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Dislodging the Center/Complicating the Dialectic: What Gender and Race Have Done to the Study of Labor

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Abstract

Scholars of race and gender have borrowed heavily from the analysis of class in formulating strategies to analyze the operation of social stratification. In the process, the analysis of class itself, along with the definition of what counts as work and who counts as a worker, have been radically revised. A more powerful analytical tool has emerged, offering possibilities and flexibilities as well as a better understanding of the interdependence of multiple and mutually supporting processes of social stratification.

Who among us was not inspired by the classic labor histories, the heroic narratives of class formation and workers' struggles? Celebrating the rise of unions and labor movements countered Cold War narratives of consensus and rational progress, offering alternative stories written "from the bottom up," revealing continual contests over power and wealth through which classes and class consciousness were forged. Central to these stories were workplace struggles in which class took shape dialectically, at the point of production, in the processes through which the worker was coercively parted from the fruits of his labor. And I do mean *his*. For at the center stood the archetypal worker, the adult white male whose skill, his mastery over tools, technique, technology, underwrote his exclusive bargaining power.¹

In spite of women's marginality to these narratives, feminist historians have borrowed heavily from labor and social history, particularly the dynamic view of social formations derived from Thompsonian and Gramscian approaches.² Feminist histories have appropriated class analyses' insights into the contingency, relationality, and contextuality of all historical processes to illuminate the dynamic interdependence among gender and other power relations. We now look not just for women but for gender in every historical context.³

Without rehearsing at tedious length the multiple paths scholars have taken, it seems fair to say that it is no longer acceptable to leave half of the working class out of our histories of labor. Nor is it tenable to leave gender out of our accounts of working-class formation. Feminist labor historians have shown us how half the class was subordinated and marginalized in the process of class formation, with tragic consequences for working people's collective power.⁴ In the process, the analysis of class, and with it what counts as work and who counts as a worker, have been transformed.

What Counts as Work?

Looking for women and gender has made visible workers whom labor historians overlooked because what they did was not considered work. Real work was heroic, performed by real men at the point of production. Class struggle occurred on the shop floor or in the public realm of strikes and mass politics, in workers' often violent conflicts with bosses and their allies.

Women's work, in contrast, historically consisted of an endless round of menial tasks that were low-tech, allegedly unskilled, and underremunerated—if remunerated at all: cooking, cleaning, fetching, carrying, mopping up vomit, and wiping butts.⁵ As the husband of a feminist scholar of the 1970s was heard to exclaim: “[Studying] housework? Oh my god, how trivial can you get?”⁶ As this remark reflects, all this work was not even included in popular or scholarly definitions of labor: often performed behind closed doors in the privatized domestic sphere, “naturalized” as “a labor of love,” women's work had indeed been trivialized to a vanishing point.

Thanks to generations of feminist scholarship, we now recognize that labor need not be waged to be work, rendering visible not only women's work but also other social experience pushed to the periphery of previous labor histories: we now have histories of preindustrial household labor,⁷ slave women's healing,⁸ domestic service,⁹ waitresses “dishing it out,”¹⁰ caring work, and sexual labor.¹¹ We understand too that women's invisible, unrecognized, and unpaid work was critical to capital formation: women were “spinning out capital” all the while they were reproducing working class experience.¹² In the process feminist historians have helped dislodge the center of inquiry from the union hall and the picket line, broadening our focus to the whole of class experience, be it the shop floor, the kitchen sink, the nursery or the street.

At the Point of Reproduction

In addition to redefining work to uncover previously neglected forms of labor, women's historians have helped to shift our focus from the point of industrial production to sites of social reproduction: child-rearing, mothering, and domestic labor. Feminist scholars have helped us to see class formation, including its discursive reproduction, occurring in the physical and ideological work of reproduction: whether describing how poor mothers secured their families' survival in spite of industrial economic and power relations,¹³ recounting how children learned they were working class through childhoods of deprivation,¹⁴ or reconstructing how mothers socialized their children to bourgeois norms of comportment and behavior, reproducing class in the nursery.¹⁵ Child-rearing and mothering are now understood as critical to class formation.¹⁶ Putting reproduction at the center of our analysis of class formation and labor exploitation is not that new, really. This is exactly what Friedrich Engels did over 100 years ago, and why I return again and again to his foundational text, *The Origin of the Family*.¹⁷

Dislodging the center of feminist labor historians' attention to refocus on social reproduction has had multiple salutary effects. Beyond recognizing mothering and housework as work, putting reproduction at the center illuminates other types of labor women perform, including waged or social labor.

It has helped explain why women's labor outside the privatized domestic sphere so often resembles housework anyway. Within the paid workforce women have been relegated to jobs that mirror reproductive and domestic labor, from nursing and teaching, archetypal women's professions, to less conventional labor, such as sex work. A lot of women's social labor still looks like housework writ large: personal service, cleaning up, emotional support (cooking, cleaning, fetching, carrying, mopping up vomit, and wiping butts). Even when women's labor has not been reproductive it has often been feminized, domesticated, and naturalized. An example is "the myth of nimble fingers," the view that women are naturally suited to fussy, tedious work, such as electronics assembly.¹⁸

Tracing our analysis of women's work back to social reproduction also helps us to recognize how women's role as infants' primary caregiver has produced psychosexual associations with availability, physical comfort, and care of the body. These associations help to explain why uninvited sexual advances are such a tiresomely routine part of women's working lives¹⁹ and perhaps why so many folks at work think we are their Mom!

Gender analyses also enable us to see that, even when women are not doing it, reproductive labor still is regarded as women's work, work that real men do not do. To explain their demeaning participation in women's work, men who perform the labor of social reproduction have been dialectically redefined as less than men: racialized, feminized, infantilized. Such discourses have justified, conversely, confining African American or colonized men to women's work as ships' stewards or sleeping car porters.²⁰ Should men unavoidably find themselves doing women's work, and as all work increasingly resembles women's work in its routinization and restricted autonomy,²¹ such work is often relabeled, repackaged, assigned higher status, imputed higher skill, and enhanced with technological gadgets: cooks become chefs, dressmakers become designers, and real men need a heavy, noisy, smelly gas-powered machine to sweep leaves off the sidewalk. Thus, we are prompted to consider the adult male skilled white worker anew and ask what makes this worker tick. What myths of brotherhood and fatherhood,²² what mystiques of skill,²³ what mastery of arcane technologies²⁴ have sustained adult male workers' status and remuneration, often at other workers' expense? "Jack Tar" and the "Representative Artisan" are now scrutinized by scholars who find gender operating in every realm of human experience.²⁵

Complicating the Dialectic

But opening labor history to consider women and gender was only a first step. Observing the ways gender intersects with class to structure social formations

and order subordinations has helped us better understand how other dynamics of power and social differentiation, such as race, sexualities, region, age, and the complex marginalizations collected under the rubric “Orientalism,” have permeated divisions of labor and fragmented class experience. The dialectic of class formation, we are coming to understand, is vastly complicated by these multiple vectors of power and struggle. A more powerful analytical tool has emerged, offering possibilities and flexibilities, as well as a better understanding of the interdependence of these overlapping, mutually reinforcing processes.

Race: The Final Frontier

Simply put, we are not there yet. In spite of mounting evidence of their presence throughout British and European history, racialized workers remain as invisible in many labor and social histories as women once were. We must rely on the most race-conscious of historical informants to alert us to their presence, perpetuating their depiction as anomalous outsiders. Yet such workers appeared in Europe due to a global traffic in labor and its products making nonsense of such parochialism. Even our language is inadequate: we lack a term analogous to gender to de-couple the physical and cultural differences we celebrate from the mechanisms of domination that hurt and kill.²⁶ For “skin color,” like religious or cultural difference, only becomes “race” when articulated with power.²⁷

Current analyses of “racial formation” and its implication in working-class formation cannot yet account for the many forms race and racism have taken. Welcome in problematizing the “unmarked category,” scholarship on whiteness, in changing the subject back to white people, threatens to reproduce the silencing, marginalization, and erasure of racialized working people. Projecting “whiteness” beyond our own society, we risk universalizing what is not universal.

Although race and racism are rooted in global processes, there is no evidence that they have taken the same forms everywhere. Models exported from the United States cannot explain the most enormous racial crime in twentieth-century Europe—the genocide of European Jewry, which was not organized around “whiteness” or “skin color.”²⁸ Nor can they illuminate the slippage from nationalism to racism so common in European history. Applying the lessons of class and gender, historians must interrogate apparent racial fixities to expose their fundamental contingency, fluidity, and unpredictability, as well as their relational interdependence with historical processes of power and wealth. We must specify for each context how racial formation, class formation, and gender formation, among others, articulate, mutually constitute, and help form and reinforce, or on rarer occasions undermine one another, in what we are coming to understand as an infinitely complex, unstable, and dialectically reproducing circuit.²⁹

As we celebrate the contribution women’s history and gender analysis have made to the study of labor and working-class formation, we must renew our commitment to the fullest possible exploration of the sometimes painful history of these multiply intertwined dynamics and the power relations they construct and reinforce. Rather than gerrymandering the boundaries of class to exclude racial-

ized working people, labor historians must hear their voices and integrate these into class narratives. We must recognize racialized workers and their work as integral to labor exploitation on a global scale and racialization as a process dividing not just individual societies but a global working class.

In the meantime, racialized workers have not waited around for us. They have been acting like a working class by organizing into unions! Burgeoning “service sector” unions are largely composed of women, migrants, and workers of color, the millions who perform our societies’ still largely invisible work of social reproduction. In Europe as in the United States such labor has often fallen to workers simultaneously racialized and defined as guest workers or outsiders, even by indigenous labor: Turks in Germany, Algerians in France, and formerly colonized workers in Britain. Among the most militant in Britain, such workers have often contended with racist unions as well as employers, in strikes against Courtaulds’s Red Scar mill in Preston (1965), Rockware Glass in Southall, Woolf Rubber Company, Perivale Güterman, Mansfield Hosiery, and Harwood Cash.³⁰ Asian women led a strike against Imperial Typewriters in 1974 and a prolonged and bitter stoppage in 1976–1977 against Grunwick Photoprocessing in North London.³¹ British Airways catering staff were led to victory in the summer of 1997 by Bill Morris, the dynamic and articulate Afro-Caribbean General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union (T&GWU).

Examples closer to home include the UPS drivers’ landmark victory in 1998, the organization of sweated garment workers by UNITE, Justice for Janitors, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees of Los Angeles’s Local 11. No doubt familiar to many here was the “biggest union organizing victory” since the UAW’s historic 1937 organization of General Motors. That came in February 1999, when 74,000 Los Angeles county home care workers were successfully organized into the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).³²

So, how far have we come? We still have some way to go even to catch up with the constantly re-forming and re-producing contemporary working class. Efforts to integrate gender, race, and other social dynamics into accounts of labor struggle and class formation have deepened our understanding that all social formations have been fissured on multiple axes of power and the resources power commands. The “gender turn,” in dislodging the center and complicating the dialectic that previously grounded labor history, has opened up an array of newly visible categories of work and workers, while inviting us to revisit sites we thought were thoroughly worked over. But when we visit these new and old scholarly haunts, we must carry with us not just gender but an array of new analytical tools.

NOTES

The following citations are meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

1. Pioneering critiques of this gendered and racially limited definition of “the worker” include Bea Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the Eighties* (London, 1984);

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States" (Pt. I), *Socialist Review* 71 (September–October 1983); Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986). Critiques of "skill" include Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England* (Berkeley, 1992); "Masculinity and Machines: Automation in Manufacturing Industry," in *Gender at Work*, eds. Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle (Sydney, 1983), 25–40.

2. Catherine Hall, "Feminism and Feminist History," in *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminist History* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 1–40.

3. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?" *American Historical Review* 91, 5 (December 1986): 1053–1075.

4. Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, 1995); Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods*.

5. For purposes of brevity, I am omitting discussion of the rich literature on women's factory work.

6. Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender & Class* (London, 1995), 73.

7. Merry Wiesner, "Spinning Out Capital," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner, 3rd edition, (Boston, 1998), 221–249.

8. Sharla Fett, "'It's a Spirit in Me': Spiritual Power and the Healing Work of African-American Women in Slavery," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, eds. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, 1996).

9. Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, 75–77, 104–106; Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920–1945* (Philadelphia, 1989), 138–141.

10. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 1991); Greta Foff Paules, *Dishing It Out: Power and Resistance Among Waitresses in a New Jersey Restaurant* (Philadelphia, 1991).

11. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980); Linda Gordon, "Be Careful About Father: Incest, Girls' Resistance, and the Construction of Femininity," in *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence 1880–1960* (London, 1988), 204–249.

12. Wiesner, "Spinning Out Capital."

13. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1993); Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (London, 1993).

14. Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

15. Marion A. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1995).

16. Woe betide the state that failed to provide, for women lacking bread for their families have toppled states. See Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution 1789–1796," *Past and Present* 53 (November 1971): 90–108; Richard Stites, "Women and the Revolutionary Process in Russia," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 417–436; Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918," *Signs* 7, 3 (1982): 545–566.

17. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York, 1972 [1884]).

18. Sallie Westwood, *All Day, Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives* (Urbana, IL, 1985); Pringle and Game, "Masculinity and Machines."

19. Davidoff, *Worlds Between*; Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*.

20. Jeffrey Bolster, "'To Feel Like A Man': Black Seamen in the Northern States," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 1173–1199; Laura Tabili, "'A Maritime Race': Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labor in British Merchant Ships, 1900–1939," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920*, eds. Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (Baltimore, 1996), 169–188.

21. Pringle and Game, "Masculinity and Machines."

22. Mary Ann Clawson, "Early Modern Fraternalism and the Patriarchal Family" *Feminist Studies* 6, 2 (Summer 1980): 368–391.

23. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods*.
24. Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men, and Technical Know-how* (Boston, 1988).
25. Keith McClelland, "Masculinity and the 'Representative Artisan' in Britain, 1850–80," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, eds. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London, 1991), 74–91; Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man"; Jeffrey D. Glasco, "Stripping Manhood: Masculine Power and Discipline in the Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars," Western Conference on British Studies, October 1999, Tucson, Arizona.
26. I use the term "racialized" provisionally to emphasize this distinction—but only provisionally, since in truth race itself is the social construct.
27. Here I refer to Gayle Rubin's classic response to Marx, who wrote "What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations." From this Rubin extrapolated, "What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. . . . She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations." "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), 158. The quotation from Marx came from *Wage-Labor and Capital* (New York, 1971), 28. Also see Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (London, 1991), 53–55, 68.
28. As Gerard Noiriel wrote, "Social History should avoid playing into widespread commonsense notions about the definition of individuals according to biological criteria and focus instead on the modalities of their social construction," in *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity* (Minneapolis, 1996 [1988]), 272.
29. In this regard, the most useful work remains Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 95–118.
30. A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (Pluto, 1982), 15, 126, 128.
31. Amrit Wilson, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (London, 1985 [1979]), 56–70.
32. The victory at GM involved 112,000 workers. In 1999 SEIU had over 1.3 million members and was the "third largest and fastest-growing union in the AFL-CIO." *Arizona Daily Star* 27 (February 1999); also see Janice Fine, "Building Community Unions," *The Nation* 272, 1 (January 1, 2001): 18–22; David Bacon, "Labor Fights for Immigrants," *The Nation* (May 21, 2001): 15–18.