WORKING-CLASS SUBJECTIVITES AND SEXUALITIES

Introduction

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Studies of identity have proliferated over the last three decades; race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationalism all have been explored at length. Writing now in 2006, we can look back on a substantial body of theoretical and empirical work that has forever changed conceptions of identity formation. Although divisions persist between scholars of identity and those writing labor and working-class history, many have called for greater intellectual exchange across the class-identity divide. We hope to further that exchange by bringing together essays on working-class subjectivities and sexualities in this thematic issue.

In January 2004, when we issued a call for papers for a special *ILWCH* issue on working-class subjectivities and sexualities, we hoped to invigorate new cross-field conversations by foregrounding work exploring the class dimensions of masculinity and femininity and, at the same time, deepening the ongoing exploration of the ways in which class is constantly in dynamic interaction with, and coconstituted by, other identities such as those based on gender and sexuality. We chose the term "subjectivities" to allow for the full range of worker consciousness. Many have called for intersectional approaches to identity formation; we wanted to see how these dynamic relations played out on the ground.

A number of the articles in this special issue were first aired as invited papers at a 2004 spring conference on "Labor, Class, and Sexuality" cohosted by the Rutgers University Institute for Research on Women (IRW) and *ILWCH*. The IRW, directed by Dorothy Sue Cobble at the time, had just finished a year of lectures, seminars, and symposia on "Femininities, Masculinities, and the Politics of Sexual Difference(s)" which brought together a large and diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars working primarily in gender and gay history. The May conference added a leavening dose of labor

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and working-class researchers to the mix, just the kind of cross-fertilization of scholarship that we had hoped to encourage. Stephen Brooke, Eileen Boris, Deborah Cohen, and Carolyn Brown were among those who presented papers at the conference. We thank David Eng, Ava Baron, and Temma Kaplan for illuminating commentary on the conference panels which included those papers.

As editors we selected articles for inclusion in this special issue with the larger aims of the volume in mind. We wanted essays that continued a significant engagement with issues of class formation and that also resonated (not always gently) with each other. We were pleased and intrigued with the results. The essays that follow, taken individually and as a group, illustrate some of the creative possibilities that emerge when scholarly literatures collide. At the same time, significant gaps appear, raising questions for future research.

The first four articles focus on working-class masculinities, attending not only to how these identities change over time, place, and life cycle, but how ideologies of race, ethnicity, colonialism, and nationalism have relied upon and shaped notions of manhood. Each ambitiously situates itself astride multiple literatures, and each ponders how the new work on masculinities changes our notions of class identities and class politics.

Craig Heron's essay is a groundbreaking contribution to the masculinity literature. Building on R.W. Connell's pivotal notion of multiple and contesting masculinities, he persuasively details the cultural and social forces molding young working-class men's gender identities in Hamilton, Ontario over the course of a half-century. Age differences matter as do differences in family status. Most working-class men eventually marry, "settle down," and adapt to being husbands, fathers, and household breadwinners. But Heron uncovers an adolescent homosocial male world whose values and rituals are never fully abandoned.

Carolyn Brown shifts our attention to the colonial context and to the ways in which Nigerian coal miners' class subjectivity was tied to issues of colonialism and racial hierarchy. Class antagonism and resistance were certainly important, but the new sense of themselves as "industrial men" was constituted through colonial racial ideology and prevailing household relations. This identity enabled them to challenge Colonial authority, tribal elites, and workplace hierarchies. The systems of gender dominance, however, remained secure. Brown's richly documented essay makes plain the benefits of considering subject formation in broad terms. After reading her essay, accounts of Nigerian coalminers focusing on class alone seem difficult to imagine.

Class and race-based systems of dominance pressed down on the African-American Mississippi Delta levee camp workers depicted by Michael McCoyer as well. Yet few transformative possibilities existed in the turn-of-the-century American South given persistent racial inequalities and employer power. White bosses circumscribed leisure as well as work activities, leaving music as one of the few semiautonomous spaces for African-American men. McCoyer offers his interpretations of the songs that infuse levee camp

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life, "reading" the lyrics for clues to gender as well as class relationships. It was a "rough mens' music" which countered and mirrored the individualistic and violence-soaked culture fostered by the white bosses. And here, unlike the situation among Nigerian miners depicted by Brown, McCoyer argues that the move toward male solidarity dampened workplace reform.

The Mexican workers who came to work in the US under the Bracero program (1942 to 1964) found themselves in all-male living arrangements as did the levee camp workers. Relying on in-depth interviews with the workers themselves, Cohen illuminates new aspects of that history and challenges generally accepted assumptions. Although a demeaning experience in many regards, Cohen documents the sense of solidarity in the field and posits an emerging transnational masculinity secured in part through socializing in bars and sending remittances home. By attending to the domestic lives of Braceros and the novel "housekeeping" arrangements in the all-male camps, Cohen's imaginative essay uncovers migrant strategies for maintaining a gendered sense of self. Interestingly, both McCoyer and Cohen see masculinity as a compensatory identification for workers in precarious class positions: The "wages of masculinity," if you will, offered both Braceros and Levee camp workers psychic rewards that at times helped deflect or alleviate the indignities of the workplace. The reconstitution of masculinity also meant maintaining the gender status quo.

These four essays make a compelling case for the centrality of masculine identity in the psychic and emotional lives of men. What is less clear is the degree to which masculine identity is actually formed in relation to women or just in relation to other men. Women are a key referent in all four papers, but how necessary is their presence? Women serve as a touchstone, but with little agency of their own. Similarly, the homoerotic current within male sociability is another theme in these essays that warrants further investigation. Labor history as a field could profit from tapping into the rich discussion of class that has been undertaken within queer theory in recent years.

The second section of thematic articles focuses on working-class women's bodies. Sexual desire and its regulation by employers, the state, and societal mores are more prominent themes than in the first group of papers concerned with working-class men. Brooke's essay is a careful investigation into the efforts by British reformers to modernize the sexual practices of working-class families and to make them more like the middle class. The reformers could be condescending toward workers. At the same time, they did emphasize women's control over their bodies, and, by the 1950s, the importance of women's sexual pleasure. Brooke persuasively argues that class cultures cannot be understood apart from the private realm of domesticity and sexuality, whether the question is the "embourgeoisement" of the working class after the Second World War or class tensions in the 1920s and 1930s.

US employers have sought to regulate women's sexuality and appearance as well. But women workers have not always agreed with employer definitions of beauty or their codes for proper dress. Eileen Boris takes us into two very different workplace environments, revealing the ways women and employers

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have negotiated sexuality in the workplace. Industrial employers primarily saw women's sexuality as a disruptive force, as a hindrance to worker productivity and management control. Service sector employers, however, increasingly have learned to package and sell women's sexuality in order to raise their profits. Boris's thoughtful paper suggests that "sexual difference" is not inherently demeaning or productive of secondary status. It depends on who is defining what "sexual difference" means and the context in which those differences are enacted.

In addition to these six fine monographs, the special issue includes a trio of more speculative and historiographical essays by Ava Baron, Barbara Weinstein, and Ardis Cameron. Ava Baron's influential work in the 1980s and 1990s on men and masculinity was pivotal in the development of a gendered labor history. Her essay here is similarly prescient. She offers cogent, judicious reflections on the state of masculinity studies and lays out a number of promising new directions for research. In a powerful critical assessment of the masculinity literature to date, Baron points out the ways in which bodies and embodiment figure differently for women and men. Labor history, Baron observes, has unwittingly replicated assumptions of male disembodiment twinned with the sexual embodiment of women. Labor history would benefit from a more sustained exploration of the embodiments associated with working-class men. Paradoxically, while issues of male embodiment are eschewed, the psychic life of men assumes center stage. "Crises of masculinity" abound, but what of "crises in femininity?"

In our opinion, the asymmetries are telling and suggestive of new lines of research. We know more about working-class women's bodies than about men's. We also know more about men's struggles to achieve a gendered self than women's. Put another way, femininities have received far less attention than masculinities. Perhaps this is due to the concern of researchers to disrobe "privilege" as Daniel Wickberg has recently suggested.[1] Perhaps it reflects a scholarly reluctance to recover aspects of working women's consciousness that appear less heroic or feminist. But without an exploration of how women in the past constructed their gendered identities, our understanding of their dreams and desires, political or otherwise, will remain partial at best.

Barbara Weinstein's attention to working-class women's subjectivity is thus a very welcome addition to this special issue, and hopefully one which will encourage more scholarship on working-class women's femininities. Weinstein's stimulating essay asks how the preoccupations with femininity have influenced the class identities of working-class women in Latin America. When is working-class femininity at odds with class consciousness? When does it nurture women's desire for dignity, power, and autonomy? Drawing on the innovative new work among US historians on consumerism, fashion, and political identities, Weinstein takes us deep into this uncharted, fascinating terrain.

Although working-class male sexuality, particularly working-class homosexuality, has not been a central concern of labor and working-class history, Ardis Cameron shows how the marginalization of sexual and class "others" is

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often intertwined. In the third of the reflective essays, Cameron traces complex processes of "othering" in motion. Beginning with images of George Bush at Daytona and heated debates over gay marriage, Cameron explores these "spaces of encounter," revealing the multiplicity and malleability of cultural difference. Throughout, Cameron keeps a dizzying array of identifications in play without losing sight of the dynamic relation between center and margins.

Finally, in our "Classics Revisited" section, Alice Kessler-Harris provides a moving semiautobiographical account of her encounter as a young graduate student with Vera Shlakman's 1935 gender-inclusive analysis of industrial change in Chicopee, Massachusetts. As a woman and a communist, Shlakman had been marginalized in the academy, but Kessler-Harris found her way to Shlakman and her essay recovers Shlakman's work for us all.

NOTE

1. Daniel Wickberg, "Heterosexual White Male: Some Recent Inversions in American Cultural History," *Journal of American History* 92.1 (June 2005), 136–157.

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