

War, Work, and the Culture of Gender

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War, Work, and the Culture of Gender

Alice Kessler-Harris

D'Ann Campbell, *Women At War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1984).

Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst MA; University of Massachusetts Press 1984).

Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1986).

AMONG THE ISSUES that have recently infused labour history with its electrical energy, none has created more sparks than the debate over the meaning of workers' culture. Simply put, the problem is how to think about large groups of people in ethnic, racial, regional, or gendered ways in the context both of their own cultural integrity and of their relationships with a larger society. The issue has led some historians, following Herbert Gutman, into an exploration of culture as though it could somehow exist independently of a wider social reality, resisting it in the interests of traditional cultural forms. But concern with the inherently static implications of such a notion has led other historians to question the power and even the existence of independent cultures altogether, adhering more closely to the Marxian conception of a culture that emerges from a class-defined consciousness conditioned by social reality. In the interstices, such voices as those of Sean Wilentz and T. Jackson Lears are beginning to develop more complex explanations of the relationship between consciousness and culture, between behaviour and attitudes. My own current favourite inspiration is Charles Sabel, whose portrait of workers' world views provides a variegated picture of consciousness within which cultural change becomes plausible.¹

¹ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1950* (New York 1984); T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 567-93; Charles Sabel, *Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry* (New York 1982).

Alice Kessler-Harris, "War, Work, and the Culture of Gender," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 163-167.

Problems of the nature of culture and its relationship to change are nowhere more germane than they are to the complex issues surrounding women and work. For many years, women's relationships to wage work were said to have been informed by their ethnic, racial, and class identifications. Recently, however, the question has arisen about the extent to which, in addition to these cultural inputs, gender itself influences the formation of consciousness. But gender has two facets: the first ideological, and the second experiential. In the first case, gender functions as a system of socially imposed expectations and roles that men and women more or less share and by which they are expected to act. In this sense, gender culture is as static as any ethnic culture. In the second, gender operates as felt experience, conditioned by social reality to be sure, but at some level rooted in human needs. So defined, it can incorporate endless possibilities for change. Because the two meanings are separable only analytically, we are left with a tension between them that raises inevitable questions about women's capacity to function as agents of change. This accounts, I think, for the endless fascination with questions of whether women's experiences at wage work affirm a system of social roles or threaten to change it.

The literature on women in World War II provides a case in point. The war offered enormous possibilities for redefining gender relationships, yet historians differ as to how men and women responded. Most concur that war sufficiently altered social reality to lead us to expect changes in women's attitudes, values, and norms. But they disagree as to what happened. Some argue that wartime experience laid the ground for women's steadily increasing participation in wage labour thereafter, or that it planted the seeds of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s. Others suggest that women remained ultimately untouched by the war experience. They attribute this

variously to pressures for stasis reflected in rigid occupational segregation, media and government propaganda, family policy, or women's own desires to maintain traditional roles.² At the core of differences in interpretation are sometimes unarticulated conceptions of cultural transmission.

These three volumes illustrate the point. The authors agree that war was perceived by male and female contemporaries as posing a serious threat to women's traditional roles. They describe how pressures to pull women into the labour force were weighed against the need to preserve familial roles and commitment as well as against the possibility that women workers would develop self-images independent of the family. They reveal how the media alternately urged women to give up such elements of their femininity as frivolous clothes, make-up, and men, and yet deplored the loss of womanliness that resulted. They reveal how women rushed to the war effort patriotically, only to risk their reputations and suffer sexual harassment as a consequence of nearly universal fears about loss of control over women's sexuality. With only minor discrepancies, they note that combat roles for women were everywhere discouraged by governments and policy-makers.

But if there is general agreement as to the attempts of policy-makers to have it both ways — that is, to attract women to war service, while insisting that their identities remain rooted in the home and motherhood — there is none about

² See, for example, William Chafe, *The American Woman, Her Changing Social, Political and Economic Roles, 1920-1970* (New York 1972); Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women. Sex Roles, Family Relations and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, CT 1981); and Susan Hartmann, *American Women in the 1940s: The Home Front and Beyond* (Boston 1982), as well as the excellent annotated bibliography in Ruth Pierson's "They're Still Women After All," herein reviewed.

women's felt experience. Whether women welcomed or fought against the new opportunities is still in question.

In the most compact of these studies, Maureen Honey confronts the issue by looking at attempts of popular magazines (under the direction of the Office of War Information) to guide women's sense of themselves. Eager to get at class differences in the direction of propaganda, she selects *True Story* and *Saturday Evening Post* as representative of working-class and middle-class women respectively. Content analysis of stories sampled from these two magazines leads to some surprising conclusions. Class apparently does not discriminate in attempts to portray women with stronger self-images and more positive identities than in the pre-war period. Both magazines depict women who are competent and steadfast, dependable and compassionate. Pre-war themes of conflict between marriage and career disappear as women's work identities emerge boldly, and egalitarian images increase. In stories directed at both groups, women appear as "self-sacrificing patriots" who will surely return to home and hearth at war's end.

But if portraits of all women have much in common, sizeable differences between appropriate roles for middle- and working-class women remain. Working-class audiences were presented with heroines who generally held traditional female jobs (sometimes in war settings), who were frequently in love, and for whom motherhood formed the centre of female identity. Almost always, they were passive in the face of a cruel and uncontrollable world. In contrast, for middle-class heroines work formed the centre of female identity and women typically held professional and skilled or managerial jobs vacated by men. Middle-class women were decisive, competent, and assertive; they exercised authority over men as well as women; and they could triumph over obstacles. Class differences in images of wartime women, Honey

argues, reflect the social values of editors, of the Office of War Information, and of women themselves.

In Honey's view, the media's attempt to "weld the home front into an economic army" successfully created models of women of all classes that reinforced female sacrifice in the interests of a cause larger than themselves. The media thus sustained and enhanced traditional roles, and their effective propaganda shaped women's perceptions of wartime experiences in order to insure that female images of self would not permanently alter. Although Honey does not say so, one gets the impression that the campaign in which *True Story* and *Saturday Evening Post* participated did more than preserve visions of home and motherhood; it embedded them in women's consciousness.

There is no question of Honey's achievement here. The conscious effort to sway the public mind is clearly documented as is the collusion of magazine editors and writers with the federal government. Still at issue, however, is the implicit assumption that women are reflected in and readily swayed by media images. One wonders, for example, at the author's failure to explore the relationship between images imposed and images received. The impact of real experience fades against an idealized vision of self. Honey suggests that patriotism in wartime calls upon such traditional female values as self-sacrifice, but in the real world it also provided greater income, job choice, and some sense of accomplishment against which sacrifice was measured. What is the relationship between these real experiences and media portrayals? This question is especially germane for black women, for whom, however, no magazine was included. If, then, we learn something from Honey about the desire of government and editors to influence women, we learn far less about how ordinary women responded to these stories. We are left to infer that female readers

bought the line offered them, but no theory of how culture is imposed suggests why this should be so.

Like Maureen Honey, D'Ann Campbell believes that women emerged from the war with traditional values intact. But unlike Honey, she suggests that women struggled to retain these values in the face of efforts by government and policy-makers to instill a different vision. In Campbell's view, the United States government tried desperately, and with limited success, to draw women into the labour force. It failed in the face of female resistance and women emerged from the war with old values intact. In the most succinct statement of her thesis, Campbell argues that reactions to the war "were produced by attitudes and values... rather than by material factors such as paychecks." (4) Although Campbell is not always consistent on this point, I take her to mean that the behaviour of women grew out of a set of attitudes and values developed in the pre-war period.

Campbell supports her thesis with evidence that single women resisted government propaganda to enter the armed services and mothers refused daycare for their children, both acting in conformity with values that held femininity and motherhood in high esteem. The material lives of most women, as she demonstrates in one of the most informative parts of the book, did not change in wartime: the husbands of most wives remained at home for all or most of the war; the ability of most women to live in nuclear family units was not impaired. While the war drew women into the labour force, trade union restrictions insured that their jobs would be limited in scope and duration. Employers cooperated by restructuring jobs so that women could not use them as avenues for mobility.

Underlying Campbell's argument is a vision of culture that is more than usually static. If Honey's conception of attitudes and values (and the behaviour that

emanates from them) appears to be imposed from above and conforms too readily to the cultural visions of others, Campbell suggests a far more rigid image. For her, female values are rooted in an impermeable self and have little to do with the social fabric. Women's attitudes are juxtaposed against those of a larger society as though they did not exist as part of an integrated whole. At one point, Campbell refers to patriotism and private interest as two categories that "cut across each other like a grid." But surely private interest was often perceived as emerging from the same sources as patriotism. Missing is the profound ambivalence manifested in most government programmes for soliciting women's participation in non-home activities and the equally profound ambivalence shared by women who were simultaneously delighted and confused at new possibilities for earning significant incomes. A Geertzian conception of culture as "lived experience" or process would be helpful here.

Campbell's interpretation lends itself to a troubling vision of women without agency. "During the short term of the war years," she suggests, "women responded to new challenges on the basis of their identities as women, as members of families and communities that had been forged before the war and would persist after it." (236) Such changes as occurred among women came from the way in which the war accelerated and crystallized changes in American society that had impact on "the social patterns and values of the fifties." The difficulty here is that in drawing too harsh a line, Campbell has caught herself in a trap. While we might all agree that the choices women made in the war tell us something about attitudes, we want to know what they tell us about opportunity as well. In failing to come to terms with the tension between these two, Campbell fails to grapple with the process of change and eliminates the nuance that is at the heart of all culture.

It is precisely the dynamism of change

that is at the heart of Ruth Roach Pierson's lucidly written study of women and policy in the Canadian war experience. Where D'Ann Campbell sees women successfully sticking to an older set of attitudes in the face of government pressure to change, Pierson argues that some women welcomed new opportunities and that government policy-makers tried to contain them. Setting aside the unlikely possibility that these two interpretations accurately represent different national experiences, let us assume that they reflect different visions of female agency and of the dual challenge of wartime. So contextualized, Pierson offers a more comforting view of the impact of war. On the one hand, she acknowledges a set of attitudes shared by men and women about women's role and place. On the other, she notes that war offered a tremendous opportunity for adventure, for experience, and for income. The task of men and some women was to recruit women to the war effort without threatening traditional roles. The task of women was to take advantage of opportunity consistent with their capacities to live by or redefine an older set of values and attitudes. Pierson explores the incentives and barriers on both sides of this equation, concluding that neither a vision of emancipated womanhood nor one of carefully channelled domesticity accurately reflects women's experience.

If patterns in government policy and a shared gender ideology restricted women's access to jobs and training, and

inhibited women's capacity to reap any permanent benefit from them, the opportunity offered by war suggested its own temptations and created its own tensions. The result was a vision of possibility that did not simply disappear or become dormant at war's end. Rather, it contributed to an on-going reassessment of sex/gender ideology. In contrast to Campbell, Pierson describes the conflicts of women who must choose whether to alter older modes of behaviour. In contrast to Honey, she sees propaganda not as a reflection of social roles but as a way of insuring that boundaries are maintained. If her women are not freed by the war, at least they are touched by it. And if Pierson does not offer a way of resolving tension at least she pursues its existence.

Ultimately each of these books places the meaning of women's experiences in a different context. Honey suggests that it is best understood as a function of efforts to mould it; Campbell insists on the framework of female values; and Pierson views women in relation to the pull of opportunity. Together they pose a twofold challenge to the historian. They raise key questions for those of us who want to pursue the framework within which something called the culture of gender can be understood and described. They provide a new beginning for interpreting the way different groups of people resonate with a broader set of cultural imperatives and therefore produce or resist change. For these contributions we should all be profoundly grateful.

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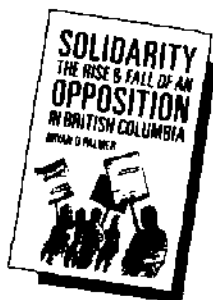
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