LABOR HISTORY AFTER THE GENDER TURN

Introduction

Peter Winn
Tufts University

Some three decades have elapsed since feminists turned the scholarly spotlight on the previously ignored historical experience of half the world's population. Nearly two decades have transpired since the publication of Joan Scott's path-breaking essay on gender and history.[1] Since then, women's history and increasingly sophisticated forms of gender analysis have altered understandings of and approaches to many fields of history.

This issue of ILWCH focuses on the impact of gender analysis on labor history. It begins with a symposium based on a session at the 2000 Social Science History Association meetings. As Sonya Rose notes in her introduction to this section, four historians of the United States and Western Europe (Eileen Boris, Laura Tabili, Laura Frader, and Eric Weitz) reflect on "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." Their essays provide concise summaries of the impact of gender analysis on the United States and Western Europe, creating a basis for comparison with the monographic articles on Mexico that comprise the second part of this issue.

All five are feminist historians, sympathetic with the claims of gender analysis and its implications for labor history. Yet, as Rose's introduction suggests, their essays break down into two groups. The historians of the Anglo-American world (Boris and Tabili) stress the transformation of labor history wrought by gender analysis and the often associated "linguistic turn." The primacy of class is gone, replaced by negotiated and fluid identities and a gendered analysis of work, social relations, bodies, politics, and institutions. Gender and race permeate labor history and reshape our understandings of it. Structure has given way to subjectivity, class formation to "mutual constitution." The world of Anglo-American labor history has been turned upside down.

In France and Germany, on the other hand, the story is more of scholarly resistance than transformation. Although both Frader and Weitz point to advances, most of these gender analyses were written by Anglo-American historians. In continental Europe, the problematics of national histories, together with the gender politics of the academy, have limited the impact of gender analysis.

If that is true even in Western Europe, how universal has the "gender turn" in labor history been? Laura Frader poses this question in her essay when she

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 63, Spring 2003, pp. 1–5
© 2003 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

refers to Tani Barlow's cautionary warning that there is no word for "gender" in Chinese and that the discourse of gender analysis does not translate easily in the homeland of one-fifth of the world's population. In fact, Barlow argues, the very words for "universal" woman only entered the Chinese language in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as imports by Westernizing intellectuals with political projects of their own. To this unique cultural construction, Maoism added a unique class analysis in which the "universal" woman of Euro-Marxism was transformed into a Chinese political subject emancipated from family and feudalism.[2] Gender emerges as a cultural and political construct.

Not surprisingly, Chinese historians, including labor historians, tend to view gender analysis as a Western imposition.[3] But even Emily Honig, a third-wave feminist and Anglo-American historian of Chinese women workers, has come to the conclusion that, in China, regional geographic identities often trumped gender or class identities.[4] China, with its very different culture and where a Maoist revolution has monopolized historical discourse, calls into question the universality of the gender turn.

For a journal that calls itself "International Labor and Working-Class History," this question of the international scope of the gender turn in labor history is of central importance. A full answer to that question would require a much broader symposium than the one this issue begins with, a symposium that goes beyond the United States and Western Europe to include the other regions of the globe.

This issue is more modest in its ambitions, reaching beyond the US border with four articles by feminist scholars trained in the United States whose focus is gender and the labor history of Mexico during the decades that followed its Epic Revolution of 1910–1917. Jocelyn Olcott and Susan Gauss use gender analysis of the textile and garment industries in southern and central Mexico to help illuminate not only the labor history of the 1930s and 1940s, but their political and economic history as well in an era of populism and industrialization. Olcott focuses on the state and its changing construction of women workers, while Gauss examines unions and their gendered policies toward women workers. María Teresa Fernández-Aceves analyzes the same period from the perspective of women in the tortilla industry of northern Mexico, where mechanization, as in the textile industry, was threatening women's place in an industry that had itself replaced the traditional artesanal home work of Mexican women. Finally, Heather Fowler-Salamini explores the lives of the coffee export workers of the gulf coast, stressing the gendered character of the workplace and the creation of new forms of female sociability and new identities as women and workers. Together, these articles give us a vision of women workers and gender politics in Mexico during the decades of upheaval that began with the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Mexico, with its recent revolution and proximity to the United States, might well be a special case within Latin America. But, as Thomas Klubock argues in his introduction to this section, these essays in a gendered labor history of Mex-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ico are typical of the trend among US-educated historians of Latin American labor.

In Latin America, there is an increasing acknowledgment of women workers within labor studies, in part a reflection of historical processes that have brought women increasingly into the region's workplaces, and some pioneering use of gender analysis by labor historians. But, it would be misleading to speak of a "gender turn" in labor history.

In many, perhaps most, countries of the region, labor history still means old-fashioned institutional and political history of unions and labor relations, often informed by a Marxism now out of fashion in the United States and Europe. In most of Latin America, structural approaches still predominate, along with class analysis and national perspectives.

Where these structural approaches have been criticized, it has tended to be from the perspective of workers' experience. In Chile, with one of the richest and most active labor historiographies in Latin America, for example, labor historians influenced by E. P. Thompson and others have examined class formation, documented the material conditions and daily lives of workers, narrated their strikes and workplace struggles, exhumed their popular culture, and explored their links with the larger world of "*lo popular.*" Chilean historians have also taken this historical revision a step further, moving from the formation of class consciousness to the construction of popular identities. In some instances, this opening has included women workers or "women of the people" and a recognition of the need to address their experience. However, with rare exception, generally in the works of younger scholars of Anglo-American origin and/or education, gender analysis has been conspicuous by its absence.[5]

Moreover, women's history in Latin America more often reflects first wave feminism than third-wave gender analysis. Thomas Klubock's pioneering book, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904–1951,* remains a rare exploration of masculinity within the region that gave "machismo" its name.

Too often, the response of Latin America labor historians and worker activists is to regard gender analysis with the hostility reserved for "imperialist plots." As Laura Frader points out, too often what is conceived in its Anglo-American context as a political project is viewed in Latin America as a depoliticizing threat to divide a labor movement already weakened by state repression, economic globalization, and consumer culture.

Yet, despite the lack of a gender turn in Latin American labor history, as the articles on twentieth-century Mexico make clear, there is a younger generation of scholars, most of them trained in the United States, who are bringing gender analysis to their histories of Latin American labor. Many of them share the theoretical sophistication of their sisters in the labor history of the United States and the United Kingdom.

Where they tend to differ from feminist labor historians north of the border, as Thomas Klubock points out, is in their reluctance to abandon structural

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explanations that still seem so powerful in Latin America. Instead, they have tended to learn from Emilia Viotti Da Costa that the best labor history combines structure with experience[6] and to embrace the call of Daniel James and John French to combine "an analysis of structural conditioning features with the study of gendered subjects."[7]

At the same time, they are less enamoured of the linguistic turn, less inclined to substitute discourse analysis for an analysis of material conditions. For them, class remains as powerful a construct as gender. It does not, as Boris maintains it has in US labor history, "melt into air."

They also differ from Anglo-American labor history in the weight they give to the state, both national and local, to its formation, and to its impact on the lives of women workers and their efforts to shape their own destinies. Their focus, however, on the role of gender ideologies in the building of the state, the formation of the working class, and the evolution of the labor movement reveals their participation in the Anglo-American project of gender analysis spelled out by Sonya Rose, Eileen Boris, and Laura Tabili. So, too, does their analysis of the gendering of work, the gendered impact of the mechanization and rationalization of production, and the creation by working women of new forms of popular culture and sociability.

In short, the articles on Mexican labor history in the first half of the twentieth century do not fully confirm the claim of Boris and Tabili that a gender turn has transformed labor history. To some degree they corroborate the Frader–Weitz cautionary warning of slower progress outside the Anglo-American cultural sphere. But they also suggest that gender analysis can illuminate Latin American labor history in new ways and that its influence is likely to be greater in the future, although mediated and modified by the region's very different cultural politics, structural constraints, and historical experience.

NOTES

1. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, 5 (1986). See also Joan Scott's article "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (1987): 1–13, and her reflections on gender as a category of historical analysis in "Preface to the Revised Edition," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 2000), especially ix–xii.

2. Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: Funu, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family)," in *Body, Subject and Power in China,* eds. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago, 1994), 253–290.

3. See, for example, Li Xiaojiang, "Economic Reform and the Awakening of Chinese Women's Collective Consciousness," in *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State,* eds. Christina Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter et al. (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 360–382. Li's goal is not to replace class analysis with gender analysis, but rather to add gender as a category of analysis, a goal which, she admits, has yet to be embraced by Chinese women.
In that same volume, see also Margaret Y. K. Woo, "Chinese Women Workers: The Delicate Balance Between Protection and Equality," 279–298.

4. Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mils, 1919–1949* (Stanford, 1986), Chapter 8 and 246–247.

5. For the best recent summary and analysis of the historiography of Chilean labor, see Jorge Rojas F., "Los trabajadores en la historiografía chilena: balance y proyecciones," *Revista de Economía & Trabajo* 10 (2000): 47–117.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

6. Emilia Viotti Da Costa, "Experience versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America—What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?" *International Labor and Working-Class History* 36 (Fall 1989): 3–24.

7. Daniel James and John French, *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers* (Durham, NC, 1997), 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press