

# Gender and the languages of labor history : an overview

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire**

Band (Jahr): **7 (2000)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **26.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-18860>

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## GENDER AND THE LANGUAGES OF LABOR HISTORY

### AN OVERVIEW

#### KATHLEEN CANNING

At the turn to the 21st century it seems that the once vital field of labor history may be relegated to the realm of legacy. One of the crowning achievements of the new social history of the 1960s, the English-language new labor history was driven by the desire to grasp “the authentic voices and authentic experiences of working people” that underlay the meta-histories of class formations and class conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Some three decades of innovative scholarship and intensive debate followed the publication of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, during which the history of work, workers’ politics and cultures, was at the center of many of the most interesting and fruitful debates in the wider field of social history. In the German scholarly arena of the 1960s and 1970s, studies of labor, industrialization, urbanization and social movements drove the rise of social-science history, the hallmark of which was the analysis of structures and processes of social transformation. Yet the “authentic experiences” and everyday lives of German workers came to figure in German labor history only as an oppositional narrative of *Alltagshistoriker*, whose anthropologically-informed critiques and conceptual innovations were widely heralded in the English-speaking academy, but subject to scathing criticism by leading German historians.<sup>2</sup>

While the politics of labor history may have diverged across these distinct national settings, by the late 1980s the vitality of labor history had begun to wane across Western Europe and in the U. S. For one, its “materialist common sense” was undermined, as William H. Sewell has argued, by the “massive and fundamental changes in the nature, location, and meaning of work and in the fortunes of labor movements and socialist ideologies all over the globe”.<sup>3</sup> At the same time a crisis, internal to the field of labor history itself, was well underway by the mid- to late 1980s. One impetus was the rejection of socioeconomic causality in favor of political languages, ideologies, rhetorics, and representations, the turn away from a notion of class as a “social fact” to one of class as a postulated “social identity”, a paradigm shift in which historians of French and British labor clearly led the way.<sup>4</sup> No less destabilizing was the advancement of feminist historical scholarship on women’s labor, which delivered ■ 33

powerful challenges to the concept of class “as the privileged signifier of social relations and their political representations”.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the hegemony of class was interrogated by historians of race, ethnicity and nationality who also made clear the embeddedness of class in these social identities. Finally, the collapse of socialist governments across Eastern Europe rendered class an apparent remnant of a past age, while citizenship became the new terrain of political contest and theoretical reflection.

By the late 1980s, then, cultural modes of explanation had already seriously undermined the materialist presumptions of labor history. A field in the throes of epistemological change, labor history figured centrally in the subsequent controversies surrounding the so-called “linguistic turn”, a catch-all concept that signalled the growing significance of the linguistic, discursive and symbolic dimensions of workers’ politics and culture. The stakes of the struggle over the “linguistic turn” were no less than the very keywords of labor and history – experience, agency and resistance – which many claimed were rendered invisible by their subsumption into the all-pervasive phenomenon of discourse.<sup>6</sup> As “theory” debates raged in the U. S. and Britain, the intensive study of German labor came rather quietly to a close in the mid-1980s, with a set of synthetic volumes appearing in the early 1990s as a testimony to its accomplishments.<sup>7</sup>

As work and workers faded from the central stage of German social history, new comparative projects in the history of the *Bürgertum* soon flourished in their place. Nor was labor history viewed by the early 1990s as a site of historiographical innovation in Anglo Saxon scholarship. Rather, it was eclipsed by the new and innovative study of gender and sexuality, of race, ethnicity and nationality, colonialisms and empires, of popular culture and consumption. Parallel perhaps was the displacement of Marxism, including its Gramscian variant, by British cultural studies, which together with Foucauldian notions of power and feminist literary criticism, became the crucial theoretical impulses of English-language historiography on these topics.

At the turn to the 21st century the dethroning of labor history is tangible, for example, in the absence of labor in the curriculum of major graduate history programs in the United States, or in the dissipating numbers of dissertations in the field of labor history. While it is difficult to deny the impact of the profound transformations of global political economies on the paradigms and practices of labor history, the epistemological shifts of the late 1980s and early 1990s also had a crucial role in this process.<sup>8</sup> Critics of the “linguistic turn”, for example, have contended that the melding of social and cultural modes of historical analysis virtually detached the study of labor from its own material conditions of production, leaving it without a historiographical cause or place of its own.<sup>9</sup>

34 ■ In this account the avowed embrace of culture stripped labor history of its

vitality. William H. Sewell, Jr. has contended to the contrary that the demise of labor history was the result of its insularity against culturalist modes of explanation and its continued adherence to a “broad and complacent materialist perspective”.<sup>10</sup>

The meaning of these political and historiographical transformations for the current state of labor history is the central preoccupation of this essay. Here I will look more closely at some of the ways in which labor history was revitalized and transformed during the last ten years with the intention of complicating the somewhat linear story of labor history’s progressive demise. In this I will explore the shift from the history of *women’s work* to the new field of *gender and labor* history in the early 1990s, which had a crucial role in reinvigorating labor history at the peak of its purported decline.

### RECONSIDERING THE LABOR-GENDER NEXUS

In his 1993 essay, *Towards a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History*, William H. Sewell, Jr. drew a comparison between the fields of labor history and women’s history, which both began to flourish amidst the political and historiographical transformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Women’s history, he argued, continued to enjoy an “intellectual vitality” and dynamism that labor history had already lost.<sup>11</sup> Sewell’s bifurcation between women’s/gender history and labor history overlooks, however, the very invigoration of the field of labor history by gender which began in the late 1980s. The rhetorics of specialization that pervade our academic disciplines (despite the widespread embrace of interdisciplinarity) and that underlay the opposition Sewell posited between labor history and feminist history relegated the path-breaking gender/labor scholarship of this period to the field of women’s history, while figuring labor history as devoid of new impulses.

Feminist historians of labor, however, clearly took a different view of their scholarly contributions. So, for example, Gay Gullickson, historian of gender and work in 19th-century France, predicted in an essay published in the same volume as Sewell’s that labor historians were “poised on the threshold of an exciting new era”.<sup>12</sup> Here it may be useful to weave gender/labor history back into the story of labor history’s rise and fall, exploring the ways in which it revived labor history at a critical moment of decline.

By contrast with the “old labor history” and its focus on idealized male workers and their organizations, the “new labor history” of the 1970s offered new insights into ideologies and workers’ cultures and collective actions, sociability and leisure, everyday negotiations and self-perceptions. Yet as Laura Frader ■ 35

and Sonya Rose have argued, “much of the new labor history was itself a story of exclusions”, which “rarely included women” or viewed “their work and labor activism through conceptual prisms that highlighted their differences from men”.<sup>13</sup> So feminist historians of labor faced the formidable task of moving women from the margins to the center of the histories of production, social reproduction and politics, and of charting the path by which working women became “agents of their own history”.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the parallel developments of the new labor history and *women's* labor history of the 1970s and early 1980s, certain terminologies and tropes, such as that of proletarianization, figured centrally in histories of men's experiences of industrialization, while the history of women's work was cast within the analytical paradigms of the sexual division of labor or the separation of home and work, both of which appeared to apply exclusively to women. By the mid- to late 1980s *women's* labor history could claim considerable achievements in the study of working women's experiences of workplace, neighbourhood, and home, in the understanding of “the centrality of sex as well as class to their experiences”.<sup>15</sup> Feminist exploration of the “sexual division of labor”, which diverged so remarkably among and sometimes within regions, industrial branches, and technologies, suggested that not one “narrative structure or [...] organizing principle” could account for the disparate patterns of industrial transformation.<sup>16</sup> Canadian historian Joy Parr, for example, pointed to the “diverse and fluid” patterns of dividing labor along gender lines that rendered some tasks as “clearly and exclusively women's work in one factory, town or region”, but as “exclusively men's work in another factory, town or region”.<sup>17</sup> As women's historians investigated the origins and meanings of the differentials of skill, wage, career patterns, which labor history understood primarily as shaped by the material conditions of production, they again confronted ideologies and cultural practices of gender – definitions of masculinity and the male breadwinner, of femininity and the female “wage cutter” – as realms in which these inequalities were constituted.<sup>18</sup> Although these studies had powerfully demonstrated the significance of women to the history of work and politics by the mid – to late 1980s, they had not yet successfully challenged or displaced the keywords or paradigms of labor history.<sup>19</sup>

The protracted shift towards the study of *gender*, as a symbolic system or as a signifier of relations of power in which men and women are positioned differently, gradually rendered the pursuit of parallel histories of women and men obsolete and drew new attention to the ways in which “feminine” and “masculine” constituted one another in the various arenas of workers' history. The fact that female wage laborers were seldom perceived primarily in terms of their location

36 ■ in the process of production, rather overwhelmingly in terms of their bodily

capacities for marriage and motherhood, means that women's labor, more so than men's, was debated, defined, governed and protected across a wide array of social and political arenas. The study of "discourses" as sites of articulation and dissemination of ideologies, helped feminist historians to grasp the often obscure connections across the diverse milieus – welfare state, social reform, medicine and hygiene, trade unions and bourgeois feminist associations – in which the social question of female factory labor was defined and its solutions debated. Here discourse is usefully defined, following Richard Terdman, as "complexes of signs and practices which organize social existence and social reproduction" and which comprise "a culture's determined and determining structures of representation and practice".<sup>20</sup> As much as it is often understood as a frivolously fashion-driven concept, discourse at this juncture proved a significant, even essential, conceptual tool for analyzing the melding and interlocking of the domains in which the ideologies of women's work were constituted and contested. The embrace of discourse analysis in and of itself did not bring about the abandonment of the study of waged work or workers, as some have claimed. Rather, it opened new possibilities for exploring the "separation of home and work" or the "sexual division of labor" as ideological processes.

At the same time the turn to the study of *gender* and labor led a whole complex of dualisms to crumble, upon which both the materialist paradigm and male-centered labor history had balanced. Class, for example, was understood by historians of gender and labor in terms of its rhetorical distinctions between work and "non-work", production and reproduction, which by definition excluded most female workers. As an alternative to the notion of class as a set of stages or levels (economic, social, cultural and political), class was increasingly viewed as a contingent and contested social identity, "a series of makings and remakings [...] in which gender appears to constitute a continual point of contest, a renewed disordering of the process of class formation".<sup>21</sup> Another distinguishing feature of gender/labor scholarship, was the firm rejection of dichotomies between class and "non-class" lines of social differentiation, by which gender (along with ethnicity, nationality and race) belonged to the "non-class" distinctions.<sup>22</sup> This view has a particular resonance in German labor history.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the bold challenges of gender/labor historians to key concepts and paradigms of labor history, such as class, not only propelled new directions in labor history, but also had a central role in the broader paradigm shift from women's history to gender history. Today in the era of the post-"linguistic turn", few remember the centrality of labor in Joan Scott's controversial *Gender and the Politics of History* of 1988, a text that had the dual effect of signalling ■ 37

the arrival of gender as a new category of historical analysis and which also sparked the first wave of vitriolic debate about “the linguistic turn”.<sup>24</sup> Scott’s critical reflections on E. P. Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones’ histories of English class formation, the probing of work identities, labor statistics, and the discourses of political economy in 19th-century France, and finally her insightful analysis of the “equality-difference” debate in the court case involving Sears Roebuck Co. of the 1980s, render this book a classic in labor history, one that not only offered deep and critical interpretations of influential historiography, but also sought to forge analytical links between historical and contemporary conflicts over women’s work.<sup>25</sup> The publication of Scott’s essay collection in 1988 and the controversies that followed in its wake, galvanized a new wave of gender and labor scholarship in the European field, while Ava Baron’s *Work Engendered* published in 1991, had a similar impact in the American history field.<sup>26</sup> The extent to which the gendering of labor history transformed the field as a whole became evident in the course of the 1990s, which saw a swell of new books by younger scholars who entered the profession on the eve of the “linguistic turn”.<sup>27</sup> This generation of scholars experienced the disorienting clash of our own social-historical training with the theoretical and methodological impulses of literary theory, cultural anthropology, and Foucauldian notions of discursive and capillary power. At the same time, Joan Scott’s challenge had special resonances among this generation which explicitly sought to place gender, as both a social and symbolic system, at the heart of our historical case studies. While our books, taken together, maintained a shared sensitivity towards the material fabrics of laboring lives, of the transformations of machines, landscapes, architectures, families and communities, we also were compelled to develop new interpretive strategies, to learn how to decode images, rhetorics, and tropes in textual sources, while many of us continued to work with quantitative evidence on budgets, wages, prices, and career patterns. The first half of the 1990s saw a spate of excellent German studies in gender and labor history, which even if they did not grapple with these same epistemological problems, made clear that German labor history, despite the flood of scholarship work on *Bürgertum*, had been prematurely declared *passé*.<sup>28</sup>

## BEYOND LABOR HISTORIES

As the gender and labor studies of the 1990s sought to dissolve the binary of material and representational evidence, they delivered the final blow to many of the tropes and master narratives of labor history. More importantly, they also

38 ■ rendered the study of labor a less bounded inquiry, which now had the potential

to reach far beyond the factory workshop and forge new interpretations of state, public sphere (both “subaltern” and dominant), and “the social”. Indeed, the project of “rewriting” labor history from the perspective of gender has significantly widened its scope, as the meanings of work spilled over into the histories of state and social reform, and laid the groundwork for new explorations of the histories of citizenship and consumption, of empires and diasporas, in which labor had not previously been central.

While the pessimist might lament the fact that labor history did not withstand intact the assault of culture, language, or gender, the optimist could take pleasure in the new absence of boundaries around the history of work and class. This process by which the pursuit of gendered labor histories spilled over into other areas of inquiry and forged the way to rethinkings of states, citizenships, bodies and subjectivities, was propelled as well by new methodologies in which discourses and languages helped to map the connections between and among arenas that were otherwise viewed as socially or politically distinct.

An example from my own study, *Languages of Labor and Gender*, regarding the “separation of home and work” may make this argument more concrete. In German labor history the “separation of home and work” has generally served as a crucial marker of the onset of modernization and working-class formation. In approaching the “separation of home and work” as a plot line in the narrative (story) of German working-class formation, I was able to trace the connections among and between the mega-processes of industrial transformation, class formation, and the expansion of the welfare state.<sup>29</sup> As the largest factory employer of women in pre-war Germany, the mills constituted a complex laboratory for state bureaucrats and academic social reformers who sought to alleviate the abuses of factory labor for women and youths and to resolve the crisis of the family that accompanied the transition from home to factory industry.

The transformations encompassed in the “separation of home and work” in Rhenish and Westfalian textile regions included the erosion of the household as a site of wage labor, the recurrent unemployment or displacement of male hand-weavers from their craft, the fragmentation of the family wage into individual, gender-specific wages, and the final and permanent usurpation of the domestic workshop by the factory. Male weavers, as well as the social reformers who took up their cause, understood this separation not only as a profound disruption of the industrial order, but also of the sexual order, as the competition of “cheap” female labor and the inscription of certain sectors of production with female attributes (“dexterity”) came to signify the feminization of textile production. Male weavers’ litanies of loss, then, figured prominently in the coalescence of class identity among textile workers in these regions. The “separation of home and work”, as the most poignant of these litanies, left in-



delible traces on the programs and practices of the textile unions, both Social Democratic and Catholic, and in the collective memories and class identities of union leaders.

The outcry against feminization and displacement as two key consequences of the separation of home and work also resonated in the rhetorics of social reform as eminent professors of political economy undertook *Studienreisen* through the textile regions of Germany and produced scholarly investigations of the human costs of this momentous transition. The subsequent discursive and social mobilizations around the social question of female factory labor during the 1880s and 1890s rendered the “separation of home and work” a critical moment in the expansion of the German welfare state, as bureaucrats and reformers responded to public pressure to solve this problem by extending labor protection to adult women. The interventions of the German state, from the establishment of social insurance to the expansion of labor protection for women and youths in 1891 and again in 1908, helped to define two distinct categories of citizenship for men and women. The dichotomies this process fostered between male breadwinners and female dependents, between independent male citizens and “female organisms” (as the object of both moral and hygienic intervention), reinforced, in turn, the gendered boundaries of German class formation.

The “separation of home and work” forms a narrative thread that links the processes of German working-class formation, the framing of new social identities of citizenship, and the expansion of the German welfare state. This thread, which is not necessarily replicated or mirrored in institutions, helps to uncover the politics and ideologies of gender that shaped each of these processes. The work of tracing this thread not only led my own study of workplaces, unions and strikes (as originally conceived) to spill over into the histories of state, social reform, and citizenship. It also necessitated attention to the languages of labor, to the tropes and narrative strands, the component elements of discourses, which spanned by definition a broad range of milieus, movements, and institutions and the source materials they produced.

In recent years labor historians have frequently extended their explorations into the realm of citizenship, probing the meanings of the gendered ideologies of work and divisions of labor for the social identities of masculine and feminine citizens.<sup>30</sup> The claim of British Chartists, for example, that men “held property in their labor” made wage labor the cornerstone of citizenship rights for “respectable” men, and as such, elevated gender to a defining element of the new social identity of working-class citizenship.<sup>31</sup> In other cases, citizenship emerges as a social identity after class has already established a certain rhetorical and social power among workers, as in Germany. In such instances, it

40 ■ might be interesting to consider how the new social claims or legal identities

of citizenship change the vocabularies and practices of class. So, for example, women's acquisition of citizenship rights in Germany and England after the First World War changed the terms of their struggles for equality of skill and wage at work and in the union halls. In the wake of world war, revolution, and the founding of German democracy, female activists cast themselves as newly empowered citizens in order to demand equal representation for women in the Social Democratic unions, thus mobilizing the new multi-layered languages of female citizenship to critique the politics of class.<sup>32</sup> Viewing the history of labor through the lens of citizenship certainly does widen its scope to encompass the realms of nation, state (legislative and juridical) and public sphere as spaces beyond the workplace in which citizenship was both defined and contested.

Citizenship is tangentially related to another field of inquiry which emerged at the nexus of labor history and family history, namely that of consumption. While histories of middle-class formation, such as Davidoff and Hall's classic, *Family Fortunes*, highlighted the significance of women's labor as consumers in fashioning the proper middle-class household, feminist histories of proletarian families recognized the dual contributions of women, as wage-earners and as frugal consumers, in working-class households.<sup>33</sup> Not only was "women's wage earning", as Judith Coffin argues in her study of the French garment industry, "crucial to the expansion of popular consumption", but the narratives of danger about female factory labor also paired the two realms as well.<sup>34</sup> Just as the rapid expansion of the female factory work force appeared to social reformers as uncontrollable, so they were also alarmed by the allegedly unbridled consumer desires of independent wage-earning women for "luxury" goods (such as hats, silks, hairpins, stockings and lace). Nancy Green's comparative study of the women's garment industry in Paris and New York also creatively links fashion and fabrication, consumption and production, which forms the foundation for an even richer exploration of ethnicity and immigration, urban growth and labor politics in the two metropolises from the late 19th century through the 1980s.<sup>35</sup>

#### **BODIES, MATERIAL AND THE DISCURSIVE: SOME FINAL METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is perhaps worth noting in conclusion that the process by which labor history has become less bounded has not produced one dominant paradigm or epistemology, culturalist or discursive. Rather, explorations of citizenship have revived inquiry into the relationship between law and social practices, while the history of consumption links the symbolic and the social in its pursuit of the processes of "commodification, spectatorship, and commercial exchanges".<sup>36</sup> ■ 41

Nor has the willingness of “culturalist” labor historians to grapple with new concepts and methodologies, like discourses and narratives, meant the wholesale neglect of the “material”, or of experience and agency.<sup>37</sup> In contending with both the discourses and experiences of work, the last wave of Anglo-Saxon gender and labor scholarship, for example, helped to dissolve the dichotomies between these terms, to untangle the relationship between the two, and to resist a fixed notion of this relationship by which one of the pair (discourse) always seems to determine or “construct” the other (experience).<sup>38</sup> An emphasis on the changing meanings of work leaves the historical subject at the center of the process of assigning meaning, of transforming the discourses in which those meanings are internalized, deliberated or contested. Taking discourses as sites of struggle, rather than as fixed formations, necessitates analysis of their mutability and instability across time and place, as creating or encompassing not a singular image or construct, but an array of subject positions.

Bodies, laboring and symbolic, have emerged in the years since the peak of the “linguistic turn” as an interesting site of debate and potential resolution of some of its dilemmas, including this very relationship between the material and the discursive. While the laboring body has remained remarkably elusive in most labor history, recent interest in body history has produced a groundswell of books, articles, dissertation proposals and conference panels on various aspects thereof.<sup>39</sup> It may be possible to interpret this groundswell of interdisciplinary interest in the body as a reaction to the disorientation that beset both the humanities and social sciences in the wake of the “linguistic turn”, in which the physicality of the body – its pain, disease, desire – serves as an oasis of materiality in the swirl of intangible discourses. For the history of gender and labor, however, female bodies attest to the “hybrid character” of women’s work, to its “melding of paid (industrial) and unpaid (domestic or household labor)” and in this sense they defy the legendary separation of home and work, often in quite graphic terms (birthing on the factory floor, for example).<sup>40</sup> This notion of hybridity might also help to understand bodies as intriguing sites at which the binary opposition between the discursive and the material dissolves, at which discourses and everyday experiences converge, at which women workers encountered and often subverted the meanings imparted to their bodies by idealized visions of motherhood, by the prescriptions of social and reproductive hygiene. The body, as a more explicit presence in labor history, may shed light on its meanings for the formation of women’s political subjectivities, for the articulation of their claims as citizens upon states, employers, or labor unions. The body, then, could also figure as yet another analytical strand by which the history of labor reaches considerably beyond its traditional sites and is made meaningful

42 ■ for the arenas of state, citizenship, consumption, hygiene and medicine.

By now it should be evident that work and workers remain important subjects of historical analysis even if the factory workplace is no longer its center stage. The process by which labor history has become less confined by notions of class and dichotomies of production/reproduction is certainly a complex one, in which the social and economic transformations that underlay “the condition of post-modernity” are entwined with the epistemological crises and theoretical renovations encompassed in the so-called “linguistic turn” and the elevation of gender to a central category of historical analysis.<sup>41</sup> If labor history’s dispersal across a wider terrain of institutions, movements, and languages has dissolved the dichotomies of the last wave of debate – material and culture, discourse and experience – its effect has not, hopefully, been the instating of new binary terms, rather a new consideration of the many arenas in which work had meaning and of the multiple subject positions of workers as well.

#### Notes

- 1 Lenard R. Berlanstein, “Introduction”, in Lenard R. Berlanstein (ed.), *Rethinking Labor History. Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, Urbana 1993, 1.
- 2 Here it is also important to mention the Geschichtswerkstätten. For some of the early debates on Alltagsgeschichte, see Hans Medick, “‘Missionare im Ruderboot?’ Ethnologische Erkenntnisweisen als Herausforderung an die Sozialgeschichte”, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10/3 (1984), 295–319; and the responses in the same issue from Jürgen Kocka, “Zurück zur Erzählung? Plädoyer für historische Argumentation”, 395–408; Klaus Tenfelde, “Schwierigkeiten mit dem Alltag”, 376–394; Alf Lüdtke, “Organizational Order or Eigensinn? Workers’ Privacy and Workers’ Politics in Imperial Germany”, in Sean Wilentz (ed.), *Rites of Power. Symbolism, Ritual and Politics since the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 1985, 303–334, played an important role in the U. S. reception of Alltagsgeschichte. See Alf Lüdtke, *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1989. For incisive overviews see: David F. Crew, “Alltagsgeschichte. A New Social History from Below?” in *Central European History* 22/3–4 (September/December 1989), 394–407; Geoff Eley, “Labor History, Social History, Alltagsgeschichte. Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday – A New Direction for German Social History?”, in *Journal of Modern History* 61 (June 1989), 297–343.
- 3 William H. Sewell, Jr., “Toward a Post-materialist Rhetoric for Labor History”, in Berlanstein (above, n. 1), 17.
- 4 See, for example, William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge 1980; William Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture. The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750–1900*, Cambridge 1984 and *Money and Liberty in Europe. A Critique of Historical Understanding*, Cambridge 1987; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*, Cambridge 1983; Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People. Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914*, Cambridge 1991; *The Historical Meanings of Work*, Cambridge 1987.
- 5 Sally Alexander, “Women, Class, and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s. Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History”, in *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984), 133–49. See also Laura L. Frader, Sonya O. Rose, “Introduction. Gender and the Reconstruction of European Working-Class History”, in Frader/Rose (ed.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, Ithaca 1996, 1–36; Kathleen Canning, “Gender and the Politics of Class

- Formation: Rethinking German Labor History”, in *American Historical Review* 97/3 (June 1992), 736–68.
- 6 Kathleen Canning, *Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience*, *Signs* 19/2 (Winter 1994), 368–404.
- 7 For additional Anglo-Saxon debates, see *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Fall 1994, Special Issue: *What Next for Labor and Working-Class History?* The synthetic volumes were edited by Gerhard A. Ritter in a series entitled: *Geschichte der Arbeiter und der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts*. See in particular: Jürgen Kocka, *Weder Stand noch Klasse. Unterschichten um 1800*, Bonn 1990 and *Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeiterexistenzen. Grundlagen der Klassenbildung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bonn 1990; Gerhard A. Ritter, Klaus Tenfelde (ed.), *Arbeiter im deutschen Kaiserreich, 1871 bis 1914*, Bonn 1992.
- 8 Here I would like to make clear that I do view these two strands of transformation as related, although not deterministically.
- 9 Sewell (above, n. 3), 17. For the most frequently-discussed argument against the “linguistic turn” in social history, see Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, Philadelphia 1990.
- 10 Sewell (above, n. 3), 17.
- 11 Sewell (above, n. 3), 15.
- 12 Gay Gullickson, “Commentary. New Labor History from the Perspective of a Women’s Historian”, in Berlanstein (above, n. 1), 200–201.
- 13 Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), 4.
- 14 Berlanstein (above, n. 1), 8.
- 15 Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), 19. See also the influential book: Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan, Judith R. Walkowitz, *Sex and Class in Women’s History*, London 1983.
- 16 Gullickson (above, n. 12), 202–03.
- 17 Joy Parr, “Disaggregating the Sexual Division of Labour. A Transatlantic Case Study”, in *Comparative Study of Society and History* (1988), 511–533. For further discussion of this topic, see Mary Freifeld, “Technological Change and the ‘Self-Acting’ Mule: A Study of Skill and the Sexual Division of Labor”, in *Social History* 11/3 (October 1986), 319–343; Sonya O. Rose, “Gender Segregation in the Transition to the Factory. The English Hosiery Industry, 1850–1910”, in *Feminist Studies* 13/1 (Spring 1987), 163–184; Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender. Female Factory Work in Germany 1850–1914*, Ithaca 1996, 38–84.
- 18 See, for example, the classic articles by Jean H. Quataert, “The Shaping of Women’s Work in Manufacturing. Guilds, Household, and the State in Central Europe, 1648–1870”, in *American Historical Review* 90 (December 1985), 1122–1148 and Sonya O. Rose, “‘Gender at Work’. Sex, Class, and Industrial Capitalism”, in *History Workshop* 21 (Spring 1986), 113–131.
- 19 See Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), for a similar argument.
- 20 Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse. The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca 1985, 12, 54.
- 21 Canning (above, n. 5), 768. Class came under assault from a wide range of scholars in the field of gender and labor. Formative for my own thinking were: Alexander (above, n. 5); Barbara Taylor, *Eye and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 1983; Rose (above, n. 18); Sonia O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods. Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England*, Berkeley 1992; Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988; Anna Clark, “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity. Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s”, in *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992), 62–88.
- 22 Canning (above, n. 5), 745–748. Of course feminist historians of gender and labor were not alone in their critiques of class. The work of male historians already cited in this essay, Sewell (above, n. 3), Reddy (above, n. 4), and Joyce (above, n. 4), for example, also had a crucial role in undermining the stability of the concept of class. See for example *Inter-*

- national Labor and Working-Class History*, Spring 1996, special Issue: Kathleen Paul, Marc W. Steinberg, Ann Farnsworth-Alvear (ed.), *Identity Formation and Class*.
- 23 On the class and “non-class” lines of distinction, see Kocka (above, n. 7).
- 24 Debates about the linguistic turn were already underway at this time among scholars of intellectual history. See, for example, John Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn. The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience”, in *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987), 879–907.
- 25 Scott (above, n. 21). Part II includes her essays on E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and Stedman Jones’ *Languages of Class*. *Studies in English Working Class History*; Part III includes three essays on the representations of women’s work in France in the mid-nineteenth century; and Part IV includes the essay on “The Sears Case”, which analyzes the resonances of the “equality-difference” debate in the sex-discrimination suit which the U. S. government’s Equal Opportunity Commission filed in 1978 against Sears, Roebuck & Company on behalf of its female sales personnel.
- 26 Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, Ithaca 1991.
- 27 A partial list of these books includes: Rose (above, n. 21); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches. Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*, Berkeley 1994; Tessie Liu, *The Weaver’s Knot. The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1750–1914*, Ithaca 1994; Laura Tabili, “We Ask for British Justice”. *Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, Ithaca 1994; Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman*, New York 1995; Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality. Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914–1939*, Ithaca 1995; Judith G. Coffin, *The Politics of Women’s Work. The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915*, Princeton 1996; Canning (above, n. 17); Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power. Furnishing Modern France*, Berkeley 1997; Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work. A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York*, Durham 1997.
- 28 See, for example, Marlene Ellerkamp, *Industriearbeit, Krankheit und Geschlecht*, Göttingen 1991; Karin Hausen (ed.), *Geschlechterhierarchie und Arbeitsteilung. Zur Geschichte ungleicher Erwerbschancen von Männern und Frauen*, Göttingen 1993; Brigitte Kerchner, *Beruf und Geschlecht. Frauenberufsverbände in Deutschland 1848–1908*, Göttingen 1992; Susanne Rouette, *Sozialpolitik als Geschlechterpolitik. Die Regulierung der Frauenarbeit nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Frankfurt a. M. 1993; Sabine Schmitt, *Der Arbeiterinnenschutz im deutschen Kaiserreich. Zur Konstruktion der schutzbedürftigen Arbeiterin*, Stuttgart 1995.
- 29 On narrative as a tool of historical analysis, see Margaret R. Somers, Gloria D. Gibson, “Reclaiming the Epistemological ‘Other’. Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity”, in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *From Persons to Nations. The Social Constitution of Identities*, London 1994.
- 30 See, for example, the “scholarly controversy” on “Women, Work and Citizenship”, in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 52 (Fall 1997), 1–71.
- 31 Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), 15. For an excellent analysis of the meaning of labor for male citizenship claims, see Keith McClelland, “Rational and Respectable Men. Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850–1867”, in Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), 280–293.
- 32 This is one of the arguments I am pursuing in my current book project, *Embodied Citizenships. Gender and the Crisis of Nation in Weimar Germany* (in progress).
- 33 See, for example, Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, *Family Fortune. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, Chicago 1987; Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love. Women’s Experience of Home and Family 1850–1940*, London 1986; Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil. Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918*, Oxford 1993; Leora Auslander, “The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France”, in Victoria de Grazia, Ellen Furlough (ed.), *The Sex of Things. Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, Berkeley 1996, 79–112. See also Victoria de Grazia’s contribution to this volume, “Empowering Women as Citizen-Consumers”, 275–86.

- 34 Judith G. Coffin, "Consumption, Production, and Gender: The Sewing Machine in Nineteenth-Century France", in Frader/Rose (above, n. 5), 121. Also see her excellent book, *The Politics of Women's Work* (above, n. 27).
- 35 Green (above, n. 27).
- 36 Victoria de Grazia, "Introduction", in de Grazia/Furlough (above, n. 33), 4–5.
- 37 See Judith Butler's thoughtful comments on the dichotomy between "the material" and the "constructed" in the introduction to her *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London 1993. For a discussion of experience and agency, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", in *Critical Inquiry* 17/3 (1991), 773–797 and Canning (above, n. 6).
- 38 Canning (above, n. 17), 10–15.
- 39 See Kathleen Canning, "The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History", in *Gender & History* 11/3 (November 1999), 499–513.
- 40 Coffin (above, n. 27), 9.
- 41 David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-Modernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, London 1990. Certainly nationally-bounded particularities of both labor politics and history-writing have also had a role in shaping the responses of French, British, American labor historians to these challenges of the last two decades.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **GENDER AND THE LANGUAGES OF LABOR HISTORY. AN OVERVIEW**

Kathleen Canning's essay takes a critical approach to the trajectory of decline that has been widely assigned to the field of Anglo-Saxon labor history at the turn to the 21st century. Exploring both the "external" political-economic redefinitions of "labor" and the "internal" historiographical shifts from materialist to culturalist modes of historical explanation in recent years, she suggests that rather than decline, labor history has experienced a new and fruitful dispersal across other areas of scholarly inquiry. As a result, it has become less bounded by notions of class and masculinist dichotomies of production/reproduction.

Emphasizing the importance of labor for the paradigm shift from the history of women to gender in the late 1980s, Canning explicates the ways in which the wave of new scholarship on gender and labor revitalized and expanded the scope of labor history during the last decade while grappling with the theoretical and methodological challenges of the "linguistic turn" in the historical sciences. The task of rewriting labor history from the perspective of gender, she argues, has significantly widened its scope, as the meanings of work spilled over into the histories of state and social reform, citizenship and consumption, empires and diasporas.