

Gender and British Labour History in the 1990s

Current editions of *Labour History Review*, the journal of the (British) Society for the Study of Labour History, invite contributors to 'engage with issues of gender and ethnicity or race, as well as class, and attempt to broaden the traditional subject matter of labour history'. It seems that in the twenty-first century there is now some sense among British labour historians of the need to make explicit the aspiration to a more inclusive labour history. There is also by implication some recognition of the need to rethink the terrain of the subject in a fundamental way if the work of labour historians is to be relevant to new generations. But how optimistic can we be that this is more than rhetoric? One way to assess the prospects for the future, at least in terms of creating a gender-aware labour history in Britain, is to review the extent to which the 1990s saw promising developments in this area. In particular, what can we learn from gender history¹ which could help to reframe British labour history?

Labour History Review in the 1990s: a space for a gender-aware labour history?

The obvious place to start any diagnosis of the state of British labour history in the 1990s is *Labour History Review*. This is a journal which changed its format and to some extent its purpose during the 1990s. It began the decade consisting largely of reports of papers given to the Society's biannual conferences, reports on work in progress, notes on sources as well as letters and extensive book reviews. At this stage there were few full-scale academic articles. This continued to be largely the case until the journal was re-launched in 1996 as an academic journal, albeit one that sought to reach a wider audience than professional labour historians, a diminishing group amongst university historians and adult educators. To some extent this might explain the dearth of essays which make an explicit engagement with women, as the subject of study, or with the concept of gender. Aside from a special issue of the journal guest-edited by Pam Sharpe and Harriet Bradley on 'Gender and Work' (1998),² James Hinton's short but thought-provoking article on 'Women and the Labour vote, 1945–1950' (1992)³ is the only article on women in the decade while Gary Cross's 'Consumer history and the dilemmas of

1 For a discussion of the particular trajectory of British women's/gender history see J. Rendall, 'Uneven Developments: Women's History, Feminist History and Gender History in Great Britain', in: K. Offen, R. Roach Pierson & J. Rendall (eds), *Writing Women's History. International Perspectives* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991), 45–57. See also A. Davin, 'Redressing the Balance or Transforming the Art? The British Experience', in: S.J. Kleinberg (ed.), *Retrieving Women's History* (Oxford, Berg, 1988), 60–78.

2 Special issue on Gender and Work, *Labour History Review*, 63, 1 (1998).

3 J. Hinton, 'Women and the Labour vote, 1945–1950', *Labour History Review*, 57,3 (1992), 59–66.

working-class history' (1997)⁴ does acknowledge gender as an issue, although it is not central to or thoroughly integrated into his remarks.

Aside from the special issue which focuses on work, it is curious that the two articles on women and/or gender in *Labour History Review* in this period are about aspects of consumption, a topic which has received relatively little attention from labour historians. Hinton considers whether working-class housewives revolted against austerity in the 1940s. The question arises from trying to understand an apparently gendered response amongst the working class to the first majority Labour government. The evidence from contemporary opinion polls is that between 1945 and 1951, the Labour Party held on to the women's vote much better than it did to the men's vote. Hinton suggests that 'not only did the Labour government serve the *class* interests of working class women, it may also have done something for the *gender* interests, despite its poor performance on issues connected with waged work – nurseries and equal pay'.⁵ Indeed he speculates that working-class women chose rationally to stick with a government which had sharply increased taxation on their husband's beer and tobacco and used the proceeds to subsidise food prices and to fund the welfare state.⁶ The issue of the distribution of resources within families and its interrelationship with political identification and with wage bargaining are not aspects of working-class life that labour historians have traditionally foregrounded. Indeed, this relates to the replication amongst labour historians of the labour movement's privileging of production over consumption; concentrating on work, wages and workplaces at the expense of how wages were spent.⁷

This is a point touched upon by Gary Cross, although his focus is more on envisaging a labour history of consumer society. His view is that 'We must recognise that wage-earners and their families are consumers at least as much as part of a work process. But to abandon the context of work and the status of wage earning for a classless deconstruction of communities of spending is equally mistaken'.⁸ Cross seeks to reclaim for labour history the study of popular culture and mass consumerism from cultural studies. He makes no references to everyday consumption – the 'everyday' is an area of considerable potential for a gendered labour history – except by implication in his suggestion that one direction that a labour history of consumption could take is to connect consumption to the setting where most of it takes place – families. Yet Cross's consumption remains resolutely about fridges, cars and Do It Yourself as

4 G. Cross, 'Consumer History and the Dilemmas of Working-Class History', *Labour History Review*, 62,3 (1997), 261–274.

5 Hinton, 'Women and the Labour vote', 62.

6 Ibid.

7 For more recent explorations of these issues see K. Hunt, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of the Domestic: British Socialist Women and the Politics of Consumption', *Women's History Review*, 9,2 (2000), 389–410; J. Hannam & K. Hunt, *Socialist Women. Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, Routledge, 2000), chap. 6; M. Daunt & M. Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption. Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, Berg, 2001); M. Hilton, 'The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 45, 1 (2002), 103–128.

8 Cross, 'Consumer history', 261.

a leisure activity rather than fishfingers, bread or the rent book.⁹ Gender is acknowledged – ‘At least until recently, this balance of work and consumption in the working-class family was gendered’ – but the task of gendering a labour history of consumption remains just out of sight. Much of the new work on consumption¹⁰ does not come from within labour history or from those who identify as labour historians, yet there is much that could be learnt from reconceiving the relationship between production and consumption as well as the politics of production and of consumption. This is one of the ways in which women can be put back into labour history but also, as importantly, that the ways in which they have been marginalised from the labour market and from the politics of labour can be recognised. Only then can the integral role of gender politics to this relationship be acknowledged.

It is the journal’s special issue on ‘Gender and Work’ which concentrates together most of *Labour History Review*’s articles on women’s/gender history. It is fitting, and perhaps predictable, that work, such a central concept to labour history, be the theme of the volume. As the editors noted in a piece carefully and more aptly called ‘Gendering work’, ‘The title was deliberately chosen to suggest action and to imply that work and gender co-exist within a dynamic relationship, reflecting the current theoretical view that gender should be seen as a process rather than a fixed attribute of women and men’.¹¹ Influenced by the important collection of American essays brought together by Ava Baron under the powerful title, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*¹², the four essays in this issue of *Labour History Review* engage with different aspects of the gendering of work. Michael Roberts re-examined the prescriptive literature of the early modern period for its representation of work as gendered, focusing in particular on contemporary understandings of housewifery.¹³ Jane Humphries contributes to the wider debate on how to unpick the ways in which gender has to be integral to our understanding of class.¹⁴ Her subject matter, female-headed households during industrialisation, does not just enable attention to be redirected to the marginalised but shows clearly how this group was in fact central to the process of industrialisation. Evidently the female-headed household was significant: at any one time during the Industrial Revolution around nine per cent of all households with children were headed by women.¹⁵ Humphries demonstrates the impoverishment of these particular households relative to

9 See F. Trentmann, ‘Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship in Twentieth Century Britain’, in: Daunton & Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption*, 129–163.

10 See for example, V. de Grazia & E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things. Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).

11 P. Sharpe & H. Bradley, ‘Gendering work: historical perspectives’, *Labour History Review*, 63, 1 (1998), 1.

12 A. Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991).

13 M. Roberts, ‘To Bridle the Falsehood of Unconscionable Workmen, and for her Own Satisfaction’: What the Jacobean Housewife Needed to Know About Men’s Work, and Why’, *Labour History Review*, 63, 1 (1998), 4–30.

14 J. Humphries, ‘Female-Headed Households in Early Industrial Britain: the Vanguard of the Proletariat?’, *Labour History Review*, 63, 1 (1998), 31–65.

15 *Ibid.*, 33.

those headed by men. She shows how industrialisation brought an end to many traditional female jobs, such as spinning, so that overall women's economic opportunities outside the factory districts were reduced, whether they headed households or not. She suggests that focusing on these particular families allows historians to record another negative experience of industrialisation to stand alongside the more familiar tales of handloom weavers and southern agricultural labourers.¹⁶ But as importantly she highlights the ways in which the survival strategies adopted by these female heads of households led to their playing important roles in the early industrial economy by providing lodgings, facilitating migration and supplying adult female and child labour at high rates. Her suggestion that these women were the 'vanguard of the early industrial proletariat',¹⁷ constitutes a fundamental challenge to much that labour historians have held sacred.

Another issue which is central to discussions of the gendering of work, and thus should be integral to any historians understanding of labour, is the social construction of skill. The gendering of skill and its effect on definitions of men's and women's work and the effect that this has had on the practices of the labour movement, have been explored by feminist historians – mainly in terms of trades or jobs in which there was some contest between men and women, for example, printing, cotton spinning.¹⁸ Less has been written about men's work and the process whereby a particular trade or occupation has been gendered.¹⁹ Sián Reynolds' contribution to the 'Gender and Work' special issue of *Labour History Review*, takes us into a little studied industry at a particular moment, the French film industry of the 1930s, to explore the contested and gendered arena of skill.²⁰ She suggests that editing film 'was one of the rare areas where women almost accidentally acquired a skill associated with modern machinery – namely the handling of film and, most importantly, of sound technology, which evaded men because it was seen as relatively unimportant at first – merely time-consuming'.²¹

Finally, Penny Summerfield uses her article in this collection²² to engage with female strategies for labour but within very specific contexts – not only the opportunities and constraints placed on the women but also the effect of the needs of male workers within male-controlled

16 Ibid, 51.

17 Ibid, 52.

18 A key text in this area remains A. Phillips & B. Taylor, 'Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics', *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 79–88. See also B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, Virago, 1983); C. Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London, Pluto, 1983); M. Freifield, 'Technological Change and the 'Self Acting' Mule: a Study of Skill and the Sexual Division of Labour', *Social History*, 11, 3 (1986), 319–343; S. O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods. Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), espec. chaps 2, 5, 7.

19 An attempt to do this can be found in A. Mutch, 'The Construction of a 'Traditional' Occupation: Welding, 1900–1960', *Labour History Review*, 66, 1 (2001), 41–60.

20 S. Reynolds, 'The Face on the Cutting-Room Floor: Women Editors in the French Cinema of the 1930s', *Labour History Review*, 63,1 (1998), 66–82.

21 Ibid, 79.

22 P. Summerfield, 'They Didn't Want Women Back in That Job!': the Second World War and the Construction of Gendered Work Histories', *Labour History Review*, 63, 1 (1998), 83–104.

production. She looks at the effect that the Second World War had on a selection of women's work histories when viewed as part of a number of competing discourses: the discourse of marginality, as it affected women's relationship to the workforce; the discourse of opportunity, that increasing education led to more work opportunities for women; the discourse of the dual role, that mothers should participate in the labour market; and the feminist discourse of the male exploitation of women through the double burden of paid and domestic labour. Summerfield explores how women tell their own work histories in relation to a number of narratives open to them. Here is an important issue for labour history for we should be concerned not only with how labour is objectively constructed and reconstructed over time but also how this interrelates with subjective understandings of labour. As Summerfield says, these women's personal accounts 'become a window both on women's negotiations with discourse in endeavouring to give their lives coherence and meaning, and on the processes of women's active involvement in the gendered construction of work'.²³ On both grounds, it might be useful to explore this approach in relation to men's work histories.

This issue of *Labour History Review* is therefore important for what it contains, alerting readers to significant debates for labour historians which are opened up by re-centring enquiry on gender. This is not at the expense of, for example, class but does seek to give gender equal recognition as a concept and by so doing inevitably reconfigures the whole terrain. Together the articles, which were not selected to be representative, demonstrate no single approach to gender history, the sources used are rich and diverse and the methods varied. Yet given the dearth of such articles before 1998 and even their relative scarcity since, one might ask whether this work would have found its way into a labour history journal (as oppose to social history, economic history, gender or women's history) except in a special issue. It seems that the culture of labour history is more resistant to issues of gender than many other histories in Britain, for example social history. Ironically the same might be claimed for economic history. Yet the campaigning of the Women's Committee of the Economic History Society and their regular workshops seem to have been successful in at least claiming a space for women's and gender history within economic history. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore how successful the Society's women members have been in moving beyond this to reconfiguring the subject matter of the discipline and the content of its journal, *Economic History Review*. Certainly one thing labour and economic history shares, apart from an overlap in subject matter, is that they are no longer very popular with students. Does this encourage conservatism, as the innovators find other outlets for their work? Certainly it is striking that none of the individual authors in this special issue of *Labour History Review* are particularly identified with labour history. Perhaps that is labour history's loss.

23 Ibid, 101.

Labour History Review in the 1990s: gender as subterranean

Articles are not the only way in which the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH)'s journal could engage with women's/gender history. Women, and as the decade wore on, also gender can be found as themes of papers given to SSLH conferences. An early conference with the title 'Women, the family economy and homework' (1991) brings some themes to the surface. It brought together speakers who worked in the field but who did not appear to identify specifically with labour history, such as Carl Chinn and Elizabeth Roberts, with stalwarts of the Society, such as Dorothy Thompson, Sheila Blackburn and Maggie Walsh. While Thompson was 'disappointed to note the extent to which labour history has remained male history'²⁴ and stressed in particular the continued identification of work as masculine, Chinn pointed to a very differently gendered working class. Here Chinn put forward his argument, which he had first set out in *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England, 1880-1939*,²⁵ that amongst the urban poor women were not the victims of male power but actually constituted a matriarchy. 'Women were the lynchpins of the poorer working-class family, and because of their duties or characteristics, some of these mothers were the fulcrum of their neighbourhoods'.²⁶ Here were women who were not usually defined as 'workers' within labour history but who participated in the informal economy. An apparent implication of Chinn's analysis was that women who were not part of the formal economy could be drawn into the stories of the making and re-making of the working class (whether British or English),²⁷ as they had a crucial role in the survival of the working-class family. Yet at the same time this was a curiously ungendered as well as sentimental account of the working class. Pat Ayers²⁸ has given a rather different version of how the working-class family economy worked in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike Chinn, the explicit context for Ayers' recovery of women's ingenious survival strategies is contemporary gender relations. Even amongst the urban poor, men had much greater access to power and status including the threat of physical violence. A less sentimental account certainly, but also one which while not denying women's agency does identify the constraints upon it and in which women are

24 D. Thompson, 'Gender, Work and the Family', *Labour History Review*, 56, 3 (1991), 4.

25 C. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988).

26 Chinn, 'A hidden matriarchy among the urban poor of England, 1880-1939', *Labour History Review*, 56, 3 (1991), 10.

27 See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963); G. Stedman Jones, 'Working class culture and working class politics in London, 1870-1900: notes on the remaking of a working class', *Journal of Social History*, 7, 4 (1974) reprinted in his, *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working-class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 179-238; M.Savage & A. Miles, *The Re-making of the British Working Class, 1840-1940* (London, Routledge, 1994).

28 P.Ayers, 'The Hidden Economy of Dockland Families: Liverpool in the 1930s', in: P. Hudson and W.R. Lee (eds), *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991), 271-90; P. Ayers and J. Lambert, 'Marriage, Money and Domestic Violence in Working-class Liverpool, 1919-39' in: J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love. Women's Experiences of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), 195-219. See also E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993).

clearly gendered beings. If a gender-sensitive British labour history was to be created in the 1990s then the issues raised by this conference would have to be addressed. Certainly labour history had to become more than male history, a history in which women's various forms of agency could be explored, but it also needed to provide a space in which processes of gendering could be deconstructed.

Few SSLH conferences in the 1990s had such an explicit gender focus except for the Spring 1998 conference on Gender and Labour, many of whose papers were included in the collection *Working Out Gender*, edited by the conference organiser Maggie Walsh.²⁹ Some conferences did manage to attract a paper on women and/or gender, summaries of which were reprinted in *Labour History Review* in the period before the journal was re-formatted. Thus there were isolated papers to be found in the programmes of day conferences which explored topics such as British women and the Second International, women in movements of religious dissent in 1840s Germany and women and the Independent Labour Party in the 1920s.³⁰ A two day conference in 1994 on the history of the Labour Party even had two papers: Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Labour and the Female Consumer, 1945–1951' and Mike Savage, 'Gender and the Labour Party before 1940'.³¹ Here was some indication of a shift from women as the central focus (and the use of gender as a necessary tool of analysis) to making gender relationships themselves the subject of investigation. Thus Mike Savage asserted that 'taking gender seriously' can affect our understanding of the development of the Labour Party. His concern was to explore the gender assumptions of the party.³² He challenged as a fallacy the notion that Labour was the natural home of feminists, suggesting that the early Labour Party supported policies 'which defined women's role mainly in the domestic sphere and that supported the economic dominance of male wage earners'. Indeed Savage argued that taking gender seriously might lead to seeing the Conservative Party as more successful 'in articulating women's centred politics in the early twentieth century'.³³ There was some evidence by the mid-1990s that the SSLH was taking gender a little more seriously with a conference on 'Community, Gender and Culture in Mining History' in which gender was much more integral to the overall conference agenda.³⁴ Here the umbilical cord between the categories of 'gender' and 'women' was most self-consciously cut so that masculinity could also now be interrogated within labour history. But soon after this point the Society's confer-

29 M. Walsh (ed.), *Working Out Gender. Perspectives from Labour History* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999).

30 K. Hunt, 'British Women and the Second International', *Labour History Review*, 58, 1 (1993), 25–29; S. Paletschek, 'Women in Movements of Religious Dissent in 1840s Germany', *Labour History Review*, 58, 3 (1993), 6–8; J. Hannam, 'Women and the ILP in the 1920s' referred to in Conference Report, *Labour History Review*, 59, 1 (1994), 14–15.

31 I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Labour and the Female Consumer, 1945–1951' and M. Savage, 'Gender and the Labour Party before 1940' referred to in Conference Report, *Labour History Review*, 59, 3 (1994), 11–16.

32 This is the approach taken in K. Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: the Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

33 Report of 'History of Labour Party' conference in *Labour History Review*, 59, 3 (1994), p.15.

34 Summaries of papers given at 'Community, Gender and Culture in Mining History' conference in *Labour History Review*, 60, 2 (1995), 47–110.

ences ceased to be regularly reported and their deliberations were more likely to result in books rather than articles, or even summaries, in *Labour History Review*.³⁵

At the beginning of the decade, Pat Thane had observed in her reflections on women's history and labour history: 'These two approaches are less thoroughly divorced than was the case ten years ago, though both have much to gain from still closer union'.³⁶ She had gone on to consider what she called the classic territory of labour history: Labour politics, industrial relations, work and pay over the last century. Her purpose was to identify potential areas of shared interest rather than to map the actual confluence between the two histories. At this stage it was a women's history of labour rather than a gendered labour history which was what was envisaged. When in 1995 Eileen Yeo came to reflect at the Society's Spring conference on 'Gender and class: women's languages of power', her focus was more emphatically on gender although less clearly on the processes of gendering. Yeo observed that in the 1970s 'labour historians were largely genderblind' but that by the mid-1990s they should be regarding their subject matter as 'gendered territory'.³⁷ Drawing largely on the work of feminist historians she sought to explore gender relations in a number of different ways: horizontally, that is within the same class group; diagonally, between men from one class and women from another; and vertically, between men of different classes or women of differing social classes. The purpose was not only to draw attention to examples of labour history where gender is taken seriously, such as Sonya Rose's *Limited Livelihoods*³⁸ but also examples of gender history which could help to reframe the agenda of labour history, such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes*.³⁹

The 'crisis of labour history': an opportunity to integrate gender into a revisioned labour history?

The 1990s saw what some termed a crisis in labour history.⁴⁰ Although aware that the field was also being vigorously reassessed in the USA, this debate took on a peculiar form amongst British labour historians, at least as represented by those who became very excited in the pages of *Labour History Review*.⁴¹ The British 'crisis' was unlike the debate in America which had been going on for longer and which seemed, at least in relation to issues of inclusivity such as

35 One example is the 1996 SSLH conference on Languages of Labour which became J. Belchem & N. Kirk (eds), *Languages of Labour* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997).

36 Conference Report, *Labour History Review*, 55, 3 (1990), 14.

37 E. Yeo, 'Gender and Class: Women's Languages of Power', *Labour History Review*, 60, 3 (1995), 15.

38 Rose, *Limited Livelihoods*.

39 L. Davidoff & C. Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London, Routledge, 1987).

40 See David Howell's editorial in: *Labour History Review*, 60,1 (1995), 2.

41 See, for example, the responses of Malcolm Chase, Steven Fielding, Keith Flett and John Halstead in: *Labour History Review*, 60, 3 (1995), 46–53.

race and gender, to be taken more seriously amongst the community of labour historians.⁴² For example, a special edition in 1993 of *Labor History* on Gender and the Reconstruction of Labor History, contained Leon Fink's 'Culture's Last Stand? Gender and the Search for Synthesis in American Labor History' and Alice Kessler-Harris's 'Treating the Male as "Other": Re-defining the Parameters of Labor History'.⁴³ A similar debate was not apparent in 1993 in *Labour History Review* and arguably such an exercise of self-analysis, as part of a desire to re-configure the territory of labour history, has never really occurred in the journal or in SSLH. Nor was America's labour history the only national history to be interrogated in this way, as Kathleen Canning's work on Germany demonstrates.⁴⁴

Yet the failings of labour history in relation to gender or race were not at the heart of the British debate, indeed for some they were not even peripherally relevant. Few of the participants, so wracked with the future of class, noted as Malcolm Chase did:

Let us be frank, labour history having failed women (like every other sub-discipline of history), has been slow to make amends. Since so much of its subject matter is made up of institutions and movements that were male-dominated, this can sometimes seem difficult. Labour historians cannot invent women activists when they were not there: but they can ask why this was so and critically interrogate these personalities, processes and institutions that marginalised and/or excluded women. However the reformulation of gender history doesn't stop with engendering.⁴⁵

But there was little akin to the American examples where exploring what a gendered history of labour and of the working class might look like was being debated and worked on *within* the community of labour historians.

More recently June Hannam and I wondered during our discussion of the gendering of the competing narratives of British socialism, 'why mainstream labour history is sometimes deaf and often very hard of hearing when it comes to the contributions which feminist historians have made to the history of British socialism'.⁴⁶ Here our concern was with how limited the attempt has been of labour historians to explore the extent to which the theory and practice of

⁴² See, for example, Ava Baron's article based on her contribution to the 1992 conference, Reworking American Labor History: Race, Gender and Class, which appeared as 'On Looking at Men. Masculinity and the Making of a Gendered Working-Class History', in: A.L. Shapiro (ed.), *Feminists Revision History* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994), 146–171. See also A. Baron, 'Gender and Labour History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future' in: Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered*, 1–46; 'ILWCH Roundtable: What Next for Labor and Working Class History?' in: *International Labor and Working Class History*, 46 (1994), 7–92.

⁴³ Symposium on Gender and the Reconstruction of Labor History, *Labor History*, 34, 2–3 (1993). Most of the essays in this edition had been presented at the 1991 North American Labour History Conference on Men, Women and Labor: Perspectives on Gender in Labor History.

⁴⁴ K. Canning, 'Gender and the Politics of Class Formation: Rethinking German Labor History', *American Historical Review*, 97, 3 (1992), 736–768.

⁴⁵ M. Chase, 'Labour History in the Mainstream: not Drowning but Waving?', *Labour History Review*, 60, 3 (1995), 47.

⁴⁶ J. Hannam & K. Hunt, 'Gendering the Stories of Socialism: an Essay in Historical Criticism', in: Walsh (ed.), *Working Out Gender*, 114.

socialist organisations was gendered and the ways in which women and men negotiated over this across time, place and party. Such observations might be made about other aspects of British labour history. It is not that work on women and on gender is not going on but that it has so little effect on mainstream labour history. It is also interesting to note that it is a sociologist, Mike Savage, rather than a labour historian, who has most consistently written on the history of the labour movement from a gendered perspective.⁴⁷

Learning from gender history?

So what areas of gender history might be particularly productive for labour historians to consider or even emulate? One obvious area of history developing apace in Britain in the 1990s was the issue of masculinity. This is clearly particularly pertinent to a history so firmly fixed on male-dominated workplaces and political movements.

In 1994 John Tosh asked ‘What should historians do with masculinity?’⁴⁸ Although the mainstream of British labour history seemed reluctant to see this as a question of much relevance to them, some of the most interesting work in the area of a gendered working-class history sought to engage with the questions raised in the collection *Manful Assertions*, edited by Tosh and Michael Roper.⁴⁹ Keith McClelland’s path breaking work on masculinity and the ‘representative Artisan’ was reprinted in this collection. Here McClelland unpicked the gendered meanings of the discourses that secured working-class political representation in the middle years of the nineteenth century, which he was to develop further in his contribution to *Defining the Victorian Nation. Class, Race and Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*.⁵⁰ Others, such as Patrick Joyce and James Vernon,⁵¹ have explored political languages at play in the same period but they have not been particularly interested in identifying the processes whereby terms like ‘the people’, ‘citizenship’ or even ‘politics’ itself were, and continue to be, gendered. Many labour historians at the time did not seem to be able to see past Joyce and Vernon and their particular approach to language. Indeed when Joyce came to revisit this de-

47 See, for example, M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics. The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987); M. Savage, ‘Urban politics and the rise of the Labour party, 1919–1939’, in: L. Jamieson and H. Corr (eds), *State, Private Life and Political Change* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990), 204–223; Savage & Miles, *The Re-making of the British Working Class*; M. Savage, ‘Sociology, class and male manual work cultures’, in: J. McLroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Volume Two: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–1979* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999), 23–42.

48 J. Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do With Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 179–202.

49 M. Roper & J. Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, Routledge, 1991).

50 C. Hall, K. McClelland & J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation. Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

51 P. Joyce, *Visions of the People. Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848–1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture c.1815–1867* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

bate in *Labour History Review* in 1997 he did not engage with gender at all.⁵² More instructively for labour historians, Anna Clark has shown how the masculinity of citizenship was both rewritten and strengthened during the nineteenth century. She also entered the debate on the nature of class, which continued to be a feature of the 1990s as it had been in the decade before. One of her contributions was to carefully explore the gendered nature of the languages and assumptions made by Chartists.⁵³ Another concept of particular relevance to labour history which was explored by gender historians was respectability. Sonya Rose considered the changing gendered meaning of respectability as part of a working-class language employed in industrial conflict by analysing the Lancashire weavers' strike of 1878.⁵⁴ Robbie Gray also employed a gender analysis within the terrain of labour history in his discussion of the gendering of jobs in the North of England from 1830 to 1860.⁵⁵ Again one of the key elements in this analysis is the way in which notions of 'manly' independence, particularly as the breadwinner of a family wage, were employed within the campaigns for factory reform.

Yet in many ways Gray and McClelland are exceptions as male historians taking gender analysis into the subject area of labour history, for exposing the gendering of language has been an approach taken much more consistently by feminist historians. It could certainly be usefully applied much more systematically over the terrain of British labour history. For example, by exploring the particular circumstances whereby an apparently gender-neutral term, such as unemployment, or a gender-neutral demand, such as the right to work, were gendered by British socialists,⁵⁶ enables us to learn something about the nature of socialism itself. Similar exercises could be undertaken in relation to ranges of working-class politics and trades as well as leisure activities and community and familial interactions.⁵⁷ In the past feminist historians have been more concerned to reveal the ways in which 'woman' was understood,⁵⁸ but many of the same techniques can be used to explore the normative male and masculine identities.

52 P. Joyce, 'Refabricating Labour History: or, from Labour History to the History of Labour', *Labour History Review*, 62, 2 (1997), 147–152.

53 A. Clark, 'Gender, Class and the Nation: Franchise Reform in England, 1832–1928', in: J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 230–253; A. Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 62–88. See also her 'Manhood, Womanhood and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790–1845' in: L. Frader & S.O. Rose (eds), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996), 263–279.

54 S.O. Rose, 'Respectable Men, Disorderly Others: The Language of Gender and the Lancashire Weavers' Strike of 1878 in Britain', *Gender & History*, 5, 3 (1993), 382–397.

55 R. Gray, 'Factory Legislation and the Gendering of Jobs in the North of England, 1830–1860', *Gender & History*, 5, 1 (1993), 56–80.

56 See K. Hunt, 'Fractured Universality: the Language of British Socialism Before the First World War' in: Belchem & Kirk (ed.), *Languages of Labour*, 72–74.

57 See for example, J. Lawrence, 'Class and Gender and the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 630–652.

58 See for example D. Riley, *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989).

Initially, some feminist historians were concerned about the way in which masculinity could be historicized. As Joy Parr has noted, this was based on 'the early emphasis within these studies on the diversity among men rather than the privileges of dominance shared by men'.⁵⁹ It is certainly possible for labour historians to analyse the making of men's identities in terms of class and the labour process whilst overlooking or marginalizing the role of gender. Indeed it was John Tosh's view in 1994 that up to that point little connection had been made in historical studies between masculinity and patriarchy.⁶⁰ What is clear is that a gendered labour history has to recognise that workers do not only exist in the workplace and that understandings of what made 'real men' was as much about their role as fathers and husbands as workers, and that this process occurred in the home and at leisure as much as at work or at political meetings.⁶¹ Indeed as Pat Ayers has shown in her study of masculinities in inter-war Liverpool, the family is a key site for the construction and maintenance of masculinity and male reciprocity outside work is as important to affirming male identity as relationships within the workplace. But she also reminds us that

In the North End of Liverpool between the wars, the components which came together to form a collective masculine identity were fluid, could be contradictory, and were not, in an individual sense, necessarily subscribed to by all men. They could vary over time, spatially and within particular labour market contexts. Nevertheless, the understanding of what comprised masculinity was in any one locality or situation or at any one moment in time, universal. More importantly, the privileges which attached to ownership of a male identity were, for the most part, immutable.⁶²

Her conclusions suggest the potential riches for labour historians in exploring the making of masculine identities at particular moments and in specific trades and places, let alone in the informal and formal politics of the working class.

In addition Susan Kingsley Kent has shown us in *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640–1990*⁶³ that gender is not just an essential tool in any micro-study but can enable the reconfiguring of a much broader history. Drawing on the scholarship of many feminist historians, Kent has produced a history of Britain over three and a half centuries, and in so doing shows how labour historians could incorporate gender into their own areas of study. For following Joan Scott,⁶⁴ Kent applies a clear understanding of what constitutes gender. It

59 J. Parr, 'Gender History and Historical Practice', *The Canadian Historical Review*, 76, 3 (1995), 367.

60 Tosh, 'What should historians do', 67.

61 See P. Ayers, 'The Making of Men: masculinities in interwar Liverpool', in: Walsh (ed.), *Working Out Gender*, 68; A. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty. Working-class Cultures in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 1992).

62 Ayers, 'The making of men', 79.

63 S. Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640–1990* (London, Routledge, 1999).

64 J. W. Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986), reprinted in: R. Shoemaker & M. Vincent (eds), *Gender and History in Western Europe* (London, Arnold, 1998), 42–65.

serves as one of the most fundamental and vivid ways by which relations of power can be articulated and mobilised in any given society at any particular time. It acts to represent relationships of power that seem entirely unrelated to men and women: relationships between monarchy and parliament, for example; or between middle-ranked people and aristocrats; or between imperial Britain and its colonies. Utilizing images of masculinity and femininity in this way very often has an impact on how men and women are perceived by themselves and by society as a whole, and on the social relations they have with one another.⁶⁵

Gender, understood in this way, is everywhere and is not dependent on the presence of women, individually or collectively. It is in this sense that gender is always relevant to the study of labour history, whether or not this is recognised by labour historians.

Joan Scott observed in 1986 that ‘gender has been seen as antithetical to the real business of politics ... [P]olitical history – still the dominant mode of historical inquiry – has been the stronghold of resistance to the inclusion of material or even questions about women and gender’.⁶⁶ In as much as labour history deals with formal and informal politics, so these observations could also apply to this particular form of history. Indeed Scott is often the only gender historian to be cited by male labour historians but her advice is rarely heeded. So in the noisy British debates on ‘class’ and the linguistic turn, which reverberated through labour history in the 1990s, Scott was often the only feminist historian to be referred to. But her radical challenge was rarely acknowledged and even less often taken up.⁶⁷ Her notoriety amongst a certain sort of British labour historian whose primary interest was the making of the English (sometimes British) working class was that she had challenged, as Catherine Hall put it, ‘two of the kings of labour history, E.P. Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones’.⁶⁸ Like Hall, many British feminist historians reacted in a different way to Scott than their fellow labour historians. Hall argued

We did not need post-structuralism to develop gender as a category of analysis – rather it emerged out of years of work both with texts and in consciousness raising groups. We needed a new analytic term, a concept which had the power to counter class without being reducible to sex. In *Family Fortunes*, for example, published in 1987, Leonore Davidoff and I used gender conceptually to mean the social organisation of relations be-

65 Kent, *Gender and Power*, xi.

66 Scott, ‘Gender: a useful category’, 58.

67 See Joyce, *Visions of the People*; J. Belchem, ‘A Language of Classlessness’, *Labour History Review*, 57, 2 (1992), 43–45; D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, ‘Social history and its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language’, *Social History*, 17, 2 (1992), 165–188; J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, ‘The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language – a reply’, *Social History*, 18, 1 (1993), 1–15; P. Joyce, ‘The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: a Note of Response to Mayfield and Thorne, and Lawrence and Taylor’, *Social History*, 18, 1 (1993), 81–85; J. Vernon, ‘Who’s Afraid of the Linguistic Turn? The Politics of Social History and its Discontents’, *Social History*, 19, 1 (1994), 82–97; N. Kirk, ‘History and Post-Modernism’, *Social History*, 19, 2 (1994), 221–240.

68 J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988); C. Hall, ‘Politics, Post-structuralism and Feminist History’, *Gender and History*, 3, 2 (1991), 208.

tween the sexes and argued that, thought of in this way, gender is a constitutive element in all social relations. Similarly it could be suggested that feminists did not need Foucault to understand that power operates on many sites, or post-structuralism to understand that historical writing was a male centred form of knowledge. It is vital to remember and insist on the different ways in which theoretical work can develop as part of a political practice.⁶⁹

In her discussion of Scott's work Hall also raised another issue which is important to labour history but also which engaged those who sought to create a gendered political history in the 1990s, and that is the issue of agency. As Hall concluded, 'While fully aware of the discursive fields which construct meaning in our lives I still want an emphasis on 'we' acting, on us being present and active in our own making'.⁷⁰

The debate on structure and agency within labour history might have seemed a little tired by the 1990s, but historians interested in understanding women's relationship to politics and citizenship were revisiting these issues in new ways. Some were influenced by the work of Habermas⁷¹, for whom the public consisted mainly of readers of the printed word and members of voluntary associations. This notion of the public helped historians exploring women's relationship to politics before female enfranchisement. So, for example, Kathryn Gleadle, Jane Rendall and Angela John in the recent volume edited by Amanda Vickery, *Women, Privilege and Power*⁷², extend the definition of the public sphere of politics to include the supposedly 'private' world of family connections and friendship networks. Here they are following in the footsteps of Liz Stanley's thought-provoking demonstration of webs of friendship which showed all sorts of connections between women activists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷³ Others have been as influenced by thinking through the constraints on ranges of women's agency given the pervasiveness of the ideology of separate spheres, particularly in the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ These debates have particularly influenced the flourishing revisionist history of the British women's suffrage movement, which has raised among other issues: the political relationship between the local and the national; the processes by which an

69 Hall, 'Politics, Post-structuralism and Feminist History', 209.

70 Ibid, 210.

71 See J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989). For a range of responses see C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992).

72 A. Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power. British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2001).

73 See L. Stanley, 'Feminism and Friendship in England from 1825 to 1938: the Case of Olive Schreiner', *Studies in Sexual Politics*, 8 (1985), 10–46. See also another exploration of the relationship between public and private practice in P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990).

74 See Hall & Davidoff, *Family Fortunes*. For responses to this important work see A. Vickery, 'Historiographical Review: Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383–414; H. Barker & E. Chalus, 'Introduction' to H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London, Longman, 1997), 1–28.

individual's politics develop over a lifetime; the anatomy of the difficult relationship between the labour and the socialist movement and women's suffrage; men's support for women's suffrage; the street politics of the suffragettes⁷⁵ – all of which have direct resonances for and could inform a gendered labour history.

It was also through persistent questioning of the assumptions, strategies and personal practices of Victorian and Edwardian suffragists, that the interplay between gender and race was revealed. Again there are possible lessons here for a more inclusive labour history which acknowledges and explores the interrelationship between race on the one hand and both class and gender on the other, within a Britain framed by its place at the centre of a vast empire. Vron Ware explored the British women's movement in the context of imperialism in her *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* as did Antonia Burton in her *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915*.⁷⁶ In so doing they revealed many tensions within the idea and practice of sisterhood, which might be suggestive for studies which draw on the notion of fraternity. Clare Midgley began her extensive work in this area with her study of the British women's anti-slavery movement and she has taken this forward to explore 'imperial feminism'.⁷⁷ Others, such as Sandra Holton, have taken these sensitivities and questions into their studies of the British women's suffrage movement.⁷⁸ But clearly these questions do not end with women's enfranchisement and various feminist scholars have been opening up the study of white women, race and imperial politics in interwar Britain and beyond.⁷⁹ Britain still does not have a history equivalent to the controversial *Creating a Nation*,⁸⁰ the attempt by Australian feminist historians to write a 'raced' and gendered history of their country. Such an attempt to de-centre the dominant narrative of the making

75 For example: J. Hannam, "I Had not Been to London": Women's Suffrage – a View from the Regions', in: J. Purvis & S.S. Holton (eds), *Votes for Women* (London, Routledge, 2000), 226–245; K. Hunt, 'Journeying Through Suffrage: the Politics of Dora Montefiore' in: C. Eustance, J. Ryan & L. Ugolini (eds), *A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History* (London, Leicester University Press, 2000), 162–176; S.S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986); Hannam & Hunt, *Socialist Women*, chap. 5; A.V. John & C. Eustance (eds), *The Men's Share? Masculinities and Male Support and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920* (London, Routledge, 1997); J. Lawrence, 'Contesting the Male Polity: the Suffragettes and the Politics of Disruption in Edwardian Britain', in: Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*, 201–226.

76 V. Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London, Verso, 1992); A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

77 C. Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: the British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, Routledge, 1992); C. Midgley, 'Anti-Slavery and the Roots of 'Imperial Feminism'', in: C. Midgley (ed.), *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998), 161–179.

78 S.S. Holton, 'From Anti-Slavery to Suffrage Militancy: the Bright Circle, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the British Women's Movement', in: C. Daley & M. Nolan, (eds), *Suffrage and Beyond. International Perspectives* (Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1994), 213–233.

79 For example, B. Bush, 'Britain's Conscience on Africa: White Women, Race and Imperial Politics in Inter-War Britain' in Midgley (ed.), *Gender & Imperialism*, 200–223.

80 P. Grimshaw, M. Lake, A. McGrath, & M. Quartly, *Creating a Nation: 1788 to 1990* (Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1994).

of Australia by foregrounding gender and race maybe an ambitious place to start for Britain. Is British labour history ready to try?

The way forward?

Joan Scott said back in 1987: ‘Among labor historians, attention to “gender” has acquired a certain legitimacy, although it has nothing of the fashionable status of “language”. Some labor historians, acting on a kind of popular front mentality, now place gender (along with race) on the list of variables they acknowledge as important but don’t have time to study; class, after all, is still the issue that really counts. Others, rejecting gender as a useful category, do refer to women (or note their absence or exclusion) as a gesture of sympathy or solidarity, but with little interest or attention. Most, however, ignore gender entirely, insisting either that it is absent from their sources or that (unfortunately) women played only a minor role in the working-class politics that mattered.’⁸¹ These observations applied as much to British labour history as the American variant but the issue for labour historians in the 1990s was how much did they want to revise their practices and approaches to working-class history.

Ten years later, John Belchem claimed optimistically that ‘With the decentring of class, labour historians now readily acknowledge the multiplicity of identities on offer at an individual and collective level. Continually contested, re-defined and re-packaged, such identities are neither mutually exclusive nor randomly adopted’.⁸² Yet it was to American labour history that he was forced to turn for his examples – ‘Here American labour history points the way forward, highlighting the complementarity of ethnicity, gender, generation, class and ‘whiteness’ in the construction of Americanisation from the bottom up’.⁸³ Yet none of these were examples of gender history. As there *are* plenty of examples, this suggests a certain myopia when it comes to looking for outside stimuli to help in the reconfiguring of a British labour history which can deal with the interrelationship of a range of different identities in a variety of historical settings. In this brief survey I have tried to show some of the aspects of gender and women’s history in the 1990s which could contribute to this process, but only if labour historians read more widely and take a few more risks as they frame their questions and formulate their projects.

81 J.W. Scott, ‘On Language, Gender and Working-Class History’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 31 (1987), 2.

82 J. Belchem, ‘Reconstructing labour history’, *Labour History Review*, 62, 3 (1997), 319.

83 *Ibid*, 320.