INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES AND WESTERN EUROPE

Introduction

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The papers by Eileen Boris, Laura Frader, Laura Tabili, and Eric Weitz were presented at the 2000 meeting of the Social Science History Association. The panel was organized to reflect upon how and in what ways the "gender turn"—the move from feminist-inspired women's history to feminist-inspired gender history—has influenced labor and working-class history in different national contexts. The gender turn was, to a large extent, informed and motivated by a renewed and reinvigorated cultural history, which itself grew out of scholarship focused on language and discourse.

Joan Scott's landmark essay, published in the American Historical Review in 1986, was highly influential in stimulating feminist historians, particularly Anglo-American feminist historians concerned with labor history and the history of class formation, to question their analytical strategies and concepts. No longer could "woman" and "man" be understood as naturally existing and unchanging categories. Rather, historians began to consider how various social and cultural processes historically produced the meanings of the categories based upon historically changing and culturally variable perceptions of sexual difference. As Laura Tabili and Eileen Boris suggest, this move led to a questioning of how the categories of work, workers, and class were constructed by and through gender meanings and relations.

But this turn was not universally welcomed by feminist historians or labor and working-class historians, and its impact was not experienced to the same extent in different national contexts. Some feminist historians feared that the shift to gender, and the interrogation of masculinity as well as femininity, would result in the remarginalization of both women as historical subjects and women's history as a field of inquiry. Some labor and working-class historians saw the turn to gender as depoliticizing the field by turning scholars' attention away from a focus on class struggle and diminishing the relevance of and concern with the "material realities" affecting peoples' lives, as Laura Frader suggests in her essay. The issue of how to engage with both language or representations and materiality, without emphasizing one at the expense of the other or without under-

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standing these analytical realms as oppositional, remains a theoretical and analytical concern. The cultural turn was suspect as well for potentially moving away from a focus on "ordinary people," on those who in the past were condemned to the "condescension of history," to a renewed interest in the powerful and the literate.

Furthermore, gender history was not so easily integrated into particular national historiographies, as Laura Frader points out for the case of France and Eric Weitz points out for the case of Germany. Indeed, when Laura Frader and I were assembling in the mid-1990s our edited collection, *Gender and Class in Modern Europe,* we made a conscious decision to rely primarily upon the work of Anglo-American or Anglo-American-trained scholars of European history because we sought to make the volume theoretically coherent. What this did, we realized later, was to leave out some of the interesting issues raised by the questioning of gender itself and its position in the various national and international historical contexts. As Laura Frader suggests, gender is often contested as a Western notion that is not politically useful, and debates about gender seem irrelevant in the context of the lived lives of women in many countries outside Europe and the United States. In France, she suggests, sexual difference is understood as the social relations between the sexes, while gender history has been denigrated as merely the history of representations.

The gender politics of the academy, including among working-class and labor historians, have stymied the potential impact of gender history in both France and Germany, as Laura Frader and Eric Weitz suggest. Male historians in both countries have served as gate-keepers, and works produced outside of what has been accepted as mainstream in Germany—works concerned with gender and class as identities and discourses and works that are interdisciplinary—are rarely reviewed or read. Both suggest that the insularity of the historiographies of Germany and France is linked to the politics of national identity. In the case of Germany, the collapse of the GDR led to a purge of East German historians, and the renewal of political history as national attention focused on "coming to terms with the past" with both Fascism and Communism, with accommodation as well as resistance. In France, the republican myth of equality and the understanding of French nationhood as one and indivisible have limited the extent to which issues of difference raised by gender historians have had an impact.

While in France and Germany gender history has had less of an impact on labor and working-working class history than in the Anglo-American world, Laura Tabili and Eileen Boris (as well as Laura Frader) point out the increasing scholarly importance of race and of dealing with the intersections of race, class, and gender. "Intersectionality" has been a theme of many critiques of feminist history for at least the past decade, but these essays advance the ways of thinking about it. Laura Tabili suggests that, while racial formations are rooted in global processes, they take different forms in different social contexts; she urges scholars to be sensitive to these contextual differences. She also points to the surge of class politics as racialized workers and women are becoming militant in

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the UK as well as the US. Eileen Boris's work argues that "gender is raced and race is gendered." Thus race and class are engendered identities and categories of analysis and must be considered together. As Laura Frader suggests, concern with the intersection of differences relocates, reemphasizes, and rearticulates the political project of both feminist and labor historians.

But how are labor and gender historians to pursue these intersections? What kind of history will emerge? How are we to deal with the relationship between representation and categories of knowledge, on the one hand, and what, for lack of a better term, we call "material reality," on the other? While participants in this symposium were not charged with resolving the issues they expose, suggestions about the way forward may be found in several essays. Laura Frader uses an example from her work on inter-war France to illustrate the intersections of work, social policy, race, and gender. Scientists studying work and fatigue focused on male bodies and in the course of their analysis developed a taxonomy of racial difference among the male workers. Their conclusions, she argues, "helped to produce racial difference in relation to masculinity and constituted the "masculine" as a function of racial difference." She implies what Eileen Boris explicitly suggests: a focus on bodies.

Bodies, Eileen Boris suggests, are the sites upon which race and class as well as gender are inscribed, constructed, made, and remade. Bodies are both physical and symbolic sites. Spacial proximity and physical intimacy conspire in racializing bodies. By making bodies and the performance of identities central to our inquiry, we may well advance the investigation of the intersections of gender, race, and class. In addition, a focus on the body and performance can short-circuit the tension between materiality and symbolic representation and address one of the major sticking points producing antagonism between social and cultural historians in general and labor and gender historians in particular. At the very least it may enrich the study of the intersections of race, class, and gender, even if "this arena of vital, engaged historical work," to quote Eric Weitz, remains an alternative outside of some mainstream historical discussions.

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