spheres: The Organization of Work in a Confectionary Factory, Ganong Bros.," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (1989), 9-90; Marilyn Porter, "She was skipper of the shore crew: Notes on the sexual division of labour in Newfoundland," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (1985), 105-23; Andrée Lévesque, "Le Bordel: Milieu de Travail Contrôle," *Labour/Le Travail*, 20 (1987), 13-31; Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving it Together: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-50," *Labour/Le Travail*, 7 (1981), 113-26; Shirley Tillotson. "We may all soon be 'first-class men': Gender and Skill in Canada's early twentieth century urban telegraph industry," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (1991), 97-125; Jacques Ferland, "In Search of the Unbound Prometheia: A Comparative View of Women's Activism in Two Quebec Industries," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (1989), 11-44; Jacques Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire' et syndicalism 'collectif': une intérpretation socio-technique des conflits ouvrièrs dans deux industries québécoises, 1880-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (1987), 49-88; Mercedes Steedman, "Skill and Gender in the Canadian Clothing Industry," in *On the Job*; Joy Parr, "Disaggregating the Sexual Division of Labour — a Transatlantic Case Study," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30, 3 (1988), 511-33; Michelle Martin, "*Hello Central?*" *Gender, Technology and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems*

Women's work was necessarily defined differently than men's, with studies of servants, domestic work, and feminized occupations taking a central place. The latter were especially strong in Québec, undoubtedly because of the simultaneous interest of feminist historians with the effect of the Catholic Church on women's lives.[50] The relationship of women and the labour movement to the law and social policy, especially with regards to protective legislation and welfare state provision, was also explored, often by political economists and sociologists as well as historians.[51] Building on the most basic wisdom of second-wave feminist writing,

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(Montréal 1991); Heather Menzies, "Technology in the Craft of Cheesemaking: Women in Oxford County, 1860," *Ontario History*, 87, 3 (1995), 292-304, and *Women and the Chip: Case Studies of the Effects of Informatics on Employment in Canada* (Montréal 1981).

[50]Marta Danylewycz, Beth Light and Alison Prentice, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth Century Ontario and Quebec Case Study," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 16, 31 (May 1983), 81-109; Judi Coboum, "I See and am Silent: A Short History of Nursing," in *Women at Work: Ontario*, 127-63; Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, *Les femmes dans la société québéçoise: aspects historiques* (Montréal 1977); Yoland Cohen and Michele Dagenais, "Le métier d'infirmière: savours Feminins et reconnaissance professionnelle," *RHAF*, 41, 2 (1987), 155-77.

[51]Linda Kealey "Women and Labour during World War I: Women Workers and the Minimum Wage in Manitoba," in Mary Kinnear, ed., *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina 1987), 76-99; Margaret McCallum, "Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada, 1910-25," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (1986), 29-56; Ruth Roach Pierson's *They're Still Women after All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto 1986); Ruth Roach Pierson, "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934-40," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (1990), 77-104; Margaret Hobbs and Ruth Roach Pierson, "A Kitchen That Wastes no Steps...: Gender, Class and the Home Improvement Plan, 1936-40," *Historie Sociale/Social History*, XXI (1988), 9-37; Jane Ursel, *Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto 1992); Jane Haddad and Stephen Milton, "The Construction of Gender Roles in Social Policy: Mothers Allowances and Day Care in Ontario Before World War II," *Canadian Womens Studies*, 7, 4 (1986), 68-70; Susan Prentice, "Workers, Mothers, Reds: Toronto's Postwar Daycare Fight," *Studies in Political Economy*, 30 (1989), 115-41; Brigette Kitchen, "The Family and Social Policy," in Maureen Baker, ed., *The Family: Changing Trends in Canada* (Toronto 1984); Margaret Little, "Claiming a Unique Place: The Introduction of Mothers' Pensions in BC," *B.C. Studies*, 106 (1995), 80-102. Those working on the history of crime and the law also contributed to our knowledge of working-class women's lives. For example, see Constance Backhouse, "Desperate Women and Compassionate Courts: Infanticide in Nineteenth Century Canada," *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 34 (1984), 447-78 and "Nineteenth Century Prostitution Law: Reflection of a Discriminatory Society," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, XVIII, 36 (1985), 387-423; Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax* (Porters Lake, NS 1989); Indiana Matters, "Sinners or Sinned Against? Historical Aspects of Juvenile Delinquency in British Columbia," in *Not Just Pin Money*; Andrée Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules: Women in Quebec, 1919-39* (Toronto 1994); Dorothy Chunn, *From Punishment to Doing Good: Family Courts and Socialized Justice in Ontario, 1880-1940* (Toronto 1992).

that gender was socially and historically constituted, writers also explored the ethnic, class and cultural forces shaping the experiences of working-class women, indicating their distinct differences from middle-class women of different backgrounds.[52]

Biographies of female labour leaders were seldom written, but collective pictures of the activities and ideas of women involved in union work, labour politics and the Left were attempted, with some attention not only to women wage earners, but also to women who organized as auxiliary members, consumers and supporters of other radical causes.[53] Another body of work probed the family economy as it

[52] Marie Lavigne, Yolande Pinard and Jennifer Stoddart, "The Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the Women's Movement in Québec," in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, 71-87; Wendy Mitchinson, "The YWCA and Reform in the 19th century," *Historire Sociale/Social History*, 24 (1979), 368-84; Helen Lenskyj, "A Servant Problem, or a Servant Mistress Problem? Domestic Service in Canada, 1890-1930," *Atlantis*, 7, 1 (1981), 3-11. On ethnicity and race see Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into My Sister's Eyes: an Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto 1986); Tamara Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch of Chinese Women and Work in British Columbia," in Latham and Padro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money*; Joan Sangster, "Finnish Women in Ontario, 1890-1930," *Polyphony: The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 3, 2 (Fall 1981), 46-54; Ruth Frager, "Politicized Housewives in the Jewish Communist Movement of Toronto," in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto 1989), 258-75. Much of the work on ethnicity was tied to immigration history and politics. Sociologists and political scientists made important contributions. For example, see Agnes Calliste, "Canada's Immigration Policy and Domestics from the Caribbean," in Jessie Vorst, ed., *Race, Class and Gender: Bonds and Barriers* (Toronto 1989), 133-65; Helen Ralston, "Race, Class, Gender and Work Experience of South Asian Immigrant Women in Atlantic Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 33, 2 (1991), 129-39; Roxanna Ng, "The Social Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada," in Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (Montréal 1986), 269-86. For an exploration of the differences between First Nations and white women see Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg 1980).

[53] Two exceptions are Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: a woman for her time* (Vancouver 1995) and the recent Andrée Lévesque, *Scènes de la Vie en Rouge: L'époque de Jeanne Corbin, 1906-1944* (Montréal 1999). There were more biographies of male labour leaders, simply because there were more. There were a few earlier hagiographic accounts of radical women, such as Louise Watson, *She Never Was Afraid: the Life of Annie Buller* (Toronto 1976) and some articles, such as Joan Sangster, "The Making of a Socialist-Feminist: The Early Career of Beatrice Brigden," *Atlantis*, 13, 1 (1987), 13-28; Susan Walsh, "The Peacock and the Guinea Hen: Political Profiles of Dorothy Gretchen Steeve and Grace MacInnis," in *Not Just Pin Money*, 365-79. For some examples of women in union and left politics, see also Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left 1900-1918* (Montréal 1995); Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto 1998); Sylvie Murray, *A la Junction du mouvement ouvrier et du mouvement des femmes: La Ligue Auxiliaire de l'Association Internationale des*

altered over time, showing how both children's work and that of married women were consistently important to family subsistence, even if they did not take the form of waged labour.[54] The idea of "separate spheres" was also examined, not as a reality determining women's lives, but as an ideology, and often a contradictory one, obscuring the overlapping relations of women's private and public lives.[55]

Exploring militancy, resistance and struggle were arguably well-worn motifs in the new labour history, and feminist historians were not immune to adopting them.[56] While granting the limitations in focusing on resistance, early studies were interested in more than creating one-dimensional "working-class victims" — or heroines.[57] They wrestled, however imperfectly, with the role of economic struc-

Machinistes, Canada, 1903-80 (Montréal, 1990); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left 1920-60* (Toronto 1989); Ruth Frager, "No Proper Deal: Women Workers and the Canadian Labour Movement," in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters*, 44-64; Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-79* (Toronto 1994); Mona-Josée Gagnon, "Les Femmes dans le mouvement syndical Québécois," in Marie Lavigne and Yoland Pinard, *Les Femmes dans La Société Québécoise* (Montréal 1977), 145-68; Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Lucie Piche, *Si le travail m'etait conte...autrement. Les travailleuses de la CTCC-CSN: quelques fragments d'historie, 1921-76* (Montreal 1987).

[54]Joy Parr, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto 1982); Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Toronto 1994); John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child Labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth Century Urban Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (1986), 163-88; Jane Synge, "The Transition from School to Work: Growing up Working Class in Early 20th Century Hamilton," in K. Ishwaren, ed., *Childhood and Adolescence in Canada* (Toronto 1979); Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrialization Montréal* (Toronto 1993), and some of the essays in her edited collection, *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings* (Toronto 1992); Lorna McLean, "Single Again: Widows's Work in the Urban Family Economy, Ottawa, 1871," *Ontario History*, 83, 2 (1991),127-50; Veronica Strong-Boag, "Discovering the Home: the Last 150 Years of Domestic Work in Canada," in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women's Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto 1985); Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto 1980).

[55]Jennifer Stoddart and Marie Lavigne, "Les travailleuses montrealaises entre les deux guerres," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2 (1977), 170-83; Ruth Frager, "No Proper Deal," in *Union Sisters*; Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton 1994).

[56]Certainly an exception is Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "A Hundred and One Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women of the 1880s," *Atlantis*, 3, 1 (Fall 1977), 66-83, as it did not stress resistance. A number of early articles did examine points of conflict, such as strikes, including Joan Sangster, "The Bell Telephone Strike of 1907: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 109-30; Mary Horodyski, "Women and the Winnipeg General Strike," *Manitoba History*, 11 (Spring 1986), 28-37.

[57]Dubinsky *et al.*, "Introduction," *Gender Conflicts*, xvii. Another author argued that we (primarily I) created oppositional ideologies such as feminism where they did not exist. See

tures and both dominant and alternative ideologies in the creation of women's consciousness, though we often failed to address, until recently, the simultaneous process of accommodation.[58] French-Canadian feminists also had to counter the claim that they had overemphasized the patriarchal "victimization" of working women, supposedly obscuring other stories, including the economic improvement in women's lives over the early 20th century.[59] The emphasis on resistance in all working-class history, claims a recent American critique, was a shortcoming that reveals a hopelessly "teleological" emancipatory narrative in which a classless society is the utopian end.[60] But is this really such a horrible thought? Sounding vaguely like earlier conservatives, this criticism would surely not be levelled against writings on the history of slavery.

Pushed and buoyed by feminist theory and organizing, the new labour history was increasingly more likely to take women into account than had the "old". This is not to say that this writing is unassailable, simply that feminist complaints were being heard. In synthetic overviews, gender assumed increased prominence, more so if the focus was on working-class experience rather than the labour movement.[61] Similarly, overviews of women's history incorporated more material on working-

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Dan Azoulay, "Winning Women for Socialism: The Ontario CCF and Women, 1947-61," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (1995), 59-90. Ruth Frager also offers a critique which I find far more balanced. As she points out, by focussing on women on the Left interested *in* the woman question, the outlook of those women with stronger class and ethnic loyalties tend to be obscured.

[58]For later discussion of accommodation, see Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-60* (Toronto 1995) and on both resistance and the creation of consent, Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto 1998).

[59]This is only one part of the critique in Fernand Ouellet, "La question sociale au Québec, 1880-1930: la condition feminine et le mouvement des femmes dans l'historiographie," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, XXI 42 (1988), 319-45. For a strong reply see Micheline Dumont, "Historie des femmes," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, XXIII 45 (May 1990), 117-28.

[60]Laura Frader, "Dissent over Discourse: Labor History, Gender and the Linguistic Turn," *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 214. Before being too disparaging about the conventions of past writing, we should perhaps take a closer look at current codes: the requisite references to Foucault, the claims that all is "contested, fluid, and constructed," etc.

[61]The second edition of *Working-Class Experience*, for example, integrated new research on gender and women, though it was criticized for not going far enough on this account, reflecting higher expectations placed on the treatment of working-class experience than examinations of the labour movement, such as Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto 1989 and 1996). I based this on eleven book reviews. 50 per cent of the ones for Palmer felt he did not include enough on women; none of the reviews of Heron mentioned this issue.

class women, though these were seldom judged by their class analysis.[62] Finally, *Labour/Le Travail*, a bell-wether of sorts, began to reflect more gender sensitivity, on its editorial board, and in its content, as the proverbial metal workers were now joined by candy makers and office employees.[63] Feminist political economy was also flourishing, while sociologists were using historical research on women, work, and unions to offer theoretically informed contributions to a feminist working-class history.[64]

Still, there were silences, lacuna and problems with these attempts to integrate a gender and class analysis. While recent work has concentrated on the differences defined by race and ethnicity, we should not forget that the divide of two solitudes — English Canada and Québec — also complicates attempts to explain class formation in feminist terms. One of the benefits of new feminist and labour academic groupings like the CCWH and CCLH was their role in linking historians from two nations in scholarly dialogue. Yet, with a few exceptions, most explorations of Canadian women's labour history stick to one side of the border or the other. The decline of a Left preoccupation with the "Québec question" may only accentuate this division, discouraging attempts at comparative histories of women from both cultures.

Undoubtedly, working-class women in Québec shared experiences with their English Canadian sisters; whether it was union wives organizing into auxiliaries, the sexual division of labour in garment factories, or the regulation of teachers, historians have noted these commonalities. However, language and culture, not to mention political alienation and the equation of language *with* class divisions, have created a distinct understanding of class in Québec. Also, as Andrée Lévesque argues, the ideological influence of the Church created different sets of domestic, familial, and sexual expectations for working-class women in Québec to negotiate. The importance of Catholic unions, strong state involvement in labour issues (ranging from Duplessis' intense anti-unionism to Parti Québécois sympathies),

[62]Even works which took gender as their primary interpretive guide and category of "difference", such as Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-39* (Toronto 1988) were not inattentive to class. Still, none of the book reviews I located for Alison Prentice, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto 1988) mentioned the book's analysis of class. I think there is an important question here for another inquiry: if we judge labour historians guilty of slighting gender, we should also ask if gender historians have slighted class.

[63]Of course, working-class and women's history was published elsewhere as well. However, *Labour/Le Travail* provides one measure of attitudes towards gender. The Board was initially male dominated with one or two women only of about 11 members. By 1987-90, it was at least 40 - 50 per cent women, a conscious political choice.

[64]See, for example, the articles by Gillian Creese, Alicia Muszynski, and Jim Conley in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's 1988).

different patterns of public sector union mobilization — to name only a few examples — have resulted in a distinct history of class formation for Québec women and men.

The strategy of blending women into existing historical concerns has also been criticized, sometimes referred to as "adding women and stirring," implying that research on women was grafted onto masculine moulds inattentive to the complexities of gender. To some extent, this was true. Women were integrated into themes such as unionization, strikes, the workplace, political parties and so on. A perennial dilemma was how to fully integrate analyses of domestic labour and paid work, informal and formal labour, fleeting as well as life long work, for women's work lives encompassed these more complex combinations of work, in contrast to men's. Fewer Canadian studies innovated with integrated analyses of work, encompassing domestic and paid work, community and culture, family and workplace, as did some American works, though by the 1990s, some community-based studies, with tightly-defined temporal and geographical foci, were emerging. Such studies followed in the footsteps of the new labour history, with its search for deep description of working-class life, though by the 1990s they faced less criticism from the historical mainstream for their concentration on the local and particular, in lieu of the national and synthetic.[65]

While considerable attention was focused on the cooperative family economy, the dark side of family life, namely "patriarchy," conflict and violence, was less often explored, until a few studies on wife battering opened discussion of the underside of working-class life.[66] And the links between sexuality and work, as well as explorations of working-class sexuality remained underdeveloped until feminist, gay, and lesbian studies sparked new interest in this area by the 1990s, producing works surveying gay sex in working-class communities and the sexuali-

[65]For a good example of a community study see Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto 1995). Undoubtedly, the positive embrace of such studies reflected the postmodern emphasis on the local and particular, which has had taken root in the profession. One exception to this embrace is Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 26 (Winter 1991-1992), 5-17.

[66]By the 1990s, this was changing. Kathryn Harvey, "To Love, Honour and Obey: Wife Battering in Working Class Montreal," *Urban History Review*, 19, 2 (October 1990), 130-40; Judith Fingard, "The Prevention of Cruelty, Marriage Breakdown and the Rights of Wives in Nova Scotia, 1880-1990," *Acadiensis*, 22,2 (1993), 84-101; Terry Chapman, "Till Death Do Us Part: Wife Beating in Alberta, 1905-20," *Alberta History*, 36,4 (1988), 13-22. The manner of exploring this topic remains contentious. For example, a review of *Working-Class Experience* criticized the author for integrating "too much" material (only a few paragraphs) on family violence into the text, reflecting "an almost sordid preoccupation" with it. For this peculiar charge, see Craig Heron, "Towards a Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History: Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking," *Left History*, 1, 1 (1993), 117.

zation of women's work.[67] Lacking a language of discourse analysis, earlier studies also overlooked opportunities to explore the gendered iconography of radical and left politics.[68]

Yet, surveying the current scene, I am tempted to argue that we still need more "add women and stir" studies. Save for Pamela Sugiman's important study of the UAW, we have few book-length studies of the CIO which take women and gender seriously.[69] Given the immense influence of transnational (especially American) migration, ideas, and organizing in Canadian history, the legacy of the AFL/CIO especially should be interrogated with reference to its impact on gender and labour.[70] We also need to develop an understanding of the emergence of retail and service work, while agricultural and domestic workers are often ignored in the period between 1920 to 1970.[71] And the latter would offer more attention to ethnic and racial differences as women of colour often found that domestic service was the only job open to them in these years. Indeed, the tendency in labour history to focus on industrial work reinforced an emphasis on white workers.[72] Women's experience of events like the Depression, the transformations in white collar work and unions like CUPE in the post 1960s period, women's long-standing role in the underground economy, the racialization of female occupations with changing immigration policy: all these, and more, need exploration.

[67]For recent exceptions, see Kathryn Macpherson's excellent chapter on sexuality in *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-90* (Toronto 1996), 164-204. On gay history, Steven Maynard, "Horrible Temptations: Sex, Men, and Working Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890-1935," *Canadian Historical Review*, 78, 2 (1997), 191-235; Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-75," in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Re-thinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto 1997), 402-23.

[68] Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*.

[69] Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*. See also Eileen Suffrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store, 1948-52* (Toronto 1982); Julie Guard, "Fair Play or Fair Pay? Gender Relations, Class Consciousness and Union Solidarity in the Canadian UE," *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1997), 149-77.

[70]Marcel van der Linden, "Transnationalizing American Labor History," *Journal of American History*, 86, 3 (1999), 1078-92.

[71]Examples covering the earlier period include Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestics for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930, *Ontario History*, 72, 3 (1980), 148-72; Magda Fahmi, "'Ruffled' Mistresses and 'Discontented' Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service,1880-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (1996), 69-98. On the later period, Sedef Arat-Koc, *et al.*, eds., *Maid in the Market: Women's Paid Domestic Labour* (Halifax 1994).

[72]Similar critiques were made in the US, though American women of colour were more significant in terms of numbers in the earlier period, and shared a different relationship to wage work. Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, "Women's Labor History, 1790-1945," *Reviews in American History*, 17 (September 1989), 501-2.

By the 1980s, as well, the limitations of concentrating on gender and class, to the detriment of race and ethnicity, were starkly apparent. Some early studies had explored the intersection of ethnicity, work, and radicalism, while others were attentive to French-Canadian working-class culture.[73] However, more attention to the integration of class, gender and ethnicity awaited later works by Lindstrom-Best, Frager, Iacovetta, and others. Their analyses, often drawing on analogous international research,[74] consciously avoided the stereotype of the oppressed immigrant woman, exploring women's coping strategies, agency, and resistance. They also suggested that ideologies promoted by a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture, such as the middle-class idealization of domesticity, were not necessarily shared by working-class immigrants (indeed, as Roberts and Klein hinted earlier, they may not have been shared by many working-class women) who developed their own ideals of working-class "femininity."

Arguably, both ethnicity and race need to be more fully integrated into our analyses of Canadian class formation. Important investigations, such as those by Dionne Brand, Agnes Calliste, and Alicia Muszynski, looking at Afro-Canadian and Caribbean workers, and Native and Asian fisheries employees, and early works emanating from British Columbia, have broken this mould.[75] Moreover, given the

[73]Robert Harney's work is notable: one example was "Montreal's King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 4 (1979), 57-84. See also Ruth Bleasdale, "Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 7 (1981), 9-40; Donald Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1832* (Toronto 1979); Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto 1990). Ethnicity was also interwoven into works on male workers, See Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses*; Al Seager, "Miners' Struggles in Western Canada," in Deian Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (St. John's 1989), 160-98.

[74]Varpu Linstrom Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada, 1890-1930* (Toronto 1988); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-39* (Toronto 1992); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal 1992).

[75]Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: The Lives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto 1991); Agnes Calliste, "Canada's Immigration Policy on Domestics from the Caribbean: The Second Domestic Scheme," and "Women of 'Exceptional Merit': Immigration of Caribbean Nurses to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 6, 1 (1993), 85-102; Alicia Muszynski, "Race and Gender: structural determinants in the formation of British Columbia's salmon fishery," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*,13, 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1988), 103-20, and *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the fisheries of British Columbia* (Montréal 1996). Collections from BC indicated a regional proclivity to take race more seriously in the 1980s. See Latham and Padro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money* and David Cobourn and Rennie Warburton, eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1988); Veronica Strong-Boag and Gillian Creese, eds., *B.C. Reconsidered: Essays in Women's History* (Vancouver 1992).

political preeminence of First Nations organizing in Canada, it is not surprising that sophisticated analyses of the impact of colonialism on First Nations women's work (though often centred on the 18th and 19th centuries) have been produced.[76] But more sustained research and critique are needed, with the kind of careful attention that Gillian Creese gives to race relations in the BC labour movement. Never relying on simplistic depictions of all workers as consistently racist, or of race as either *structurally or ideologically determined*, she shows under what conditions the labour movement opposed Asian immigration, but also why, on occasion, it embraced cross-race class solidarity.[77]

Trying to work out the "simultaneity" of race, gender and class relations remains one of the more difficult tasks facing labour historians.[78] Just as American historian David Roediger has made race and the privilege of "whiteness" a central focus — while still maintaining class as a crucial analytic category — we need to re-examine the way in which race has shaped Canadian class formation. Even if much-quoted American theories of race (such as Roediger's) are useful as intellectual stimulants to this work, close empirical attention to the historical specificity of race and colonialism in Canada is crucial, for the relationship of race to labour worked itself out in fundamentally different ways in Canada.[79]

Finally, gender became both a complicating and enriching factor in the pursuit of a feminist working-class history. In its first flushes, women's historians noted that their task inevitably involved the study of gender relations between men and women, and that their goal was, ultimately, a more holistic "history of society" even if their focus was on the understudied: women.[80] However, by the 1990s, the notion that gender analysis was a more theoretically sophisticated approach was embraced

[76]One of the first examinations of Native women's work was Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg 1980). Later discussions include Jo-Anne Fiske, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case," *Feminist Studies*, 17, 3 (1991), 509-35, and her "Fishing is a Woman's Business: The Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Women and Men," in Bruce Cox, ed., *Native Peoples, Native Lands: Canadian Indian, Innuit and Metis* (Ottawa 1988), 186-90; Ron Bougeault, "The Indians, the Metis and the Fur Trade: Class, Sexism and Racism in the Transition from Communism to Capitalism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 12 (1983), 45-80; John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: the Aboriginal labouring class of British Columbia, 1849-90," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 3 (1992), 69-94.

[77]Gillian Creese, "Exclusion or Solidarity?: Vancouver Workers Confront the Oriental Problem," *B.C. Studies*, 80 (1988-89), 24-51.

[78]Roediger is using a term coined by Terra Hunter. See his "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History," *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 127-43.

[79] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: race and the making of the American working class* (New York 1991).

[80]Kelly, *Women, History and Theory*; Ruth Roach Pierson and Alison Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," *Atlantis*, 7, 2 (1982), 37-46.

by some historians who believed that asking questions about "women alone" inevitably presupposed the answers, isolating "women from social relationships" and "presuming she existed in certain ways."[81] Perhaps influenced by the men's movement and by feminists' urgings that men interrogate their own actions and ideas, there was also increasing academic interest in exploring the gendering of men and masculinity — though why asking questions about men and "masculinity" did not hold the same risk of "presupposing" the answers, has not been adequately addressed.

The shift seemed slightly ironic. Just after some of us had retreated from a male-dominated Left, manliness was now the topic of choice! After all those years of reading endlessly about metal workers, we thought a concentration on telephone operators and candy makers *was* important, only to be told our time was up! The positive results of talking gender, of course, are apparent in some of the research produced. A focus on gender enriches the study of class formation, by exposing men's work, leisure, family lives, and sexuality to a feminist analysis, sensitive to the social constitution of gender, the creation of masculinity and heterosexuality. Its beneficial results are already apparent in Joy Parr's analysis of the polar worlds of mens and women's work in small town Ontario, in Rosenfeld's study of family lives of railway workers, and in Cecilia Danysk's evocative reconstruction of the masculinity of hired hands in the prairie west.[82] Gillian Creese's recent study of office workers also connects race and masculinity, showing how both company and union preferences for the white, male breadwinners created a "technical job hierarchy" structured by race and gender.[83]

Applied along with feminist insights about power, with historical sensibility, and without an air of determined superiority, a focus on gender history will enhance our search for a feminist working-class history. In working-class history, in which women have for so long been struggling for equal time, though, I believe it is unwise to create an academic hierarchy, with women's history relegated to the partial,

[81]Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 3 (1995), 362. For the earlier debate, Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Reassessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history*, 3, 1 (1995): 109-21, and replies from Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, Karen Dubinsky, and Lynn Marks, and my response in *left history*, 3, 2 and 4, 1 (1996), 205-48.

[82]Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); Mark Rosenfeld,"It was a Hard Life: Class and Gender in the Work and Family Rhythms of a Railway Town, 1920-50," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1988), 237-79; Cecilia Danysk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1920* (Toronto 1995). For some earlier works on the gendering of men see Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Henri Bourassa and the Woman Question," in *The Neglected Majority*, 104-115; Trofimenkoff, "Les femmes dans l'oevre de Groulx," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amerique francaise*, 32, 3 (1978), 385-98.

[83]Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-94* (Toronto 1999), 205.

inadequate and less theoretical; ideally, gender should complement, not replace a focus on women.[84]

Overlapping with debates about gender history, were other post-structuralist winds of change sweeping through academe. Although the period up until the late 1980s was one of immense possibility, there were also portents of serious problems looming. Just as feminist explorations of labour were flourishing, labour and the left were foundering. Politically, the non-NDP Left was now in disarray and depression. The Canadian women's movement, which had developed a strong social-democratic and labour focus, sometimes even a socialist-feminist one, was markedly different in this respect from the US one, where liberal and radical feminism dominated. But the federal election women's debate of 1987 marked a high point of public visibility, and in subsequent years the movement struggled to confront inequalities within its midst, at the same time that an aggressive campaign of capital, often aided by governments, ate away, both ideologically and materially, at social welfare provision, notions of equity, not to mention the "privilege" of having work. Despite the production of sophisticated books focusing on feminism and the need to democratize unions, such as *Women Challenging Unions*, the locus of scholarship was shifting.[85] Soon, performativity, not class formation, would assume the centre of academic debate. Notions of social transformation seemed to be assuming new, dare I say, "culturalist" forms. Shopping, consumerism and lipstick, once the focus of a socialist-feminist critique, were being "celebrated," as Dawn Currie recently notes, as "subversive" forms of pleasure.[86] The postmodern had certainly arrived.[87]

[84]For the arguments that gender went beyond the narrower vision of women's history see Lykke de la Cour, Cecilia Morgan and Mariana Valverde, "Gender Regulation and State Formation in Nineteenth-Century Canada," in Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in mid-nineteenth century Canada* (Toronto 1992), 163-91; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto 1991) and her "Comment," *Journal of Women's History*, 5, 1 (1993), 121-5; Karen Dubinsky, *et al.*, "Introduction," *Gender Conflicts*; Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice."

[85]Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto 1993).

[86]Dawn Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers* (Toronto 1999), 5-6.

[87]I am not arguing that studying working-class consumption and popular culture leads to the demise of class, unless class becomes a vague discursive construction in these studies. Though frankly, if only the liberating effects of popular culture are claimed for working-class women, one does have cause to be critical. Moreover, some recent works fail to acknowledge their overlap with "older" writing on this topic, or that their interpretations of working women's "subjectivities," shaped by new theoretical/political suppositions, may be partial, as were older interpretations of women's "ideologies." For all its strengths, this seems true of Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York 1999).

The Demise of Class?

The challenge of these new theoretical and political currents to the foundations of working-class history should not be underestimated. In assessing them, one has to try to ward off excessive defensiveness and welcome critiques, even if they strike at the core of our understandings of history and politics. In writing this article, I tried to interrogate my own inclination to construct a narrative around "the rise and decline of working-class history." Is it possible that class has permeated historical analysis more generally, and that working-class history has simply merged into other projects, such as women's, ethnic, or regional history? Certainly, working-class history always had the potential to encompass many areas of the social, even political past, to advocate a broader, synthetic class analysis of Canadian society.

Some recent women's history, such as Karen Dubinsky's exploration of sexual violence, integrate class as an important variable in their analysis.[88] Working-class history gets considerable press in syntheses of Canadian history, and works like *No Burden to Carry*, focusing on Afro-Canadian women, simultaneously enhance our knowledge of working women.[89] Perhaps, turning to other topics, such as crime and punishment (to which I plead guilty), does not mean abandoning a larger project of understanding the racialized and gendered nature of class formation.[90] Perhaps, we are simply witnessing a profound redefinition of the field, as it responds to a new political context, social theory and critiques of our past practice. Academic fields are always in epistemological flux, and to imply such shifts are crises suggests a hierarchy, with certain theories and topics more "important" than others.[91]

I consulted friends in the field, read recent journals, thought about my teaching experience, looked at theses in progress, and surveyed the literature. I pictured the small number of middle-aged academics nominating each other for positions at recent CCLH meetings, then the larger crowd of historians, including feminists, at other meetings. And I could not completely shrug off the notion that working-class history, and the partnership of labour and feminist history is in trouble; both the "traditional" topics of working-class women's history *and* class analysis are

[88]Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago 1993).

[89]Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry* and also Peggy Bristow, *et al.*, eds., *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto 1994). For a synthesis which integrates social history and labour see Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples*, vol. 2 (Toronto 1993).

[90]Joan Sangster, "Girls in Conflict with the Law: Exploring the Construction of Female Delinquency in Ontario, 1940-60," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 12, 1 (2000), 1-31.

[91]It would be disingenuous to suggest that we can avoid prioritizing for "history always involves the power of exclusion, for any history is always someone's history, told by that someone from a partial point of view." Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, "Telling the truth about history," in Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Post Modern History Reader*, 217.

decidedly beleaguered. This does not appear to be true in other disciplines such as political economy. And part of the problem is the very "smallness" of Canadian academe; the critical mass of feminist historians writing about labour was always modest, so that any deflation of the field is keenly felt here. Since women's and gender history appear to be healthier enterprises, offered some well-deserved recognition by the historical profession, I am still obliged to ask why class has fallen on hard times.

Neither the political or theoretical context in recent years has been propitious for either class or materialist analyses. The academic retreat from class and the decline of the political and intellectual left were intimately connected.[92] In the wake of the collapse of socialist alternatives and the rise of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, a profound pessimism overtook many radicals. The labour movement has been substantially weakened, more so in the US than Canada, and in the face of sustained assaults from the state and business, and without an internal Left, it has also tended to close ranks defensively, rejecting radical perspectives. Although more women are found in trade union offices, and separate and autonomous organizing have increased the visibility of gender, race, and sexual orientation issues, labour militancy is not necessarily the order of the day. Contradictions abound: while women's needs are more visible, unions have been inclined, as Linda Briskin notes, to accept issues of gender "representation," but avoid more threatening "transformative demands coming from the rank and file."[93]

But it was not simply hard times or the triumphant logic of capitalism that led to a erasure of class and disillusion with labour. The intellectual Left (which increasingly became an *academic* left) hurried class to an untimely demise as theoretical and political interests and loyalties shifted from marxism to post-structuralism. Class "slipped off the charts of radical social theory," abandoned as critics pronounced it deconstructed. It was deemed both politically inadequate and intellectually deficient, both as marxist structuralism on the one hand, and socialist humanist "historicism" on the other.[94] Moreover, in the broader historical profession, changes in social theory engendered an aversion to the very notion of structure in history, to the grounding of texts in historical contexts, to "modernist empiricist" strategies of recovery, and certainly to marxist "interventions of dissent" lodged

[92]Ellen Meiksins Wood, "A Chronology of the New Left and its Successors, or 'Who's Old Fashioned Now?'" in R. Miliband and L. Pantich, eds., *Socialist Register, 1995* (London 1995), 22-49.

[93]Linda Briskin, "Autonomy, Diversity and Integration: Union Women's Separate Organizing in North America and Western Europe in the Context of Restructuring and Globalization," forthcoming, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22, 5. My thanks to Linda for offering me a pre-publication copy of this paper.

[94]John Hall, "Introduction: The Reworking of Class," to John Hall, ed., *Reworking Class* (Ithaca 1997), 9. For views from the other side see Ellen M. Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London 1990); Ralph Miliband, Leo Panitch, John Saville, ed., *The Retreat of the Intellectuals: Socialist Register, 1990* (London 1990).

against mainstream history.[95] Recent popular polemics claiming that Marxism helped to kill Canadian history are thus out of touch with academic reality, endowing marxism with mythical influence beyond its due.[96]

Canadian academe has always been deeply enveloped in international scholarly debates and politics, and internationally "radical pluralism" was embraced in political theory and practice. The working class was increasingly seen as ephemeral, if not an impediment to social change; instead, an array of new social movements (some of which were not opposed to capitalism) captured the political imagination of many radicals. Identity politics, with its egalitarian emphasis on exposing multiple oppressions, has a strong appeal for feminists, but there is inevitable friction with marxist analyses of class, as the latter are seen as falsely imposing a "social totality, a phoney universalism,"[97] a hierarchy of analytic, and therefore political, importance.

The political pessimism about class is echoed in recent Anglo-American feminist critiques of working-class history which portray a *fin-de-siècle* scene, to my mind, worse than it actually is! Sonya Rose recently lamented that the "dominant paradigms in labour history continue to be reproduced as though neither women or gender were particularly relevant." Likewise, Laura Frader claims that the new labour historians (like the old) retained a "universalist, unitary notion of class," and still see "men as workers, women as wives, mothers and daughters."[98] Such sweeping claims are far more bleak than mine, unless I am going to plead "Canadian exceptionalism" to these trends.[99]

It is perhaps inevitable that each generation of scholars finds fault with the previous one, and urges the embrace of its own persuasions. Calling for more Foucault, less Marx, one British historian grumbles that the older generation is unfairly "patrolling the boundaries" of labour history as they cling to passé

[95]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism," in H.A. Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York 1989), 87. For the second quote, see Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London 1997) 9,23.

[96]Jack Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto 1998).

[97]Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham, North Carolina 1995), 120.

[98]Sonya Rose, "Gender and Labour History," 147. Laura Frader, "Dissent Over Discourse: Labor History, Gender and the Linguistic Turn," *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 217, 225. For a more comprehensive critique, which is less absolute, see Ava Baron, "Introduction," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991).

[99]For example, Frader's argument in "Dissent over Discourse" that the "old" and "new" labour historians shared a common view of "the unity and inclusiveness of class membership" and a "teleological" focus on socialism simply does not apply to Canada. As a small academic community we benefit from engagement with international scholarship, but there remains the need to interrogate these works in relation to our own experience.

paradigms such as "human agency."[100] While similar claims are not so expansively made in Canada, they have been incrementally suggested. Recent critiques have understandably called for the inclusion within working-class history of topics previously ignored, such as sexuality, religion, consumerism, and popular culture.[101] At a deeper level, some are also challenging marxist perspectives, the apparent privileging of class over other identities, and urging new approaches embracing post-structuralism.

Almost echoing Bercuson's earlier critiques, one theorist argues that previous labour historians mechanistically "equated all working-class agency with resistance."[102] Early feminist research, other critics claim, "agreed that the common (if never universal) physical experience of being born 'female' constituted the possibility for shared gender identity across class, racial and ethnic divisions." This suggestion of implicit "essentialism" may itself oversimplify, since many earlier marxist authors, as we saw, stressed class differences among women.[103] While recognizing the need for openness to new topics and overall critique, we should also guard against the tendency to set up strawpersons, often of the Marxist variety,[104] rather than really engaging with past writings. The question is: do emerging critiques really advance the prospect of a feminist labour history, and if so, how? Certainly, invocations for more attention to gender, ethnicity and race as tools of analysis, and as conceptual constructions themselves, are central to their rhetoric. But what happens to gender, class and race in practice?

[100]John Vernon, "Whose Afraid of the Linguistic Turn?: the politics of social history and its discontents," *Social History*, 19 (1994), 81-98.

[101]Lynn Marks, "The Knights of Labour and the Salvation Army: Religion and Working-Class Culture in Ontario, 1882-90," *Labour/Le Travail*, 28 (1991), 89-128 and Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989), 159-69," and "Queer Musings on Masculinity and History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (1998), 183-97.

[102]Labour historians "assumed that the exercise of agency on the part of oppressed groups is always evidence of resistance." Mariana Valverde, "As if Subjects Existed: Analyzing Social Discourses," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 18,2 (1991), 183. Note also David Bright's claim that previous historians "explained away" class divisions in *The Limits of Labour*.

[103]The authors do not cite any examples. See Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan and Nancy Forestell, eds., *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Toronto 1998), 3.

[104]To cite one small example: in a book which offers an insightful and important reading of gender and 19th labour, Christina Burr states that previous historians did not consider cartoons and literature to constitute "real" sources. While recent theorizing has undoubtedly encouraged fuller explorations of representation, this is a curious characterization of historians previously labelled "culturalists!" Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Late-Nineteenth-Centry Ontario* (Toronto 1999), 7. For other examples of the simplification of past work in women's and labour history see Nancy Christie and Michael Gavreau, *A Full Orbed Christianity*, 114, 116-7, 122.

Their pessimism with the failure of working-class history to take gender seriously, claim some feminist historians, led to their embrace of the linguistic turn. Claims that gender is now on the agenda of working-class history because of the confluence of "literary theory, feminism and post-structuralism" myopically overlook the earlier influence of socialist-feminist theory.[105] More fundamental is the question of whether we are simply replacing working-class history's failings concerning gender, with a linguistic approach that obscures class.[106] A few Canadian examples, notably Carolyn Strange's work, reveal the possibilities of using discourse analysis, informed by post-structuralist theory, in working-class history. Strange deftly uncovers the meanings assigned to working-class women's work and pleasure in the industrializing city by experts and reformers, though, as she admits, her method privileges discourses "from above" and discourages deducing conclusions about women's actual experiences. Other works explore the discursive meanings of working-class masculinity and femininity and the gendered meanings attached to social policy and the law.[107] Studies by Joy Parr, Shirley Tillotson, Mercedes Steedman, and Gillian Creese have also deconstructed the notion of skill, showing how both skill and occupation could be unstable categories, assigned gendered and racialized meanings, which might alter over time. Even if a rhetoric of deconstruction is employed, however, materialist conceptions of work and the economy are still in evidence, unlike the more radical, anti-materialist claims for deconstruction offered up by international scholars like Joan Scott.

Indeed, when such international writers suggest that the economy is simply "constructed as material"[108] (I'm sure the unemployed feel differently!), a more fundamental boundary is violated. It seems inescapable that core post-structuralist ideas will pull the rug out from many of the traditional concepts underpinning working-class history. By rejecting class as a taken-for-granted "foundational" category and deriding "grand theory," they question a basic starting point for past analyses. By belittling "liberals and Marxists'" so-called fascination with "just the

[105]Sonya Rose, "Gender and Labour History: The nineteenth-century legacy," *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 160. Some authors also lament the fact that, save for Joan Scott (often simply equated with feminist post-structuralist history), linguistic explorations ignore women and gender.

[106]Class is being completely "occluded from the lexicon of radical terms on the basis of its pernicious [supposedly economistic] history." Stanley Aronowitz quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham, North Carolina 1995), 202.

[107]Burr, *Spreading the Light*; Steven Penfold, "Have You No Manhood in You?: Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-6," *Acadiensis*, 23, 2 (1994), 21-44; Margaret Hobbs, "Equality or Difference? Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers During the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail*, 32 (1993), 210-23.

[108]William Sewell, "Towards a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History," in L. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana 1993), 15-38.

facts," they question the intensive emphasis on empirical research integral to both the old *and* new labour histories.[109] By suggesting that everything — skill, wages, class, even the economy itself[110] — is socially constructed in the discursive realm, they reject some rudimentary tools of materialist analysis. And as Mariana Valverde argues, there *is* a certain logic carrying one from the (more generally accepted) deconstruction of notions of "male/female" skill to a complete deconstruction of class.[111] Whether post-structuralists see this as liberating, or Marxists as debilitating, I think both would agree the challenge to a feminist working-class history as it has been conceived is quite fundamental.

New social theory and pluralist politics have also challenged experience, the subject, and human agency, all earlier ingredients of working-class history. Questioning the "unity of the subject," as Mariana Valverde notes, is a *sine qua non* of post-structuralist history. The "fragmented, unstable subject is not regarded as a rational autonomous unit producing meanings and values," but rather is constituted by the ebb and flow of conflicting meanings generated by various discourses. Instead of "ready-made historical agents," "women" and "workers" are "signifers in the process of being defined by competing discourses." The inverted comma around woman and worker projects her/them into the realm of the "constructed" and "unknowable" rather than a real, grounded, physical being, capable of reflection, suffering, exploitation, and conscious revolt — all the latter notions being part of the "new," but now older, labour history. Indeed, they were integral to earlier women's history too — witness Susan Mann's declaration about the intent of feminist history to name and counter women's oppression.[112]

The post-structuralist subject thus stands in direct contrast to the Thompsonian subject whose consciousness emerged from the interplay of human agency with social, cultural and economic formations and ideologies. Indeed, resistance based on "conscious, reflective agency" and an understanding of "differential access to power," (not the automatic "reflex" resistance of Foucauldian theory) is largely absent from the post-structuralist equation. Even though subjectivity is unconscious, ambiguous and fragmented, some materialist feminists counter, it may still spawn discourses and practices calling for emancipation from the experiences of

[109]M. Valverde, "PostStructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names?" *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (1990), 227. We might consider the different interpretations of 'empiricism.' Valverde may be using it in a negative sense as pure positivism; however, some historians would use the word to denote the extensive use of research, the weighing of evidence and sources in creating a historical interpretation. The former denotes an ideology, an empiricism; the latter describes a research idiom, the empirical.

[110]William Sewell in Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History*, 19-25.

[111]M. Valverde, "Deconstructive Marxism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (1995), 331.

[112] See also the earlier statement that "changes happen in the minds of women." Elaine Silverman, "Writing Canadian Women's History: 1970-82," *Canadian Historical Review*, 63, 4 (1982), 533.

domination,[113] a claim rather close to that old Marxist maxim that "people make their own history though not in conditions of their own choosing."

Like ideas concerning human agency, the recovery of womens' and workers' experiences and voices was also central to the reconstructed labour and women's history of past decades. Yet, this is also questioned, in part by those employing a critical race analysis to show very effectively how white race privilege was too often built into homogeneous renditions of women's or workers' experience.[114] But a more fundamental challenge came from post-structuralist writers who see all such projects as unfeasible, for one can never separate the layers of meaning in order to uncover any "true" experience; rather, the latter is a linguistic process of meaning creation, not a recoverable reality. Portraits of experience, as Joy Parr argues, drawing partially on these ideas, are "rendered in the style of their time ... they were interpretations, reclamations of sensations which first had been organized, then claimed as experience."[115]

Such arguments have fostered new understandings of the power of language and narrative structure in our reconstructions of women's experience, reinforcing a healthy skepticism concerning our strategies of historical recovery. And attempts to de-centre the "unitary" subject have encouraged exploration of the many axes of identity, including sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, and culture shaping the working-class subject. The question is: how do the multiple identities fracturing the subject of postmodern history differ from the multiple identities characterizing Bercuson's construction of the working-class subject? He assumed experience did exist, but working-class consciousness and culture were not a part of it. Post structuralist-informed histories assume experience can't be located, and again, class and class consciousness are not in sight. Do they both, ultimately, come to a similar ideological resting point? Moreover, does the emphasis on the "*un*limited identities" of the subject lead us into a cul-de-sac of interpretative and political immobility, merely "hymning the virtues of schizophrenia?"[116]

The sense that class has been too "fundamental" and "privileged"[117] a category in previous research has also been forwarded by Canadian authors. Lynn Marks' foray into new and important topics — religion and leisure — is posited as a corrective to earlier Marxist works which she sees as over-emphasizing working-

[113]Linda Alcoff, "Feminist Politics and Foucault: The Limits to Collaboration," in Arleen Dallery, *et al.*, eds., *Crises in Continental Philosophy* (New York 1990), 74,76.

[114]Some African-American writers, however, still use the concept of experience, sometimes drawing on "standpoint" theory and critique post-structuralist thought for "decentring" the voices of the marginalized. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (Boston 1990); Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1 (1988), 67-79.

[115]Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," 364.

[116]Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, (London 1991), 198.

[117]Lynn Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto 1996), 7.

class resistance and ignoring, not only gender, but also the role of religion in working-class life. Better to start from the principle of multiple, shifting identities based on age, religion, culture, class, and gender, searching for the "integrated" picture, she argues, in concert with other post-structuralist critiques. Claiming that earlier Marxist interpretations saw fraternal orders as "bastions" of working-class consciousness, for example, she counters this with a characterization of them as "bastions of masculinity."[118] Instead of such polarities, perhaps a gender and race analysis of fraternal orders might have complimented earlier marxist works, which, though they stressed patterns of working-class solidarity also alluded to the cross class and accommodationist aspects of such orders.[119]

As Gail Brandt argued, aspects of postmodernism, including the emphasis on difference, culture and representation have struck a responsive chord with feminist historians.[120] But this is perhaps less clearly so for feminist *labour* historians in North America, whose responses have ranged widely, from enthusiasm to strong criticism. Indeed, confusion and contradiction may actually characterize current attempts to address these theoretical issues in relation to working-class history. While marxism is often dismissed as reductionist and economistic,[121] materialist suppositions still underpin much of the writing of labour history. While an underlying political pessimism with class politics is apparent, historians are still genuflecting to the trilogy of race, class and gender. While fundamental tensions exist between post-structuralism and materialism, we are still often borrowing some post-structuralist concepts, or searching for a pluralist accommodation of both.[122]

[118]Marks cites Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict* which does not use the term a "bastion" of working-class culture, nor does Gregory S. Kealey's work on the Orange Order, which is not cited. These earlier works explored somewhat different topics: the mobilization of the labour movement in large cities, not small towns.

[119]Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 43.

[120]Gail C. Brandt, "Postmodern Patchwork: Some Recent Trends in the Writing of Women's History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 72,4 (1991), 441-70.

[121]Dismissing the "new" labour history as "mechanistic" marxism conflates diverse traditions of materialism, and ignores the attempts of this work *to* de-centre "mechanistic" models by exploring agency, culture, language and the social. Neville Kirk, "History, language, ideas and postmodernism: a materialist view," in Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader*. It is revealing that Marxists are portrayed as "angry," and "dogmatic" but liberals less so. As feminists should we not be wary of caricatures in which radicals are denigrated in this way — something we have often encountered as well?

[122]I admit to limited "borrowing." See Joan Sangster, "Girls in Conflict with the Law." For an example of the second tendency, see Burr, *Spreading the Light*, 7. She notes she draws on Marks' "deconstructionist cultural-materialist" analysis. For the view that we have moved beyond the "polarized" debate, see Frader, "Dissent over Discourse"; Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., "Introduction," *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto 1998), 12, and for a critical view of efforts to eclipse very real theoretical tensions, see Bryan D. Palmer, "On the Case: A Roundtable Discussion," *Canadian Historical Review*, 81,2 (2000), 281-7.

Perhaps, easy accommodation, resting comfortably under one umbrella, is not possible.

Although they may pay more attention to culture or language, recent works have rarely fully embraced all the tenets of post-structuralist theory or abandoned the practice of "methodological empiricism."[123] A number of good studies continue to explore "age old" questions in labour history, such as the persisting sexual division of labour and feminized occupations, state regulation of women, the participation of women in socialist politics, and the creation of political consumer activism from the daily domestic labour of housewives.[124] New research on Native women's work draws on debates concerning colonialism, gender and race, and it is often scaffolded on frameworks of productive and reproductive relations.[125]

Often, we find ourselves wrestling with ongoing interpretive dilemmas, even if linguistic conventions have changed the tenor of our conversations. What was the relationship, we asked earlier, between the economic/social structures and ideologies framing the lives of women workers, and the ways women understood their world? How were dominant ideologies and relations of ruling negotiated or internalized? How could alternative ones develop? Yet, the puzzles of subjectivity are not completely different: how do various discourses shape subjectivity, how do contradictory impulses and ideas within subjectivity, of accommodation and resistance, of radicalism and religiosity, work themselves out? Neither is the problem of 'resistance' completely extinct, even if authors are more likely to explore its everyday subtle, veiled, and mundane manifestations, or the "subjugated knowledges" working against the grain of dominant discourses.

Nor have we yet jettisoned "experience." If we were to fundamentally destabilize the subject and reject the notions of experience, then some of the basic premises of works of the 1990s, like *Such Hard Working People*, or *No Burden to Carry*, would need reappraisal. Along with other intersections of ethnic and African-Canadian history, and very much like recent Native history, they take as their goal the recovery of the experiences and voices of marginalized ethnic and racialized working peoples, previously silenced by social, economic and cultural

[123]McLennan quoted in Keith Jenkins, "Introduction," *A Postmodern History Reader*, 10. He is referring to the extensive use of observation based on research, including archival, documentary and human sources, and the weighing and interpreting of such evidence.

[124]Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace*; McPherson, *Bedside Matters*; Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause*; Margaret Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The moral regulation of single mothers in Ontario, 1920-70* (Toronto 1998); Nancy Forestall, "The Miners Wife: Working-Class Femininity in a Masculine Context, 1920-50," in McPherson, C.Morgan, N. Forestall, eds., *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Toronto 1999), 139-57; Julie Guard, "Women Worth Watching: Radical Housewives in Cold War Canada," in G. Kinsman, D. Buse, and M. Steedman, eds., *Whose National Security: Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies* (Toronto).

[125]Alicia Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*; John Lutz, "Gender and Work in Lekwammen Families, 1843-1970," in K. McPherson *et al.*, *Gendered Pasts*, 80-105.

relations of power. Though we are sometimes urged to deconstruct the identities of white male workers, do we similarly want to question the voices of ethnic, racialized women workers? Or, are some identities more "authentic" than others — a hierarchical view surely incompatible with post-structuralist tenets. I can't quite imagine (and hope I don't see) a review of Ruth Frager's *Sweatshop Strife*, for example, which suggests that the author's conclusions about the nature of Jewish garment workers' strong class and ethnic consciousness were misguided because (a) we have "deconstructed class," and (b) anyway, this "consciousness" is more a figment of Frager's meaning making than true experience.

But these are, ultimately, the logical ends of some current social theory, especially the incessant calls to deconstruct class and destabilize all group identities. The challenge for feminist and working-class historians may be to refrain from what one American critic sees as a liberal, pluralist multiculturalism — invoked in ritualized invocations of the value of "inclusion" and "difference" — as the end in itself, thus avoiding questions about the relationship of "difference" to class and economic inequality.[126] For Canadians, this is not a new issue, as they have long been aware, for example, that the state's interest in promoting multicultural history does not come without ideological baggage.[127]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to sort through the changing goals, suppositions, and political contexts framing the writing of Canadian women's labour history over the last thirty years. My aim was to ask whether the story of class formation has become thoroughly gendered, whether a feminist spirit has suffused the study of working-class experience, without ever disguising my own proclivity to favour a *rapprochement* of materialism and feminism, both in politics and scholarship. From the perspective of postmodernism, this review could be dismissed for assuming "its object of inquiry", surmising the importance of exploring class, rather than deconstructing it from the start, and I concede to writing from within, rather than rejecting these basic assumptions.

There is no doubt that, over a quarter century ago, nascent scholarship on the Canadian working class was limited in its horizons, concentrating initially on male-defined production and the public sphere, failing to make good on its initial promise to open up the totality of working-class life for historical reappraisal. However, prompted by a political climate of feminist challenge and socialist discussion in both society and in interdisciplinary scholarship, these limitations were immediately the focus of feminist revisionism. Both women's history and

[126]Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York 1999), 29-67.

[127]Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History*, 147; Bruno Ramirez, "Les rapport entre les etudes ethniques et le multiculturalism au Canada: évers de nouvelles perspectives," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 3 (1991), 170-9.

labour history, feminism and socialism, existed in tandem, sometimes in tension, sometimes in productive debate, sometimes in alliance. In fact, one could argue that, in both French and English Canada, gender, ethnicity and race revitalized the study of class, stretching out its boundaries, in terms of sources, themes and interpretative possibility.

By the 1990s, the professional, political, and theoretical context had fundamentally changed. Other topics, including culture, took centre stage for historians, and other movements of emancipation — such as gay rights or First Nations self determination — emerged, broadening our definitions of oppression and political activism. Nor do such shifts *necessarily* nullify the development of a more sophisticated class analysis in Canadian history, or a complementary concern with labour.[128] Also, feminist history is no longer positioned on the margins of academe; recognition of the importance of the "limited identities" — now very much including gender — in Canadian history is now standard fare.

However, the left's disintegration and the post-structuralist intellectual moment also altered the picture. With historical materialism in retreat, class relations and labour issues no longer command significant, sustained, and energetic attention. A more generalized radical pluralism in which class is not an objective reality, in which identities are fluctuating, unstable, indeterminate, and power always "de-centred," has had a destabilizing effect on feminist working-class history, for the latter has rested, implicitly, on materialist concepts concerning production and reproduction, social structures and the creation of social life, and of the importance of human activity in shaping subsistence and consciousness. Obviously, my sympathies lie with those historians who argue against a "replacement of class with language and culture as the central category of analysis....[and] divorcing the study of work entirely from any notion of an economy."[129]

Some would argue that the new historical skepticism will produce more introspective, open-ended, detached, "ironic"[130] ways of viewing the past, less likely to privilege class. Certainly, post-structuralist theory has offered useful critiques of the way in which historians themselves created a masculinist version of class. It has encouraged debates about the relationship of the discursive to the non-discursive, guarded us against the temptations of essentialism and, usefully unsettled any "innocent" notion that we can "grasp the scheme of things entire."[131]

Yet, as Marlene Shore points out, long before post-structuralism, historians skeptically interrogated the intellectual paradigms shaping the texts they produced,

[128]One exception indicating continuing academic interest in labour is the participation of some academics in the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, Hamilton, Ontario.

[129]Richard Price, "The Historical Meanings of Work," *International Journal of Social History*, 34 (1989), 327-32.

[130]Mariana Valverde,"'Post Structuralist Gender Historians," 236. For a critique of the "ironic" gaze, see Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives*, 208-10.

[131]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the politics of the new historicism," 87.

and suggested knowledge was partial and partisan.[132] Moreover, skepticism is a doubled-edged sword which may also cut so deep it paralyses judgements about causality, priority, and political importance. It can also become a self-generating intellectual universe or "ideology", while denying that role. Both feminists and materialists alike have objected to the failure of some post-structuralist theories to allow the veracity of any "truth claims" — thus calling into question feminist and socialist emancipatory projects.[133]

Moreover, however difficult it is to create "hyphenated" political projects, linking feminism, socialism, and anti-racism, we can't leave out a crucial ingredient, without spoiling the whole mix. In part, the complaints lodged against class reflect basic political disinterest in such issues, but we are not simply bystanders to a political context: we are a part of it. We need to redouble our efforts to understand how class, race and gender differ over history, as well as how to put them together. They may all encompass "lived experiences"[134] of oppression but — even granting social constructionism — gender and race *appear* more visible markers of difference, take on different material and ideological forms, and may also have some potential to be coopted by liberal pluralism. In transnational theoretical debates, American feminists have rather ardently embraced French feminist theory of a postmodern bent, but perhaps Canadians should carve out an alternative project — drawing on our different political history — by exploring theory dedicated to redefining materialism, production, reproduction, and sexuality.[135]

Surely, as globalized capitalism and the deconstruction of the welfare state become more menacing forces, even a "totalizing logic" for working peoples, some of the traditional topics of labour history, including wage work, the sexual division of labour, consumer organizing, and socialist politics, should seem more, not less prescient. This is especially true for women, who have dramatically increased their participation in wage work since the 1960s, yet who face persisting, and new, barriers, alienations, and injustices in their work lives — as the opening example of garment workers indicates.

[132]Marlene Shore, "'Remember the Future': The *Canadian Historical Review* and the Discipline of History, 1920-1995," *Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (September 1995), 435-55. For a spirited polemic arguing that the "new" in much post-structuralist history is hardly "new" or "radical" and that the only difference is that "there is a self-conscious drive to make representation the only legitimate field of study," see Raphael Samuel, "Reading the Signs," *History Workshop Journal*, 32 (Autumn 1991), 92-102.

[133]Linda Alcoff, "Feminist Politics and Foucault," 70.

[134]Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class and the Writing of B.C. History," *B.C. Studies* 111 (1996), 61-75 and responses by Veronica Strong-Boag, Bryan Palmer, and Robert McDonald.

[135]On the American attraction to the former and neglect of French materialist-feminism, see Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard, "Reconstructing French Feminism: Commodification, Materialism and Sex," in L. Adkins and D. Leonard, eds., *Sex in Question: French materialist feminism* (London 1996), 8.

Utopian visions, as social critics lament, are currently seen as misguided at best, sinister at worst; we embrace limited, partial integrations into, and accommodations to the social order, rather than imagining its demise. If the denigration of class and the derision of emancipatory projects has not permeated our efforts to create a feminist labour history, they do hang, like dense a fog of indifference and scepticism, over our present efforts. Without some political renewal, theoretical shifts, and new utopias, our project of creating a feminist working-class history may languish, and all that we will be left with are the complex accommodations of our negotiated postmodern, "post-feminist" age.

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