

## Women's Work:

### Re-examining Canadian and American Women's Labour History

The signing of the North American free trade agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, and intensifying economic globalization have recently highlighted shared dilemmas of Canadian and American women workers. Reports from both sides of the border indicate that gender "matters" in the current economic restructuring and adjustment. Government deregulation, freeing up the market and dismantling the social safety net have had negative effects on women's paid and unpaid domestic labour in North America, making the daily lives of working women more arduous and stressful.<sup>1</sup>

Both the Canadian and American trade union movements have noted the increase of lower-paid service work and part-time work for women who cannot get full-time work, while a gender gap in wages remains a vexing problem.<sup>2</sup> These shared trends are the result of capital's search for cheap, flexible labour, a process which transcends national boundaries. But there are also significant differences between the two countries. Although women have increased as a percentage of the unionized work force in the United States, similar increases are more dramatic in Canada, in part because of the significant place that public sector unions have in our labour movement, especially in Quebec. Political economists also ask why union density has not declined as drastically in Canada as it has in the U.S. in recent years. Are different systems of government responsible, or is the presence of a social democratic party in Canada a significant factor? Moreover, what is the impact of an increasingly 'feminized' workforce on the labour movement over the last forty years? Is it possible that increasing numbers of female trade unionists have injected some militancy into a troubled union movement that would otherwise have been even more demoralized?<sup>3</sup>

These current questions highlight the presence of strong similarities, but also important differences in the experience of women's work and labour organizing in the two countries. An examination of the writing of Canadian and U.S. women's labour history over the last thirty years is a useful means of exploring some general trends in North American working-class

- 1 Patricia Connelly, "Gender Matters: Global Restructuring and Adjustment," *Social Politics* 3 (1996), 12-31.
- 2 Canadian Labour Congress, *Women and Work* (Ottawa, 1996) and AFL/CIO web site. The American AFL/CIO, for example, estimates that women earn 74 cents on the male dollar and women of colour a lower 64 cents. In Canada, the wage gap has narrowed in part because of the downward pressure on male wages.
- 3 On the U.S. see Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (New York, 1988); on Canada, Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to the Social Contract* (Toronto, 1993); for a comparative approach see Jane Jenson (ed.), *The challenge of restructuring: North American labor movements respond* (Philadelphia, 1993).

history, as well as national differences in our understanding of women's work.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, women's labour history shows that some of the issues now linked to recent globalization, such as the non-renting search of capital for cheap, flexible female labour, have many precedents in twentieth century North America.<sup>5</sup>

This paper offers a brief review of some key trends in North American women's labour history since the 1970s. Because of my own expertise in Canadian working-class history, there may be some bias towards Canadian examples. However, given the usual domination of American examples and narratives in most North American publications, this may provide a welcome corrective. Central to my inquiry is the question whether scholars have fully integrated women into the history of class formation, and how they have done so. It is my suggestion that the writing about women and labour has been shaped by three, interconnected forces: changing trends in national historiography; directions in international social theory; and the political and social context of feminist, labour and Left organizing in each country. Over time, feminist critiques have changed the face of working-class history, pushing it towards a more gender-inclusive perspective. No doubt these efforts have been partial, only inching towards the creation of a truly feminist working-class history. Class and gender analyses have sometimes existed uneasily together; women's domestic and reproductive labour were often ignored, and race and colonialism were often inadequately addressed, and this is just to note a few problems. However, it is still important to recognize the accomplishments made and insights achieved, as well as the problems and gaps that remain. The real barriers to the creation of a feminist class analysis may lie less in our inadequate understanding of the past, and more in current political and theoretical trends which have spawned academic indifference to analyses of work, class, and labour organizing.

## Early Challenges

Across North America, labour and women's history were revitalized in the late 1960s and early 1970s, stimulated by the democratization of universities and the resulting influx of a new generation of youthful students, including more women, into institutions of higher education. The New Left and student radicalism, a resurgence of interest in social history and Marxism, Quebec's nationalist Quiet Revolution and the civil rights and anti-war movements in the U.S. all fostered new interest in the history of workers' and socialist movements. Overlapping, but sometimes distinct from these radical causes, was a rejuvenated women's movement, which sparked new attention to women's past. This was evident in some of the first books in North America on women's labour history, such as the Canadian *Women at*

4 I have used the terms labour history and working-class history interchangeably in this article, though some authors see differences: labour history may refer to the study of organized labour, such as unions, and working-class history refers to the broader study of all aspects of workers lives. I also use the term 'North American' to describe Canada and the U.S.

5 Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, 1999).

*Work: Ontario and the U.S. America's Working Women*, which proudly announced their radical political roots, as positive stimuli to scholarly work.<sup>6</sup>

What came to be called the ,new' labour history had emerged by the early 1970s, combining the interests of the so-called ,old' labour history, that is the study of trade unions, labour institutions and politics, with new attention to the social, intellectual and cultural dimensions of working-class experience. In Canada, the social democratic Canadian Commonwealth Federation/New Democratic Party (CCF/NDP) again moved into the orbit of academic research. And under the influence of New Left politics interest in the history of radicalism located outside of mainstream parties, such as anarchism, syndicalism and communism, also surged. Influenced by international currents in neo-Marxist and socialist-humanist writings, the new labour history changed the terrain of North American historical writing, with its clarion call to study all facets of working-class work, politics and culture, as well as its attention to regional, local and community-based experiences of workers, and its concern for human agency. Encouraged by historians such as E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, new labour historians explored a range of themes such as working-class culture and leisure, workers' control on the shop floor and the effect of industrialization on the family economy. In Quebec, always a culture apart from English Canada, two distinct emphases emerged: one exploring the conditions of working class life, the other researching labour institutions and radicalism. Of course, Quebec historians, some of whom were sympathetic to separatism, were also deeply concerned with the relationship of the working class to the nation and nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

The claim that there was an ,old' and ,new' labour history always oversimplified differences between the two approaches. New labour historians wrote not simply about culture, but also about trade unions, labour politics and the state. It was not simply the ,object of study' which stimulated these debates, but the political sympathies and theoretical dispositions of new labour historians, who were often influenced by various brands of Marxist and radical thought. In Canada, a social democratic old guard, loyal to the CCF/NDP, would logically be hostile to new Marxist perspectives and the implied sympathy for radical social transformation.<sup>8</sup> Debates about old and new approaches also took place in the U.S., and given the intensity of the Cold War, Marxism was not without its vocal opponents, but the tensions between cultural and 'institutional' studies was marked by less political hostility in the U.S.

6 Janice Acton et al. (eds.), *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto, 1974); Linda Gordon, Rosalyn Baxandall, Susan Reverby, *America's Working Women* (New York, 1976).

7 Joanne Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and Quebec," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1990), 149-67.

8 For some examples of opposing views in this debate, see, on the one hand, Kenneth McNaught, „E.P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* LXII/2 (1981), 141-68 and David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture," *Labour/Le Travail* 7 (1981), 95-112. On the other side: Greg Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal, 1995), ch.4 and Bryan Palmer, "Listening to History Rather than Historians", *Studies in Political Economy* 20 (1986), 47-84. For the U.S., David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New," *Labor History* 20 (1979), 111-26.

Significantly, feminism and gender did not figure prominently within these early debates in working-class history. In Canada, gender was introduced as evidence that class was a problematic category of analysis by conservative critics of the new working-class history. Since the working class was fractured by different experiences based on gender, ethnicity, religion and region, they argued, a unitary class consciousness was lacking and class was obscured.<sup>9</sup> Some echoes of this critique are still heard today, voiced by like-minded labour historians, or some authors influenced by post-structuralist theory and identity politics. Feminism, like Marxism, was a relatively new way of looking at the world in the Canadian historical profession. Lacking the American tradition of separate women's colleges, Canadian universities had allowed precious few female historians of any kind into their ranks until the 1970s. Nor was there a strong tradition of female, particularly *feminist*, social investigators and social welfare leaders with progressive ideas, either in government or academe. The Canadian field of women's labour history was therefore 'open territory.'<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Americans could draw on a small, but significant tradition of historians and social investigators, such as Alice Henry, Elizabeth Butler, Mary Beard and others, who wrote about women or labour issues throughout the twentieth century. As the new labour history took root in the U.S., this older tradition was given new direction and vitality by the emphasis put on working-class culture, and of course, by the influence of the feminist movement. By the early 1980s, historians such as Alice-Kessler Harris, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin and Nancy Dye had already produced important work on labouring women, trade unions and family life.<sup>11</sup>

American historians have often claimed that labour and women's historians existed as "two separate tribes".<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there were initially inevitable tensions between the two approaches. Women's history, by its very definition, assumed gender to be the central category of historical analysis, while for labour history, class was the definitive analytical framework. Also, women's lives were frequently explored through the realm of ideology; in contrast, men's lives were examined through the realm of economic production. Attempts to create a gendered working-class history, or a women's history which is informed by class and race, have proven to be far more difficult than anticipated.

Well into the 1980s and beyond, key studies and interpretations of *both* the old and new labour history tended to ignore women working for wages as well as women's reproductive, unpaid labour, concentrating instead on the workplace, and on 'male' workplaces. Many of the dominant paradigms used in labour history, such as industrialization, proletarianization,

9 David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture".

10 Canadian women involved in labour and politics did write about women and labour in progressive newspapers and journals but with the exception of Irene Biss Spry, an economist, few were in academe.

11 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (New York, 1981); Nancy Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, Unionism and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, Mo., 1980); Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1889-1930* (Ithaca, 1977).

12 Richard Oestreicher, "Separate Tribes? Working-class and women's history," *Reviews in American History* 19 (1991), 228.

unionization, and the labour process, tended to cast working men in leading roles. As Sonya Rose argued, a long-standing ideological investment in 'separate spheres,' a remnant of nineteenth century ideology, but incorporated into Marxism and the social sciences, lingered on in twentieth century analysis of the (male) public world of production and the private (female) world of family, nurturing, and unpaid work.<sup>13</sup> The new labour history, despite its attempt to examine class formation in its broadest context, was by and large male-centred. There were numerous studies of industrial unions, male union leaders and occupations such as metalworkers, bush workers, steel workers, auto workers, longshoremen, miners and more!<sup>14</sup> While this research filled many gaps in labour historiography, it was only in the late 1980s that some historians shifted their attention towards an analysis of the masculinity of workers, and the family relations of working-class life. But critics argue that an implicit bias in working-class history lingers on, as exemplified by a persisting emphasis on the workplace, as well as on the public, institutional and political play of class power.<sup>15</sup> Workplace studies, argues Dorothy Sue Cobble, tend to favour (male) industrial work over (female) service work, while male-dominated formal labour organizations are privileged over more diffuse, informal forms of female organizing.<sup>16</sup>

Stimulated by the concurrent development of feminist theory and politics, feminist attempts to integrate women into the new labour history also emerged in the 1970s. Historians sympathetic to a marriage of feminist and class analyses critiqued the labour process theory, the emphasis on skilled work and male-dominated unions, as well as the neglect of women's reproductive and unpaid work, and even what was seen as the masculine periodisation of working-class history.<sup>17</sup> These critiques were international in their orientation, though comparative

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

14 Some examples are: 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* (Montreal, 1989); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: seamen, Longshoremen and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, 1988); David Montgomery, *Workers Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology and Labor Struggle* (New York, 1979); Michael Nash, *Conflict and Accommodation: Coal Miners, Steel Workers and Socialism, 1890-1920* (Westport, 1982).

15 Leon Fink, "Culture's Last Stand? Gender and the Search for Synthesis in American Labor History," *Labor History*, 34 (Spring-Summer 1993), 178-89; Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," in Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, 1991), 4-5.

16 Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *International Journal of Labor and Working-Class History*, 56 (Fall, 1999), 23-44.

17 For example, 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; Susan Porter Benson, "Response" to David Montgomery in *International Journal of Labor and Working-Class History* 32 (Fall, 1987): 31-8. By the time a Canadian book on the labour process emerged, there was some attempt to integrate women. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (eds.), *On The Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Montreal, 1986).

work generally flowed one way across the Canadian/American border. The broader cultural domination of Canada by the U.S. was reflected, and continues to be reflected in academic work. Canadian feminists drew productively on U.S. scholarship, though Americans (with a few exceptions) remained largely unaware of Canadian writing. As Ruth Pierson has argued, Canadian women's history has reflected various forms of 'colonization' and one is the "colonization of Canadian women's history in relation to women's history in the U.S."<sup>18</sup> Despite the lack of communication, there were some general similarities in women's labour history in the two countries. Both were plugged into international theoretical controversies, which in the 1970s and early 1980s often centred on 'Marxist-feminist' theory. There were innovative debates and counter-debates as attempts were made to address the relationship between feminism and socialism. Scholars explored the role of capitalism and patriarchy in shaping the sexual division of labour, the relationship between the realms of reproduction and production, especially vis a vis women's domestic labour, and the interplay of economic structure and ideology in shaping class and gender inequality.<sup>19</sup>

Linked to theory was actual praxis: these debates both stimulated and reflected the reawakening of the Left. In Canada, attempts were made to revitalize the socialist traditions of the NDP, while across North America leftists set up new Marxist-Leninist parties. In addition, a host of new magazines and journals for a socialist and/or feminist audience were founded. However limited these efforts were within the larger body politic, they had broader significance and far-ranging repercussions, especially for academic thought and endeavours. But studying women and work was not a project limited to the academy. There were other important political stimulants in the 1970s and early 1980s. New attempts were made to organize the grass roots women's movement based on socialist-feminist principles. Also, innovative strategies were employed to unionize women workers, sometimes in more women oriented organizations outside of the mainstream labour movement.<sup>20</sup> No doubt, the socialist stimulus was stronger in Canada, for Canadian political traditions encompassed long-standing, inter-generational democratic socialist traditions, and the socialist influence on the renewed women's movement was strongly felt. In contrast, liberal and radical currents were both prominent in the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

18 Ruth Roach Pierson, "Colonization and Canadian Women's History," *Journal of Women's History*, 4(Fall, 1992),134-56.

19 Zillah Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York, 1979); Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in a Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London, 1980); Shelia Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London, 1980), Dorothy Smith, *Feminism and Marxism* (Vancouver, 1977); Bonnie Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household: Women's Domestic Labour Under Capitalism* (Toronto, 1980); Pat and Hugh Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards a Feminist Marxism," *Studies in Political Economy* 10 (1983), 7-43.

20 One example in the U.S. would be the group "9 to 5". In Canada bank workers initially tried to set up their own feminist unions. Women's labour issues also became rallying points for feminists. See Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," *New Left Review*, 141 (1983), 51-71.

21 Linda Adamson, Linda Briskin, Margaret Macphail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto, 1988); Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin, Christine Appelle, *Politics As If Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of*

Women's and working-class historians across North America shared similar experiences which drew attention to the issues of gender and class. As both, women and labour historians, were initially outsiders within academe they felt the common desire to question the unstated assumptions about what was deemed important in historical research. They also intended to employ history to make radical connections to the present. "Whose history" and "whose nation" they asked, does mainstream history represent – and defend?<sup>22</sup> Common themes and research challenges abounded, as both working-class and women's historians sought out the history of marginalized historical subjects, exploring themes such as exploitation, resistance, consciousness and ideology. Moreover, the new working-class history provided an important opening for feminist perspectives by rejecting, at least in rhetoric, the emphasis on formal labour institutions, and advocating the wider study of working class culture. At the same time, the strong emphasis in American feminist history on a separate 'women's culture' –not without its own feminist critics – probably influenced attempts to uncover the distinct work cultures of working-class women.<sup>23</sup> In Canada, the feminist historical interest in an earlier generation of middle-class suffragists went hand in hand with research into working-class women's wage work and labour organization; and these two themes were joined in studies exploring the ambivalent and uneasy relationship between feminists and women workers.<sup>24</sup>

The engagement between politics, theory and scholarly writing was not without tension and contradiction: relations between the women's movement and feminist scholars were sometimes strained, the Left and labour were certainly not synonymous groups, and women on the Left were highly critical of socialism's masculine biases. Nonetheless, this general political climate informed the questions explored by historians, and it infused vitality into feminist and class analyses. Moreover, historians were not alone: similar agendas preoccupied sociologists, political economists, even cultural theorists whose work became a crucial stimulus to historical explorations of class in an increasingly interdisciplinary academic milieu.<sup>25</sup>

*Women* (Toronto, 1993); Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York, 1975); Virginia Sapiro, "The Women's Movement, politics and policy in the Reagan era," in D. Dahlerup (ed.), *The new women's movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the U.S.* (London, 1986), 122-39; Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters* (Toronto, 1983). On women and unions, Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca, 1993); Julie White, *Sisters and Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto, 1993). For a comparative book on the women's movements, see Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (eds.), *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in the U.S. and Canada* (Montreal, 1992).

- 22 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* 3 (Summer, 1992), 129-31.
- 23 For a critique of the feminist preoccupation with women's culture in the U.S. see Ellen Carol DuBois et al., "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring, 1980), 26-64. Nancy Hewitt criticizes the concept of separate spheres and 'universal sisterhood', and pays attention to class and race in shaping women's culture, in "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," *Social History* 10/3 (1985), 299-321.
- 24 Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women* (Toronto, 1976).
- 25 Even cultural theory, such as the writings of Raymond Williams, offered cross-disciplinary, materialist inspiration to historians.

## Gendering the working-class past

During the 1980s, working-class history did become more positively concerned with gender, ethnicity and race. Ironically, as organized labour began to experience severe assaults on its freedoms, women's labour history began to flourish. Pushed and buoyed by feminist theory and organizing, a 'newer' labour history was increasingly more likely to take women into account, altering the earlier male story of work. Two concurrent developments were taking place. On the one hand, women's stories were integrated into the dominant, accepted themes in working-class history, and on the other hand, some re-assessments of the field argued for new perspectives that moved 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.<sup>26</sup>

Women's labour history concentrated on certain themes which changed over time. Initially, concerns with the workplace, the sexual division of labour, the processes of unionization, labour politics and the left, as well as the relationship between middle class reformers and working class women, and the working-class family dominated.<sup>27</sup> And the interest of the contemporary women's movement in challenging the entrenched sexual division of labour mostly fuelled the desire to historically deconstruct occupational sex typing. Labour historians effectively demonstrated how malleable the sexual division of labour was; how it was shaped by the economy, political exigencies, ideology, and the decisions and actions of unions and employers.<sup>28</sup> The emergence of the factory system in the nineteenth century, and the impact on artisans' work, family organization and women's labour in rural and urban contexts was also explored in considerable detail.<sup>29</sup> Predominantly female occupational group-

26 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 (eds.), *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problem of Synthesis* (DeKalb, Ill., 1989), 217-34. See also her "Treating the Male as the 'Other', *Labor History*, 34 (1993), 190-204. A Canadian assessment was Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (1987), 23-44.

27 I have limited myself to a few examples of pertinent studies. The lists could be pages long. For a bibliography on Canadian women's history see Diana Pedersen, ed., *Changing Women, Changing History* (Ottawa, 1996). Earlier bibliographies of American women's labor history usefully included primary source material: M.J. Soltow, *Women in American Labor History, 1825-1935* (Metuchen, N.J., 1976); Susan Kennedy, *America's White Working-class Women: A Historical Bibliography* (New York, 1981). Americans can also usefully draw on more web lists such as H-Net for Women's History (H-Women@H-NET.MSU.EDU).

28 Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, 1987); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto, 1990).

29 Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-80* (New York, 1979); Mary Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana, 1988); Susan Levine, *Labor's True Women: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia, 1984); Marjorie Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto, 1988); Jacques Ferland, "In Search of the Unbound Prometheus: A Comparative View of Women's Activism

ings were also examined, ranging from the study of household servants, one of the most important areas of women's labour, to other female dominated occupations, such as garment making, telephone operating, clerical and retail work, teaching and nursing.<sup>30</sup> In the U.S., the study of domestic workers was directly concerned with issues of race, as many Afro-American women were relegated to this work; while in Quebec, the question of nursing and teaching were tied to questions about the effect of Catholic religious orders on women's lives.<sup>31</sup> By the 1990s, issues such as occupational health and the effect of technology on women's work were also securing some attention.<sup>32</sup> Labour historians also used times of social and economic crises, such as the Great Depression, the Second World War, or strikes, as a means of studying women's work roles in flux, or under siege.<sup>33</sup> While strikes were a very traditional

in Two Quebec Industries," *Labour/Le Travail* 24 (1989), 11-44; Christina Burr, "Defending the Art Preservative: Class and Gender Relations in the Printing Trades Unions, 1850-1914," *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (Spring, 1993), 47-73.

- 30 Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, 1983); Magda Fahrni, "Ruffled Mistresses and Discontented Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring, 1996), 69-98; Allison Prentice and Marta Danlewycz, "Teachers Work: Changing Patterns and Perceptions in the Emerging Schools Systems of 19th and early 20th Century Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 17 (1986), 59-80; Michelle Martin, *Hello Central?: Gender, Technology and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal, 1991); Stephen Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923* (Urbana, 1990); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington, 1989); Barbara Melosh, *The Physicians Hand: Work, Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia, 1982); Sharon H. Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-39* (Urbana, 1992); Marjory W. Davies, *Woman's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870-1930* (Philadelphia, 1982); Ileen DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, 1990); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, 1986); Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana, 1987); Joan Jensen and Sue Davidson (eds.), *A Needle, a Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America* (Philadelphia, 1984); Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto, 1998).
- 31 Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, *Les femmes dans la société quebécoise: aspects historiques* (Montreal, 1977); Clio Collective, *Quebec Women: A History* (Toronto, 1987); David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living in, Living Out: African-American Domestic Workers and the Great Migration* (Washington, 1994); Brenda Gray, *Black Female Domestic Workers During the Depression in New York City, 1920-40* (New York, 1993). More recent studies of domestic workers in Canada are tied to questions of race and immigration policy: A. Bakan and D. Stasiulis, ed., *Not One of the Family: Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada* (Toronto, 1997).
- 32 Claudia Clark, *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910-39* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Michelle Martin, *Hello Central*; Heather Menzies, *Women and the Chip: Case Studies of the Effects of Informatics on Employment in Canada* (Montreal, 1981).
- 33 Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto, 1986); Any Kessleman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany, 1990); Maureen Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the U.S.* (Wesport, 1980); Lois Scharf, *To Work or to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism and the Great Depression* (Wesport, 1980); Margaret Hobbs, "Equality or Difference? Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers During the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail* 32 (1993), 210-23; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Gender Ideology in Historical

means of exploring working-class ‘resistance,’ they could also be used to shed light on women’s culture, sexuality and transgressive actions, or to question method and theory in working-class women’s history.<sup>34</sup> American academic output on these topics far outpaced Canadian writing, as the latter emanated from a far smaller academic community. For example, while some occupations, such as garment making, are explored in both national contexts, excellent studies of waitresses or store clerks are only American in content.<sup>35</sup> Also, a larger population and arts community has produced more American works of fiction or documentary films inspired by labour history.<sup>36</sup>

The relationship of women and the labour movement to state legislation and policy, especially with regards to protective legislation and unemployment, was also added to the research agenda, with political economists and sociologists making major contributions to scholarship.<sup>37</sup> By the 1990s historians also began to probe deeper into the changing historical ‘meaning’ of a woman’s wage, dissecting the social forces which both constructed and challenged dominant understandings.<sup>38</sup> Class and cultural differences between working-class and middle-class women, between Anglo and non-Anglo women, particularly in the era of the suffrage movement, were also explored, and as historians showed, could be politically fertile despite the inevitable tensions of class, expressed in conflicts over morals and leisure as well as wage work.<sup>39</sup> In the U.S. and less so in Canada, biographies of female labour leaders explored the collective activities and ideas of women involved in union work, labour politics and the

Reconstruction: A Case Study from the 1930s,” *Gender and History*, 1(Spring 1989), 31-40; Lois Hembold, “Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-class Women During the Great Depression,” *Feminist Studies* 13 (Fall, 1987), 629-56.

- 34 Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), 354-82; Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *Women’s History Review* 3 (1994), 5-28.
- 35 On waitresses see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1991); on store clerks see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures*.
- 36 Meredith Tax, *Rivington Street* (New York, 1982) and films such as *With Babies and Banners* and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.
- 37 Ruth Roach Pierson, “Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934-40,” *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (1990), 77-104; Jane Ursel, *Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto, 1992); Margeret McCallum, “Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada, 1910-25,” *Labour/Le Travail* 17 (Spring, 1986), 29-56; Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston, 1989); Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*; Nancy Rose, *Welfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare and Government Work Programs* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995). There have been excellent studies of mothers pensions or allowances see Margaret Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit*; Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana, 1994).
- 38 Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington, 1990). There is also a vast body of scholarship on the welfare state, see, for example, Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York, 1994).
- 39 Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1960* (New York, 1987); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City* (Toronto, 1995); Linda Kealey (ed.), *An Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto, 1979).

Left.<sup>40</sup> Not only were socialist-feminists of the 1970s and 1980s interested in their historical antecedents exploring women's political activism in the past,<sup>41</sup> but they also wanted to look beyond the narrow views of women's work for wages. Why women organized as trade union auxiliary members or in political parties, and how women's daily domestic labour turned them into supporters of consumer causes were questions which informed feminist research.<sup>42</sup> And in unearthing the history of housework,<sup>43</sup> feminist scholars attempted to bridge the story of paid work and unpaid household labour, often ignored in mainstream labour studies. Indeed, historians broke new ground by exploring the family economy as it altered over time, showing how both children's work and that of married women were consistently important to family subsistence, even if it did not take the form of wage labour. They also indicated how the shifting needs of capital shaped the local family economy, and how families responded, sometimes militantly, to the imperious demands of capital.<sup>44</sup> In the in-between world of home and work, they also traced the emergence of sweated or 'home work' which was often, though not exclusively, done by female homemakers in a contracting out system which defied trade union agreement and legal regulation.<sup>45</sup> Connected to explorations of the family economy was the concept of 'separate spheres,' developed by feminist historians to describe the ideological creation of distinct gender roles linked to the public and private realms for men and women. While it was undoubtedly problematic to depict women's actual lives as 'separate spheres,' some historians argued that gender ideology played an important, if contradictory role, outlining ideals for working-class women and shaping their distinctive work culture.<sup>46</sup>

40 Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A woman for her time* (Vancouver, 1995); Andree Levesque, *Scenes de al Vie en Rouge: L'époque de Jeanne Corbin, 1906-1944* (Montreal, 1999); Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where are the Organized Women Workers?" *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall, 1975), 92-110; Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Mass., 1860-1912* (Urbana, 1993). Americans could also draw on a richer source of autobiographies of labour and radical women, such as Rose Pesotta, *Bread Upon the Waters* (Ithaca, 1987); Naomi Shepard, *A Price Below Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals* (Cambridge, 1993) or Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana, 1993).

41 Mary Jo Buhle, *Women and Socialism in America* (Urbana, 1981); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-60* (Toronto, 1985). Later publications were Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900-1918* (Montreal, 1995); Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto, 1998).

42 Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, the Seattle Labor Movement* (Cambridge, 1994); Sylvie Murray, *A la Junction du mouvement ouvrier et du mouvement des femmes: La Ligue Auxiliaire de l'Association Internationale des Machinistes, Canada, 1903-80* (Montreal, 1990).

43 Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982); Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto, 1980).

44 Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto, 1993); John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth Century Urban Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail* 18 (1986), 163-88; Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: the Relationship between the Family and work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York, 1982); Carole Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class and Community in Troy, New York, 1864-86* (Urbana, 1992).

45 Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: the Politics of Industrial Homework in the U.S.* (Cambridge, 1994).

46 Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morto (eds.), *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th Century*

Themes of oppression and resistance raised different kinds of problems. Scholars were trying to integrate new feminist understandings of oppression with Marxist analyses of class exploitation. To avoid a top-down emphasis on oppression on the one hand, and a one-sided emphasis on women's agency and resistance on the other, was a difficult task. French Canadian feminists were probably not alone when they found themselves countering the claim that they had over-emphasized the patriarchal 'victimization' of working women, thus obscuring the "economic improvement" in women's lives over the early twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Scholarship struggled to accommodate both claims. Some historians drew on Gramscian theory, examining both economic structures and the subtle consent secured through hegemonic ideologies,<sup>48</sup> There existed an implicit understanding that we actually *could* recover working-class women's experience and consciousness, an idea not shared by recent post-structuralist critiques.

Regionalism was also a complicating factor in women's labour history. Vast countries such as Canada and the United States have dramatically different geographical areas with distinct cultures, economic and social formations. Any study of working women in Canada's Atlantic provinces has to confront decades of underdevelopment and out-migration as recurring themes. A historic division between English and French Canada also made generalizations difficult. Although studies showed that French and English women workers shared many common experiences, Quebec labour history was profoundly different, since prior to the 1960s it was shaped by a strong Catholic Church and Catholic unions, as well as a state with a heavy handed approach to labour relations; while in recent decades the search for a popular nationalist identity emphasized unique Quebecois working class values. In the U.S., different regions also frequently denote differences based on language, race, religion and ethnicity.<sup>49</sup> Paying attention to these difference makes for a very diverse literature. The story of Mexican women cannery workers in the American Southwest was distinct from predominantly white female Anglo auto workers in the north, or Eastern European Jewish garment workers in New York.<sup>50</sup> As a result, a synthesis of women's labour history, let alone all working-class his-

*Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1994). Louise Lamphere, *From Working Daughter to Working Mother: Immigrant Women in a New England Industrial Community* (Ithaca, 1987). See also Nancy Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood." The debate about the role of gender ideology in shaping working-class women's choices became relevant in practice with the famous 'Sears' court case in which two historians testified against each other. See Ruth Milkman, "Women's History and the Sears Case," *Feminist Studies*, 12 (Summer 1986), 375-400.

47 Fernand Ouellet, "La question sociale au Quebec, 1880-1930: la condition feminine et le mouvement des femmes dans l'historiographie," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, XXI (1988), 319-45; for a reply see Micheline Dumont, "'Historie des femmes,'" *Histoire Sociale/Social History* XXIII (1990), 117-28.

48 Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-town Ontario, 1920-60* (Toronto, 1995), and also Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace*.

49 For historiographical articles on labor and race, see *Labor History* 35 (Fall 1994), including C. Guerin-Gonzales, "Conversing Across Boundaries of Race, Ethnicity, Class, Gender and Region: Latino and Latina Labor History," *ibid*, 547-63.

50 Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-50* (Albuquerque, 1987); Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shetel: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, 1990); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York, 1985); Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-75* (Ithaca, 1990).

tory, was a daunting prospect, though some excellent surveys of working women did emerge. American historians seemed particularly worried that the strands of the new labour history, rooted in specific places and communities, were not congealing into a synthetic picture, and warned of the dangers of attempting such a synthesis as long as gender remained conceptually subordinate to class. In Canada, the issue of synthesis was debated less often; given long-standing English-French divisions and a decentralized federal political system, historians were less anxious to make this a political issue.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the initial concentration on themes such as the workplace, unions, politics and family, the literature that emerged was not without its complexities. Yet, the strategy of blending women into existing thematic frameworks of working-class history was later referred to negatively as 'adding women and stirring.' No doubt, this characterization is somewhat unfair. After all, these early studies laid important foundations and stimulated new questions and critiques for future scholars. Within feminist studies, women's labour history was initially seen as a valuable means of addressing broader theoretical debates,<sup>52</sup> as well as a useful tool for practical strategies of organizing women workers. It was interesting to learn from the past whether different union regimes, craft, industrial or syndicalist models, or different approaches to women's autonomous organizing, served or did not serve working women's interests. Research exploring women's political role within powerful unions, such as the United Auto Workers, or attempts to build women's committees within unions are just two examples of such innovative approaches.<sup>53</sup>

## Critiques and Complications

By the 1990s new themes and approaches were emerging in women's labour history. More studies were attempting synthesis, integrating domestic and paid work, community and culture, men and women. Community studies, for instance, tried to offer a holistic view of

- 51 On the debate about synthesis in the U.S. see J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (eds.), *Perspectives on American Labor History*; Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History." See also Kessler-Harris' excellent overview, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement* (New York, 1979, repr.1980) and a recent work informed by race, Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998). No such Canadian survey of working women exists. On working-class history see Bryan D. Palmer *Working Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour* (Toronto, 1992) and for women's history, Alison Prentice, et al, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto, 1996).
- 52 As Mary Jo Buhle points out history soon became less central to women's studies, "Gender and Labor History," in *Perspectives on American Labor History*, 70-1. The strength of socialist-feminist women's history in the U.S. may have been in the area of labour. For a perceptive analysis of what was to come vis a vis postmodernism see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Socialist-Feminist American Women's History," *Journal of Women's History*, 1(1990), 181-210.
- 53 Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement* and Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-79* (Toronto, 1994). See also 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; Dennis Deslippe, *Rights not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-class Feminism, 1945-80* (Urbana, 2000).

working-class life that examined paid and domestic labour, leisure and culture, political organizing for men and women. A study of families in Halifax explored the daily work and gender ideals of sons and daughters, husbands and wives, while Elizabeth Faue's examination of Depression-era Minneapolis examined themes such as the gendered representation of women and men in local labour conflicts.<sup>54</sup> Even a traditionally 'male' occupation like mining could be scrutinized in a community study that was sensitive to gender; Elizabeth Jameson's exploration of Cripple Creek uncovers both the ideals of working-class masculinity and femininity and the actual "imperfect unions" of men and women in this gold mining community.<sup>55</sup>

Historians also increasingly explored various conflicts and power imbalances fracturing working-class life and culture. Previously, the dark side of family life, namely conflict and violence, was seldom explored but new studies opened up questions about violence within working-class families.<sup>56</sup> As feminist, gay and lesbian studies sparked interest in the history of sexuality the links between sexuality and work, along with explorations about sexual orientation of male and female workers, and the resulting social tensions, were also investigated.<sup>57</sup> In addition, attempts were made to link cultural studies and labour history.<sup>58</sup> Research into delinquency, crime and marginality started to flourish, stimulated most likely both by Foucault's influence, and the blunt reality of the current economic polarization which has led to increased criminalization of the poor in North America.<sup>59</sup> Other critiques of working-class history urged reinvigoration of the field by means of addressing the links between gender and race.<sup>60</sup> Influenced by the mobilization of women of colour and by the emergence of critical race theory, historical studies of women's work were struggling to understand the way in which race and colonialism shaped women's paid and unpaid labour. Early labour history,

54 Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto, 1995); Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Men, Women and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-45* (Chapel Hill, 1991). For a community study that focuses on work and leisure, Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* (Urbana, 1997).

55 Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana, 1998).

56 Kathryn Harvey, "To Love, Honour and Obey: Wife Battering in Working Class Montreal," *Urban History Review* 19 (1990), 130-40; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Boston, 1988).

57 Kathryn Macpherson's chapter on sexuality in *Beside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-90* (Toronto, 1996); 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, 402-23; Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York, 1993).

58 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).

59 Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Victorian Halifax* (Halifax, 1989); Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, 1982).

60 These were not the only debates in labour history; others dealt with issues such as technology and the need to examine the state. For some commentary see Eric Arnesen, "Crusades against Crises," *International Review of Social History* 35 (1990), 106-27.

it was pointed out, often focussed on the old industrial regions in the North East or Middle West, and in doing so did not only privilege male, but also white workers.<sup>61</sup>

Since the early 1980s studies on immigrant life, on the connection between ethnicity, work and radicalism, and in Canada, on the cultural differences of the French Canadian working class have been numerous. Most research centered on white ethnic women workers and their communities, whether these were Italian, Finnish, or Eastern European. Historians explored women's work culture, and organizing campaigns, immigrants' strategies to adjust to a new environment, as well as their agency and resistance. Ethnic cultures generated alternative versions of femininity distinct from the dominant Anglo middle-class idealization of domesticity. The resulting tensions which developed between immigrant women and Anglo middle-class reformers trying to assimilate these newcomers by changing their domestic labour, work patterns and cultural ideals pointed to the intersection of class and ethnicity.<sup>62</sup>

More contentious than ethnicity was the issue of race in working class history. Here, the U.S. and Canadian experiences diverge in important ways. Although racism, and prior to 1800 even slavery, is certainly a part of Canadian history, the presence of a large Afro-American population and the burden of slavery, as well as the widespread racial segregation of the American workforce have created a formidable legacy for U.S. labour history. Debates about race, including its occlusion in labour history and the effects of racism on the labour movement, have been ongoing and contentious.<sup>63</sup> Studies of Afro-American women workers by authors such as Jacqueline Jones and Tera Hunter, of Mexican workers by Vicky Ruiz, or Asian workers by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, as well as comparative analyses of white and Black women workers, have highlighted how crucial race has been to the life experiences of American women.<sup>64</sup> Recent studies of the historical construction of 'whiteness' as a privileged iden-

61 For a review of some works on race see Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, 26 (1998), 146-74.

62 Jean Burnet, *Looking into my Sisters Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto, 1986); Varpu Linstrom Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of the 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* (Montreal, 1992); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women*; Ellen Dubois and Vicki Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York, 1990 and 1998); Donna Gabbacia, *From the Other Side: Gender and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1890-1999* (Bloomington, 1994).

63 Lois Rita Hembold and Ann Schofield, "Women's Labor History, 1790-1945," *Reviews in American History* (September 1989), 501-2; Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion," as well as Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History* 41 (December, 1996): 375-88 and Elizabeth Faue's response in the same issue, "Anti-Heroes of the Working Class", 351-74.

64 Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women*; Dolores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia, 1985); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Service* (Philadelphia, 1986); Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997).

tivity within the working class have added to this discussion,<sup>65</sup> but trying to work out the "simultaneity" of race, gender and class relations, as Tera Hunter argues, remains one of the more difficult tasks facing U.S. labour historians.<sup>66</sup>

Canadian studies exploring race and labour issues are rather diverse, and range from legal approaches, such as examining laws preventing white women from working for Chinese men, to oral histories which reveal the racial segregation of work endured by Afro-Canadian women.<sup>67</sup> This research is often linked to immigration history, and may also overlap Aboriginal history, as some industries sought out both Asian and Aboriginal workers.<sup>68</sup> In general, this research field of race and labour is not yet well developed; however, it is fair to say that close attention needs to be paid to changing social constructions of 'race' and the way in which immigration policy has altered the racial make up of working populations over time, especially in large urban centres. After all, it is only since the mid-1960s that Canadian immigration policy was no longer based on the criteria of race.

An emerging strength of Canadian research, on the other hand, is its recent interest in colonialism. Influenced by the central political place that Aboriginal or First Nations' organizing has assumed in Canada, – even the Canadian Labour Congress has a strong policy on Native land rights-, thoughtful studies of First Nations labour have been published addressing in particular the years of initial colonial contact. This research explores how traditional subsistence and wage labour connected and was exploited by capital, paying specific attention to cultural differences and colonial power relations, including racism.<sup>69</sup> If American historians have generated complex discussions of race and labour, Canadian authors have offered new frameworks to explore colonialism and work. But more comparative studies and cross border discussions are needed which would benefit both research areas.

Since the late 1980s, demands for the reinterpretation of 'gender' have been frequent in both Canada and the U.S. Some critics contend that the 'gendering' of *both* men and women should be studied rather than focussing just on women. Many feminist historians understood all along that the study of women was a project which should eventually lead to the re-

65 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991).

66 Roediger quoting Terra Hunter in "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), 127-143.

67 Constance Backhouse, "White Female Help and Chinese-Canadian Employers: race, Class, and Gender and Law in the Case of Yee Clun, 1924," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 26 (1994), 34-52; Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: The Lives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto, 1991).

68 Agnes Calliste, "Women of 'Exceptional Merit': Immigration of Caribbean Nurses to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 6 (1993), 85-102; Alicia Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of B.C.* (Montreal, 1996).

69 Alicia Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*; Jo-Anne Fiske, "Fishing is Women's Business: Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Women and Men," in Bruce A. Cox (ed.), *Native Peoples/Native Lands: Canadian Inuit, Indian and Metis* (Ottawa, 1988), 186-98; John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: the Aboriginal labouring class of British Columbia, 1849-90," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3 (Spring 1992), 69-94. See also the article by Donald Avery in this volume.

interpretation of the entire social history of men and women, however, the immediate goal was to concentrate on those previously ignored, that is, women. The notion that a gender analysis offers a superior analysis, going “beyond” a “narrow”<sup>70</sup> limited focus on women was nevertheless promoted by some historians. In the U.S., some feminists countered with the argument that such research would ignore the historical role of patriarchy, or undermine further analysis from a feminist perspective. In Canada, the counter argument reflected socialist-feminist proclivities, and it was pointed out that setting up a hierarchy with women’s history a less sophisticated second to gender history was simply unnecessary and undesirable.<sup>71</sup> In the end, the debate had the very positive effect of encouraging the study of workers’ masculinity; and that men’s work, leisure, family lives, sexuality and organizing attempts are now examined within a gender analysis. Indeed, this conceptual approach has been deployed in recent studies that range from work cultures to union politics to the welfare state.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, there is also the claim that women and gender have still not been accorded importance in working-class history. Sonya Rose has lamented that the “dominant paradigms in labor history continue to be reproduced as though neither women or gender were particularly relevant.” Similarly, Laura Frader claims that the new labour historians, like the old, retained a “universalist, unitary notion of class” seeing “men as workers, women as wives, mothers, daughters.”<sup>73</sup> On the whole, labour historians have been sympathetic to, not dismissive of these feminist critiques. In fact, one recent commentator on Canadian labour history who dared to suggest that ‘class’ may be presently the imperilled category, received little support and much criticism.<sup>74</sup> But my view is also not as pessimistic as that of some feminists. In Canada, the labour history journal, *Labour/Le Travail* has accorded women a significant place on the editorial board, and since the late 1980s, the content of the journal has paid considerable attention to women and gender, reflecting larger trends in the historical profession. Furthermore, in response to concerns that working-class history is in decline, some U.S. his-

70 For this view see Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto, 1991) and her “Comment on Women’s History/Gender History” *Journal of Women’s History* 5 (1993), 121-5; Karen Dubinsky, et al., (eds.), *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto, 1992).

71 Judith Bennett, “Feminism and History,” *Gender and History* 1 (1989), 251-72. On Canada see Joan Sangster, “Beyond Dichotomies: Reassessing Gender History and Women’s History in Canada,” *Left History* 3 (1995), 109-21 and responses by Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, Karen Dubinsky and Lynn Marks, *Left History* 3 and 4 (1996), 205-48.

72 Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered*; Cecilia Danysk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1920* (Toronto, 1995). Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-94* (Toronto, 1999); Lisa Fine, “Our Big Factory Family: Masculinity and Paternalism at the REO Motor Car Company of Lansing, Michigan,” *Labor History* 34 (1993), 274-91; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering*.

73 Sonya Rose, “Gender and Labor History,” 147 and Laura Frader, “Dissent over Discourse: Labor History, Gender and the Linguistic Turn,” *History and Theory*, 34 (1995), 217, 225. For a more comprehensive and measured critique see Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered*, Introduction.

74 Mark Leier, “W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class and the Writing of B.C. History,” *B.C. Studies*, 111 (1996), 61-75.

torians have suggested that discussions concerning gender, race and labour have actually revitalized working-class history.<sup>75</sup>

## Deepening political problems

There is no doubt however that current political and scholarly trends are creating a climate of some uncertainty for labour historians. In fact, changing historiographical trends and major shifts in social theory are closely linked to the general political pessimism surrounding labour and the Left.

At the same time, other historical disciplines which are closely linked to labour history are flourishing. New themes and topics, including crime, sexuality, gay history and especially cultural representation, have become fields in their own right, important to the historical profession. In Canada, the field of Aboriginal history, addressing also questions of oppression, is thriving. In addition, social history, including labour history, is more fully integrated in recent surveys of both American and Canadian history, and women's history has become not only more respectable but also more influential. Attention to gender issues provoked challenges to reigning interpretations and paradigms; for example, research on gender and welfare provisions has led to the re-thinking of the welfare state, while insights about working-class culture have been brought to bear on topics such as sexuality.<sup>76</sup> These are all positive changes which do not *necessarily* imply inattention to working-class history or to a class analysis.

But political and professional shifts have led to a deepening pessimism and cynicism about the centrality of class formation when analyzing North American history. It was not simply that some of the more traditional topics of working-class history – wage work, unions, and labour politics – had become less visible. Rather, shifts in contemporary politics and social theory have led to very direct challenges to the concept of class analysis, materialist and Marxist theories. The academic retreat from class and the decline of the political and intellectual left are connected. In North America, the organized Left has been in disarray and decline; in contrast, the role of women in the trade union movement has increased. More women are moving into trade union offices, and women are organizing separately which has increased the visibility of feminist issues. But in general, labour militancy has been on the decline; under severe attack by capital, the labour movement has been extremely defensive. Nor was or is it clear that on substantive feminist issues, the labour movement has been willing to fully embrace women's agenda.<sup>77</sup>

75 The editorial board of *Labour/Le Travail* dramatically increased its women members to about 40%-50% over the period of a decade, although the board of the American *Labor History* does not have such high numbers of women. The number of articles on women and gender also rose dramatically in *Labour/Le Travail* by the 1990s.

76 Linda Gordon (ed.), *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, 1990).

77 Linda Briskin, "Autonomy, Diversity and Integration: Union Women's Separate Organizing in North

It was not simply ,the logic of capitalism,‘ or the fall of communism internationally which has led to scholarly disinterest in the concept of class and socialism. Rather, the intellectual Left, increasingly comfortable in universities, has abandoned a vision of social transformation in which the mobilization of the working class played a central role. Indeed, in the international literature, many influential critics announced that class had been ,deconstructed,‘ that it was politically inadequate as a tool of analysis, and they claimed Marxism had proven reductionist and determinist. The labour movement, others added, has proven itself inadequate to the task of mobilization, unable to offer a broadly-based egalitarian vision for the oppressed. Instead, hope was placed in the politics of the new social movements, with a broad array of radical agendas. While these emerging movements have drawn on the politics of identity, there are however not necessarily opposed to capitalism.

The political pessimism about class was also linked to the influence of some post-structuralist theories which stood in direct antithesis to historical materialism. While exploration of the debates and tensions between Marxism/materialism and post-structuralism is impossible here, these differences have important consequences for the writing of women’s labour history.<sup>78</sup>

On the positive side, some post-structuralist theories have encouraged attention to language, the symbolic, and cultural representation as authors explored the iconography of labour or the discursive constructions of expert discourse on working women. The resulting emphasis on the multiple sites of identity has led to renewed attention concerning the issues of gender, religion, ethnicity, age and sexuality in working-class history; while Foucault’s legacy has stimulated useful discussions of power and the creation of marginalised, oppressed populations. On the negative side, a perspective in which class is never an objective reality; in which all identities are linguistic or cultural constructions, fluctuating, unstable, indeterminate; in which power is always decentred; in which skill, wages, even the economy are created in the realm of meaning, has far-reaching consequences. Such a perspective is bound to have a destabilizing effect on working class history which took for granted the economic and social reality of class divisions and class conflict. While some feminists have seen this turn of theory as positive, liberating working-class history from its overriding obsession with class, other socialist and materialist-feminists are critical, arguing that the political outcome of some post-structuralist thinking is to reinforce neo-liberal ideology of the new global capitalism rather than challenge it.<sup>79</sup>

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.

78 The debate is vast, complex and ongoing. A few examples include Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* and her “On Language, Gender and Working-Class History”. Responses by Stansell, Palmer, Rabinbach in *International Labor and Working Class History* 31 (1987), 1-40; Laura Frader, “Descent into Discourse: Labor History, Gender and the Linguistic Turn,” *History and Theory* 34 (1995), 213-30. Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 1996); Rosemary Hennessey, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York, 1993).

79 Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Ar-

The political cynicism about the Left and labour, combined with new trends in social theory and historiography have led to some disinterest in, and cynicism about the working class. This may be a more serious problem in Canada than the U.S., simply because of the small number of Canadian scholars studying women's labour history. It is also worth noting that pockets of interest, innovation and activism remain, and that many recent works in women's labour history, though they attempt to draw on some post-structuralist ideas, do not fully embrace the linguistic or Foucauldian approaches of postmodern scholars. Some of the older questions of working-class history, involving power and politics, gender and the division of labour, working-class resistance, ethnicity and culture remain, so does the notion of real, lived and ,knowable' experience. A recent article by Dorothy Sue Cobble, for instance, critiques the dominant ,masculine' narratives of working-class history and explores women's distinctive forms of collective action. But she respectfully relates the voices of the women service workers, she interviewed, to the reader. These women are not fluctuating signifiers, but rather complicated, courageous women whose experience and consciousness of work has led them to demand dignity and respect.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the last thirty years, the writing of working-class history in the U.S. and Canada has changed, influenced by changes in national historiography, by oscillations in international feminist, materialist and post-structuralist social theory, and by political praxis. Our analyses of class formation have been positively altered to include gender; we no longer start from the assumption that ,labour' automatically connotes white men working for industrial wages. This project is far from complete. Nonetheless, we need to acknowledge the shifts in perspective and research which were consciously taken in order to create a feminist analysis of class formation, however incomplete those efforts were, and still are.

There is little doubt that we are witnessing a redefinition of working-class history, in which assumptions about what is ,important' about workers' experiences are changing and broadening. While this redefinition has also reinvigorated attempts to integrate gender and race into our understanding of class formation, the very notion of class itself has come under attack in social theory. Certainly, the links between labour, feminism and the Left, both in academe and in political movements, will contribute to the future directions women's labour history takes. This intellectual and political process will evolve differently in the U.S. and Canada due to their divergent histories and cultures.<sup>81</sup> No doubt, the strength of American

bour, 1996); for a Marxist view see Ellen Wood, *The Retreat from Class: a new 'true' socialism* (London, 1986).

80 Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm".

81 Some writers have suggested that American feminists have been especially receptive to the one brand of French feminism close to postmodernism, not materialism, precisely because it fits with American liberal, individual traditions. See Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard eds., *Sex in Question: French materialist feminism* (London, 1996), 8.

International Unions as well as the policies of American Corporations will have an important impact also on Canada. But the presence of strong public sector unions with large female memberships in Canada, and the determination of powerful unions like the Canadian Auto Workers to steer an independent path from their American parent will no less affect the future direction of women and labour in Canada, as we mark out a different course from the United States. Why, when and how women and labour, feminism and socialism, have come together as allies, and what makes those alliances weak or strong, are thus important historical questions in both nations. Truly comparative analyses which cross the border might suggest the historical conditions and consciousness that foster an integrated class, gender and race analysis, and create the possibility of working-class mobilization and social change.