

Women and Work: Assessing Canadian Women's Labour History at the Millennium

Joan Sangster

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of historical writing on Canadian women and work exploring the way in which feminist challenges to the masculinist story of class formation altered the contours of working-class history. Our scholarship on women's working-class history is related to the broader trends in Canadian labour and feminist politics as well as emerging international trends in social theory and historical interpretation.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie l'évolution des écrits historiques sur les Canadiennes et leur travail en explorant la manière par laquelle les défis féministes à l'histoire masculine de la formation des classes ont changé les contours de l'histoire de la classe ouvrière. Notre connaissance sur l'histoire des femmes de la classe ouvrière est reliée aux tendances plus importantes dans les politiques sur le travail et sur le féminisme ainsi qu'à l'apparition de tendances internationales dans la théorie sociale et l'interprétation historique.

In 1996, the Canadian Labour Congress sponsored a report on "Women at Work," which told a discouraging tale. Since the 1970s, much of the job growth for female earners has been in the poorly-paid service sector, and the number of female multiple job holders has increased over 300 percent, with women often reluctantly taking on part-time work. Young and visible minority women suffered higher rates of unemployment, with only 20 percent holding down full time, full year jobs paying more than \$30,000 a year (compared to 40 percent of young, visible minority men). The wage gap based on gender has narrowed to approximately 19 percent, but perhaps only because of the overall reduction in male wages, not necessarily a sign of progress for working people.¹

These trends are the inevitable consequences of globalization and restructuring, the creation of a "McJobs" economy, and the agendas of neo-liberal governments unsympathetic to labour rights. As political economists have shown, in the process of global restructuring and adjustment, gender matters. Freeing up the market, government deregulation, and an erosion of the social safety net have had disastrous effects on the well-being of women workers. Not only are jobs less secure, but women are increasingly involved in a combination of formal and informal (e.g., home-based labour), as

well as housework, and new household strategies are needed for survival, with women inevitably assuming an intensified load of paid and unpaid labour.²

Asking the question "how did we get here?" political economists often take a long historical view, from the Second World War on, arguing that the breakdown of the Fordist compromise between labour and capital,³ and the inability of labour to counter the assault on its freedoms must be analyzed as a historical product of both economic forces of capital accumulation and the decisions, actions, and failures of labour. Although pessimism runs much deeper in the United States, where union membership has fallen dramatically, Canadian unions are not immune to a malaise in militancy, even if our numbers are healthier. A key question in these debates, however, may be underdeveloped: in the years since the Second World War, what was the relationship between an increasingly feminized labour force, and increasing female union membership, and the troubles of labour? Or was there one? Is it possible that increasing numbers of public sector female unionists and a new grass roots militancy on the part of women has injected energy into a troubled trade union movement that would otherwise be even more demoralized?

If such historical questions are crucial to understanding the present, it is unfortunate that the study of class relations has become less central to feminist academic inquiry than it was twenty years ago. In part, this is the result of the integration of class analysis into other areas of feminist writing, such as the history of crime, sexuality, and immigration history. Also, other important political issues, such as gay and lesbian liberation, colonialism, and self government for the First Nations, have emerged in academic debate, productively broadening our analysis of oppression and exploitation. Nevertheless, there is unmistakably less concern with class as a central political issue or with the labour movement as an potential engine of feminist politics. As historians, we too need to ask "how did we get here?" exploring our attempts to create a feminist working-class history, asking where our analytical strengths and weaknesses have been, and importantly, how our scholarly work has been shaped by broader political trends, from feminist theory to labour organizing. This paper will briefly examine whether, and how, we have written women into the story of Canadian class formation, particularly since the renaissance in women's and labour history in the 1970s. How have we wrestled with the connectedness of gender, class, ethnicity and race; how have our interpretive strategies changed over time; and how have both politics and contemporary social theory challenged and complicated the project of a feminist working-class history?

Certainly, our past efforts were often partial, only inching towards an inclusive and complex understanding of class: there were weaknesses in our work that we recognized at the time, and those we appreciated in retrospect. Class and gender analyses sometimes chafed uneasily against each other; race and colonialism were inadequately addressed, to note only two problems. Yet, as we face a new century, it is important to recognize the important insights achieved and the way in which the story of class formation was incrementally re-drawn, as well as critically examine the gaps, flaws, and problems that still remain in our attempt to create a feminist working-class history.

EARLY CHALLENGES

Canadian labour and women's history were revitalized in the 1970s, stimulated by insurgent political movements, the democratization of universities, and the resulting influx of a new generation of youthful students, including more women, into institutions of higher education. The New Left and student radicalism, a resurgence of interest in social history and Marxist writing, Quebec's Quiet Revolution, and the civil rights and anti-war movements all fostered new interest in the history of workers' and socialist movements. Overlapping, but also distinct from the Left, was a rejuvenated women's movement, which sparked new attention to women's past. The introduction/manifestos of some of the first books in North America on women's labour history, such as *Women at Work: Ontario* and *America's Working Women*, proudly announced these political roots as positive stimuli to scholarly work.⁴

What came to be called the "new labour history" emerged in the 1970s, combining a focus of the so-called "old" labour history on the study of trade unions and the politics of labour - especially labourist and CCF politics - with new attention to the social, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of working-class experience, and in radicalism located outside of social democratic politics. Influenced by neo-Marxist and socialist-humanist writings, the new labour history, with its clarion call to study all facets of working-class life, changed the terrain of Canadian historical writing.⁵ In French Canada, two distinct emphases emerged, one exploring the conditions of working class life, the other, labour institutions and radicalism. And of course, Quebec historians, unlike English ones, were centrally concerned with the relationship of the working class to the nation and nationalism.⁶

The characterization of old and new labour history based on the "object of study" was always inadequate, if not inaccurate. The real debates centred on political sympathies and theoretical dispositions, with a social democratic oldguard defending a supposedly neutral and pragmatic history of moderate union politics, and the neo-Marxist newguard embracing Left politics and a wide variety of neo-Marxist theories.⁷ Significantly though, feminism and gender figured little in these early debates. It made its way into this

contest when it was introduced as evidence that class was a problematic category of analysis by conservative critics of the new working-class history. Since the working-class was fractured by different experiences based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and region, they argued, class was obscured and a unitary class consciousness lacking.⁸ Some echoes of this critique are still heard today, voiced by some like-minded labour historians, or even those influenced by post-structuralist theory and identity politics.

American historians often claimed that labour and women's historians existed as "two separate tribes,"⁹ and there were initially inevitable tensions between the two, because women's history, by its very definition, assumed gender to be the central defining category of historical analysis, while for labour history, class was the definitive analytic framework. Trying to create a gendered working-class history, or a women's history centrally informed by class and race, has proven to be far more difficult than we envisioned. However, neither the study of class formation, nor the term "working-class history" needs be an ethnocentric, masculinist endeavour: both can be transformed over time.

For the first decade, even longer, it is true that both the old and new labour history tended to ignore women working for wages, and women's reproductive, unpaid labour. Undeniably, many of the dominant paradigms used in labour history, such as industrialization, proletarianism, unionization, and the labour process tended to cast working men in leading roles. As Sonya Rose has argued, a long-standing ideological investment in "separate spheres," a remnant of nineteenth century ideology, but incorporated into Marxism and the social sciences, lingered on in twentieth century analysis of the (male) public world of production and the private (female) world of family, nurturing, and unpaid work.¹⁰ Moreover, the tendency to study masculine, not feminine experiences of work continued through the 1980s, and arguably even into the 1990s, as numerous studies were done of large industrial unions and of metalworkers, bushworkers, steel workers, sailors, and miners.¹¹ Filling a gap Canadian historiography, these were still important works, and by the late 1980s some at least gestured towards the need to explore the masculinity of workers and the family relations of

working-class life.

A feminist impulse to integrate women into working-class history emerged almost simultaneously with the new labour history, stimulated by the concurrent development of feminist theory and politics. Feminist critiques of labour process theory, of a traditional emphasis on skilled work and male-dominated unions, on the neglect of women's reproductive and unpaid work, even of the masculine periodization of working-class history, were developed by historians sympathetic to a marriage of feminist and class analyses. These critiques were international in their orientation; Canadian feminists drew productively on Anglo-American scholarship and theory, though Americans generally remained largely unaware of Canadian historical writing.

This was never a project limited to the academy. There were important political stimulants to this academic dialogue/critique, perhaps stronger ones in Canada than in the United States, for Canadian political traditions encompassed more vibrant democratic socialist traditions, and a more concerted socialist influence on the women's movement of the 1970s.¹² First, women's and working-class historians often shared overlapping experiences, especially within academe, as outsiders and political advocates who did not see the need to hide behind a mask of "historical objectivity." There was a common desire to question the unstated political assumptions about what was deemed important in historical research, and a desire to employ history to make radical connections to the present. "Whose history" and "whose nation," they asked, does mainstream history represent and defend?¹³ Second, there were common themes and challenges in our research, as both groups sought out the history of marginalized, less articulate historical subjects, exploring themes such as exploitation, resistance, consciousness, and ideology. Third, the new working-class history provided an important opening for feminist perspectives by rejecting - at least in rhetoric - the emphasis on formal labour institutions, and advocating the study of the family, community, and leisure, even if this approach was stronger in English than in French Canada. Moreover, because Canadian women's history, as it emerged, did not focus only on "articulate, white middle-class" women such as social reformers,¹⁴ but encompassed

a parallel interest in working-class women, wage work and labour organization, there was fertile, receptive ground for a dialogue about gender and class. Fourth, and very significantly, Canadian women's history and labour history were plugged into international theoretical debates, which in the 1970s and early 1980s often centred on a new hybrid, "Marxist-feminist" theory. There were innovative debates and counter-debates as attempts were made to address the relationship between feminism and socialism. Prompted by these discussions, scholars explored the role of capitalism and patriarchy in shaping the sexual division of labour, the relationship between the realms of reproduction and production, especially vis à vis women's domestic labour, and the interplay of economic structure and ideology in shaping class and gender inequality.

Linked to theory was praxis: these debates both stimulated and reflected a reawakening of the Canadian Left, as groups tried either to revitalize the socialist traditions of the New Democratic Party, or set up new Marxist-Leninist Left parties. However small, the latter had a significance beyond their numbers, and this had repercussions for academic thought and endeavours. The women's movement was also engaged in discussions about socialist-feminist praxis, searching, as Linda Briskin put it, for a "historically specific analysis of capitalist patriarchy...looking at the multiplicity of relations of power based on class, race, ethnicity and gender."¹⁵

The engagement among politics, theory, and scholarly writing was not without contradiction: relations between the women's movement and feminist scholars were sometimes strained, and the Left and labour were certainly not synonymous. Nonetheless, this political climate did have an important effect on the questions explored by historians, and on the vitality of feminist and class analyses. Moreover, historians were not alone: similar agendas preoccupied Canadian sociologists and political economists whose work became a crucial stimulus to historical explorations of class in an increasingly interdisciplinary academic milieu.¹⁶ Working women and trade unions, then, were seen as an important research area and a crucial field of political action for a larger group of academic/activists,¹⁷ a preoccupation that was to change in years to come.

This political context would not survive the 1980s unscathed as the labour movement was increasingly challenged by neo-liberalism, Left politics dissipated, and scholarly priorities changed. Yet, it is wrong to juxtapose an early socialist-feminist nirvana with quick decline into academic indifference. During the 1980s, the contours of Canadian working-class history expanded positively, if unevenly. Ironically, as labour began to experience severe assaults on its freedoms, women's labour history began to flourish. Even if a gendered history of class formation remained incomplete, there were significant shifts in the story. Pushed and buoyed by feminist theory and organizing, a "new, new" labour history was more likely to take women into account, altering the earlier masculinist story of work.

Two parallel processes were taking place. On the one hand, women's stories were integrated into the dominant themes in working-class history and, on the other hand, some reflective assessments of the field began to argue for shifting the paradigms altogether, using new perspectives and creating syntheses that moved away from the conceptual subordination of gender to class. Alice Kessler-Harris' call to see gender, like class, as a "historical process," and to emphasize the "reciprocal and changing relationships" of work, household, and community was symptomatic of this shift.¹⁸

Canadian scholarship staked out certain areas of strength, which altered over time. Initially, concerns with the sexual division of labour, the processes of unionization, labour, and the Left, the relationship between middle class reformers and working class women, and the family economy were apparent. Given the central interest of the contemporary women's movement in challenging a seemingly entrenched sexual division of labour, the desire to historically deconstruct occupational sex typing was an understandable focus for early labour historians. The emergence of the industrial system, domestic work, and many "feminized" occupations, such as teaching, nursing, or clerical work were also examined by researchers; in Quebec, the question of feminized professions was especially prescient because of the simultaneous interest of feminist historians with the Roman Catholic Church's effect on women's lives.¹⁹ The relationship of women and the labour movement to state legislation and policy,

especially with regards to protective legislation and welfare state provision, was gradually added to these priorities, with political economists and sociologists making major contributions to scholarship.²⁰ Class and cultural differences between working-class and middle-class women, particularly in the era of the suffrage movement, were also a concern. Biographies of female labour leaders were seldom written, but collective pictures of the activities and ideas of women involved in union work, labour politics, and the Left were attempted, with some attention not only to women wage earners, but also to women who organized as auxiliary members, consumers, and supporters of radical causes linked to women's daily domestic labour.²¹

A recurring dilemma was how to correlate the story of paid work and unpaid household labour, with the latter often ignored in labour studies. Nonetheless, historians broke new ground, by probing the family economy as it altered over time, showing how both children's work and that of married women were consistently important to family subsistence, even if they did not take the form of waged labour.²² Connected to explorations of the family economy and the reform movement was the concept of separate spheres, which some historians used, not to describe a reality shaping women's lives, but to depict an ideology, and often a contradictory one, obscuring the overlapping relations of women's private and public lives.²³ Yet, as one feminist critic noted in the 1980s, there was a grain of truth in the view that working-class history was implicitly guided by materialist concepts, though discussion of gender sometimes veered off into assumptions that gender roles were ideologically constructed. Both categories, along with ethnicity and race, needed more sophisticated theoretical integration.

Another dilemma in this early writing was the tension between themes of oppression and resistance. Those creating a feminist labour history were not only trying to integrate new feminist understandings of oppression with analyses of class exploitation, but they also had to avoid both a top-down emphasis on oppression, and a singular emphasis on women's resistance. French Canadian feminists found themselves countering the claim that they had overemphasized the patriarchal victimization of working women, supposedly

obscuring other stories, including the "economic improvement" in women's lives over the early twentieth century.²⁴ Early writing did not, however, simply juxtapose "cut-out" working-class victims and heroines;²⁵ it attempted to explore economic structures and dominant ideologies, while also understanding (and it thought it could) working-class women's consciousness. Building on this work, later studies explored, more fully, the complex processes of accommodation and resistance, structure and agency, the creation of a more fractured subjectivity of working-class women.

The strategy of blending women into existing concerns of working-class history was later derisively referred to as "adding women and stirring," implying that research on women was grafted onto masculine models inattentive to the complexities of gender. Although this is unnecessarily pejorative, there was some truth to this characterization. Women were integrated into themes such as unionization, strikes, the workplace, and political parties. Fewer studies offered more imaginative or holistic approaches, turning the interpretive paradigms of labour history upside down, attempting a more integrative picture, encompassing domestic and paid work, community and culture, as did some American and British works, though by the 1990s, more community studies were certainly trying.²⁶ Also, while much was gained from interpretations of the cooperative family economy, the dark side of family life, namely conflict and violence, was less often explored, until a few studies opened up the question of wife battering.²⁷ And the links between sexuality and work, as well as explorations of working-class sexuality, remained underdeveloped until feminist, and gay and lesbian studies sparked new interest in this area, producing significant research in the 1990s.²⁸

Yet, arguably, we could still use some more add women and stir studies! Save for a major study of the United Auto Workers (UAW),²⁹ we have few, if any, book-length studies exploring women and gender in the emergence and consolidation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions. We still need major studies of retail and service workers, an increasing presence in the modern workforce, while agricultural and domestic workers are often ignored

in the period between 1920 to 1970. And the latter would offer more attention to the ethnic and racial differences in women's experience of work as women of colour often found domestic service the only job open to them in these years. Indeed, the tendency in labour history to focus on industrial work reinforced an emphasis on white as well as male workers. Women's experience of events such as the Depression; the transformations in white collar work and unions such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in the post-1960s period; women's long-standing role in the underground economy; the racialization of female occupations with changing immigration policy after the 1960s: all these, and more, need exploration.

Moreover, many of these later twentieth century studies would help shed light on the recent era of Fordist decline. If historians have become less interested in studies of class formation, or in the state, the same may not be true of feminists in other disciplines. Political economists, for example, are exploring the gendered nature of re-structuring and globalization, asking whether a social democratic presence in Canada after the Second World War changed labour's relationship to the state, and what feminist-labour alliances have achieved, or lacked. Still offering an important place to an analysis of capital, this research will rely heavily on historical perspectives, as well as cross national comparisons. Detailed historical research could be the building blocks for important insights into current dilemmas.

Over the last decade, those committed to creating a feminist labour history have faced new political and theoretical challenges. First is the ongoing dilemma of negotiating the histories of two national solitudes. Quebec labour history is a story apart, shaped by a history of Catholic unions, strong state interference in labour issues, different patterns of union mobilization (especially after the Quiet Revolution), and the more recent persistence of radicalism in large, public-sector unions sometimes sympathetic to nationalist political parties. As historical work has shown, women workers in Quebec shared similar experiences of exploitation and unionization with English Canadian workers, in industries such as textiles, garment making, even in occupations such as teaching. However, the influence of the Church on family life, the distinct French culture and language of workers in a

province for many years dominated by Anglo capital, the state's different approaches to labour regulation, and especially the intensification of a nationalist identity over time have helped to make Quebecoise workers' experiences distinct. What seems incontrovertible is that political trends will continue to divide the histories of English and French Canadian women workers, and that the decline of a Left preoccupation with the Quebec question, even current indifference to Quebec, may lead, unfortunately, to less and less interest in writing and talking across these borders by feminist labour historians.

Those committed to transforming Canadian working-class history by injecting women's stories into the master narrative have also faced other challenges. Scholarly interests have shifted dramatically since the 1970s. One shift came with the call to study gender history, rather than women's history. From the beginning, women's historians noted that the study of women was a relational project connected to the larger re-mapping of the social history of men and women, even if the immediate goal was to concentrate on women. However, the notion that gender as a category of analysis, rather than a partial, limited focus on women, was a preferable approach was embraced by some who claimed that asking questions about "women alone"³⁰ inevitably presupposed the answers and isolated women from other social relationships, in a sense essentializing them.

This debate had the positive effect, especially in working-class history, of encouraging comparative studies of men and women and their communities, of exploring the social construction of masculinity, of "gendering" men, that is, holding up men's work, leisure, family lives, sexuality, and organizing to a gender analysis. The ideas have been usefully deployed in studies that range from union politics to left ideology to the welfare state.³¹ From another perspective the claims made for the superiority of a gender analysis over a focus on women created an undesirable hierarchy, relegating women's stories to the "partial," and women's history to a less sophisticated endeavour. In a field which emerged so dominated by studies of metal workers, in which women's stories were too often marginal, it seems more productive to embrace both women's and gender history as equally viable and

valuable.³²

Influenced by the political mobilization of women of colour and by the emergence of critical race theory, historical studies of women's work also began to struggle with the way in which race and colonialism fundamentally shaped women's paid and unpaid labour. Because of the connection between ethnicity, work, and radicalism, and the cultural distinctions of French Canadian working-class life, early studies were not completely inattentive to culture and ethnicity.³³ By the 1980s, significant studies of women workers explored the integration of class, gender, and ethnicity, often contributing as well to immigration history.³⁴ This research explored women's work culture and organizing, their coping strategies, agency, and resistance, and the way in which ethnicity and culture generated alternative versions of women's work and female militancy, distinct from the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture or a middle-class idealization of domesticity.

More than ethnicity, race remained undertheorized in Canadian working-class history. Important investigations, looking, for example, at Caribbean workers, Native, and Asian fisheries employees,³⁵ and initial comments on the privilege of whiteness and work, have broken this mould, but more sustained research and critique are needed. Positively influenced by the vitality of the First Nations writing and organizing, Canadian studies have pioneered important explorations of colonialism and First Nations labour. Connecting gender relations and work, traditional subsistence and wage labour, these studies are attentive both to culture and the power relations of colonialism.³⁶ Still, trying to work out the "simultaneity" of race, gender, and class relations remains one of the more difficult tasks facing labour historians.³⁷ Drawing on the insights of American debates about race and whiteness may be useful in this regard, though we should also be wary of simply carbon copying race theory from one national context - with very different labour histories - to another.

Perhaps most worrying by the late 1980s (and not unconnected to some calls for gender studies) were the shifts in both politics and theory that have led to direct challenges to the concept of class analysis, and especially to a rejection of materialist and marxist theories. The academic retreat from class and the decline of the political

and intellectual Left were intimately connected. By the late 1980s, the political, organized Left was in disarray and depression, though in terms of women's role in the labour movement, contradictions abounded. While more women were moving into trade union offices, and autonomous women's organizing was increasing the visibility of feminist, sexual orientation, and race issues, labour militancy was on the decline, as the labour movement took on a defensive mode. Nor was it clear that on substantive, transformative issues, labour was willing to fully embrace a feminist agenda.³⁸

It was not simply "the logic of capitalism," or the fall of communism which led, on an international scale, to a disinterest in class and socialism by many scholars. The intellectual Left, increasingly bunkered down comfortably in the academy, abandoned a vision of social transformation in which the mobilization of the working class played a central role. Indeed, in the international literature, always a key influence on Canadian social history, many influential critics announced that class had been "deconstructed," that it was politically inadequate as a tool of analysis, and that marxism in particular had proven reductionist and determinist in its analysis of society. The labour movement, others added, had proven itself inadequate to the task of mobilization, unable to offer a broadly-based egalitarian vision for the oppressed. Instead, hope was placed in the politics of the new social movements, in which an array of radical agendas - with only some critical of capitalism - were to be nurtured. A more dispersed commitment to social change, drawing on the politics of identity, rather than the politics of class, was emerging.

The intense political pessimism about class was linked to the influence of a variety of post-structuralist theories, some of which stood in direct antithesis to historical materialism. Many scholars turned their attention to the discursive, representation, and the power of language and narrative structure in our reconstruction of our past. Others embraced Foucauldian concepts concerning power/knowledge, subjectivity, and governmentality. While exploration of the extensive debates between marxism/materialism and post-structuralist theories is impossible here, it is important to note that tensions between the two

exist, and that these differences have important consequences for the writing of women into Canadian working-class history.

On the positive side, some post-structuralist theories encouraged attention to the power of language, the symbolic, and cultural representation, as authors explored, for example, the iconography of labour or the discursive constructions of expert discourse on working women. Moreover, the scepticism that class analysis explained "all" - surely an extension of earlier socialist-feminist debates - led to the exploration of important markers of identity, ignored in early working-class history; scholars directed their attention not only to gender, but to religion, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Foucault's legacy also led to productive discussion of how power operates to create marginalized and oppressed populations, how the law, social policy, and the criminal justice system reinforced rather than challenged the dominant norms.

A perspective in which class is never an objective reality; in which all identities are linguistic or cultural constructions, fluctuating, unstable, indeterminate; in which power is always decentred; in which everything - skill, wages, even the economy - is created in the realm of meaning, will have a destabilizing effect on a history which traditionally takes as its *sine qua non* the economic and social reality of class divisions and class conflict. While some feminists have seen this turn of theory as positive, liberating working-class history from its overriding obsession on class, other socialist and materialist-feminists are deeply critical, arguing that the political outcome of some post-structuralist thinking is to reinforce neo-liberal ideology of the new global capitalism rather than challenge it. The perils of fixating on narrative and the text, of abandoning causation and systems of power, of a relativism which leads to the corollary that "morally and politically, anything goes,"³⁹ have been rehearsed by a number of critics. Suffice to say that, for Canadian working-class history, older socialist-humanist approaches, stressing both historical materialism and human agency will be seriously tried and tested by these new theoretical trends.

The political cynicism about the Left and labour, combined with new trends in social theory have led to some disinterest in more traditional

themes in working-class history (such as wage work and unions), a far more serious problem in Canada than the United States, since the critical mass of those doing women's labour history was already small here, a situation which has also circumscribed productive intellectual dissension. However, it is worth noting that many recent works in women's labour history, though they attempt to draw on some post-structuralist ideas, do not fully embrace the linguistic or Foucauldian projects of more decidedly postmodern international scholars.⁴⁰ Some of the older assumptions of working-class history - a materialist understanding of the sexual division of labour, the notion of a real lived experience - have not been totally abandoned.

The results can be curious. Past works, especially of the Marxist-humanist variety, are often criticized, yet without a clear vision of what is replacing them, besides an expansive pluralism devoted to embracing all points of view.⁴¹ There may be a certain theoretical confusion we are now faced with, and need to debate, for not all theoretical stances can be easily accommodated under one feminist umbrella. There remain tensions, if not differences, between post-structuralism and materialism, and we cannot dismiss the serious charges by socialist-feminist theorists that the abandonment of class by much post-structuralist theorizing is misleading us into a cul de sac of particularist, pluralist, and agnostic apathy at precisely the point when rampant capitalist assaults on women's work and the labour movement are occurring.

Age-old questions, such as those concerning the tenacity of the sexual and racial division of labour, the unionization of women, the relationship between unpaid and paid labour, and women's political and consumer organizing, have not been abandoned by feminist labour historians in the last decade. And why should they be? As wage labour becomes more precarious for many Canadian women, as paid and unpaid work combine in new, intensified ways, these questions should remain central to our political and academic lives. However, there is no doubt that over the last thirty years, the writing of working-class history has changed, shaped by feminist, socialist, and labour organizing, as well as by changes in the historical profession and the oscillations of academic theory. The project of transforming our understanding of

class formation was profoundly altered by the course that feminist and socialist debates took, in theory and in praxis, inside and outside the academy. Our analyses of class formation, though certainly not thoroughly gendered or raced, no longer start from the assumption that "labour" automatically connotes white men working for industrial wages. While the earliest debates in Canadian working-class history centred very little on gender, more recent works of the last decade are far more likely to incorporate either a gender analysis, or discussion of women's lives.

Perhaps more than working-class history, feminist history is no longer positioned completely on the margins of academe and, within the profession, new topics of importance, such as colonialism, have also garnered more attention, broadening our analysis of power and oppression - something we should hardly lament. At the same time, the Left's retreat and the post structuralist intellectual moment have also undermined many of the foundational concepts of working-class history. With historical materialism in retreat, a central concern with class is likely to follow. Class analysis has been replaced by class "identity," with the latter created through discourse, analyzed as a text, unstable and contested. Even scholars writing about class have pronounced the "end of class as a historical subject!"⁴² In this climate, scholarship that starts with class as a category, structure, or even an enduring social conflict, is cast into some uncertainty.

It may be inevitable that each new wave of scholars ambitiously embraces a worldview in which their new research looks back disparagingly on the inadequacies of past efforts. Despite this reflex reaction, it is worth reviewing what was actually written, contextualizing our own production of history, identifying its theoretical blindspots and empirical gaps, but also recognizing the shifts in perspective and topic which were consciously taken in order to create a feminist analysis of class formation. However imperfect those efforts were, this project may be currently imperiled, more than anything else, by a political and academic climate of indifference and theoretical confusion. Just as the labour movement faces a precarious future, those of us trying to re-write the working-class past face a precarious project. Perhaps we can take hope, however, in the first part of that well-worn materialist maxim (shorn of its masculinist language): *people make their own history*, though not in conditions of their own choosing. Our continued commitment to researching the lives of working-class women, combined with women's political praxis - particularly the increasingly dynamic activism of working and union women themselves - may offer up the most optimism in face of the retrograde political and economic forces we face at this new millennium.

ENDNOTES

1. On average, women earn 18.8 percent less than male wages. Canadian Labour Congress, *Women and Work* (Ottawa, 1996), 2-3.
2. Patricia Connelly, "Gender Matters: Global Restructuring and Adjustment," *Social Politics* 3/1 (1996): 12-31.
3. Fordism refers to a "system based on mass production and mass consumption, in which collective bargaining, Keynesian policies and the welfare state sustained an uneasy accord between capital and labour," Jane Jenson and Rianne Mahon, eds., *The Challenge of Restructuring: North American Labour Movements Respond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) 3-5. On the US see Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (New York: Verso, 1988); on Canada, Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to the Social Contract* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993).
4. Janice Acton et al., eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1974); Linda Gordon, Rosalyn Baxandall and Susan Reverby, *America's Working Women* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).
5. Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986) chap. 11.
6. Joanne Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and Quebec," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1990): 149-67.
7. For some examples of opposing views in this debate, see, on the one side, Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* LXII/2 (1981): 141-68 and

- David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (1981): 95-112. On the other side: Greg Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1995), chap. 4 and Bryan Palmer, "Listening to History Rather than Historians," *Studies in Political Economy* 20 (1986): 47-84.
8. David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture, 95-112.
9. Richard Oestreicher, "Separate Tribes? Working-Class and Women's History," *Reviews in American History* 19(1991): 228-9.
10. Sonya Rose, "Gender and Labour History: The Nineteenth-century Legacy," *International Review of Social History* 38 (1993), Supplement: 145-62.
11. For a very few examples, see Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario. 1900-80* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Laurel Sefton McDowell, *Remember Kirkland Lake: The History and the Effects of the Kirkland Lake Goldminers Strike, 1941-2* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada. 1883-1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada. 1820-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989).
12. On the Canadian movement, see Linda Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret Macphail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988).
13. L. Kealey, R. Pierson, J. Sangster and V. Strong-Boag, "Teaching Canadian History in the 1990's: Whose 'National History Are We Lamenting?'" *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Summer, 1992): 129-31.
14. For the counterview see K. Dubinsky et al, in Iacovetta and Valverde, eds., "Introduction," *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xiv and for a similar, recent generalization, Nancy Christie and Michael Gavreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada 1900-40* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 116.
15. Linda Briskin, "Identity Politics and the Hierarchy of Oppression," *Feminist Review* 35 (1990): 103-4.
16. For just two examples, Pat and Hugh Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards a Feminist Marxism," *Studies in Political Economy* 10 (1983): 7-43. Pat Connolly, *Last Hired, First Fired* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979).
17. For example, Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1983); Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," *New Left Review* 141 (1983): 51-71; Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1979).
18. Alice Kessler-Harris, "A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis and the Question of Class," in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problem of Synthesis* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1989), 217-34.
19. The following lists denote token examples. Graham Lowe, "Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office," *Labour/Le Travail* 10 (Autumn, 1982): 11-37; Marilyn Porter, "She Was Skipper of the Shore Crew: Notes on the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland," *Labour/le Travail* 15 (Spring 1985): 105-23; Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving it Together: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-50," *Labour/Le Travail* 7 (Spring, 1981): 113-26; Jacques Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire' et syndicalisme 'collectif': une interprétation socio-technique des conflits ouvrières dans deux industries québécoises, 1880-1914," *Labour/Le Travail* 19 (1987): 49-88; Marta Danylewycz, Beth Light, and Alison Prentice, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth Century Ontario and Quebec case study," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 16/31 (May 1983); Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, *Les femmes dans la société Québécoise: aspects historiques* (Montreal: Boreal Express, 1977).
20. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934- 40," *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (1990): 77-104; Jane Ursel, *Private Lives, Public Policy: 100 Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992); Susan Prentice, "Workers, Mothers, Reds: Toronto's Postwar Daycare Fight," *Studies in Political Economy* 30 (1989): 115- 41; Margaret Little, "Claiming a Unique Place: The Introduction of Mothers' Pensions in BC," *BC Studies* 1005/106 (1995): 80-102.
21. An exception of a biography is the recent Andrée Lévesque, *Scenes de la Vie en Rouge: L'époque de Jeanne Corbin, 1906-1944* (Montreal: les éditions du remue-ménage, 1999). Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left 1900-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Sylvie Murray, *A la Junction du mouvement ouvrier et du mouvement de femmes: La Ligue Auxiliaire l' Association Internationale des Machinistes, Canada 1903-80* (Montreal: RCHTS, 1990); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-60* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989); Mona-Josée Gagnon, "Les Femmes dans le mouvement syndical Québécois," in Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, *Les Femmes dans La Société Québécoise* (Montreal: Boreal, 1977) 145-68; Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Lucie Piche, *Si le travail m'était conté... autrement. Les travailleuses de la CTCC-CSN: quelques fragments d'histoire, 1921-76* (Montréal: CSN, 1987).
22. John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child Labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth Century Urban Ontario,"

- Labour/Le Travail* 18 (1981): 163-88; Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993); Veronica Strong-Boag, "Discovering the Home: the Last 150 Years of Domestic Work in Canada," in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women's Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985), 35-60; Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980).
23. Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the Nineteenth Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994).
24. This is one part of the critique in Fernand Ouellet, "La question sociale au Québec, 1880-1930: la condition féminine et le mouvement des femmes dans l'historiographie," *Histoire sociale/Social History* XXI 42 (1988): 319-45. For a reply see Micheline Dumont, "Histoire des femmes," *Histoire sociale/Social History* XXIII (1990): 117-28.
25. Karen Dubinsky, et al., "Introduction," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xvii.
26. For example, Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
27. Judith Fingard, "The Prevention of Cruelty, Marriage Breakdown and the Rights of Wives in Nova Scotia, 1880-1990," *Acadiensis* 22/2 (1993): 84-101; Kathryn Harvey, "To Love, Honour and Obey: Wife Battering in Working Class Montréal," *Urban History Review* 19/2 (1990): 130-40.
28. Kathryn Macpherson's excellent chapter on sexuality in *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-90* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996); Steven Maynard, "Horrible Temptations: Sex, Men, and Working Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890-1935," *Canadian Historical Review* 78/2 (1997): 191-235; Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-75," in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Re-Thinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto: Oxford, 1997), 402-23.
29. Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada 1937-79* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). See also Julie Guard, "Fair Play or Fair Pay? Gender Relations, Class Consciousness and Union Solidarity in the Canadian UE," *Labour/Le Travail* (1997): 149-77.
30. Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 79/3 (1995), 362. For similar claims see Lykke de la Cour, Cecilia Morgan, and Mariana Valverde, "Gender Regulation and State Formation in Nineteenth-Century Canada," in Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 163-91; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991).
31. Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Cecilia Danysk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1920* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1995). Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-94* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999).
32. For this debate see Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Reassessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history* 3/1 (1995): 109-21 and responses by Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, Karen Dubinsky and Lynn Marks, *left history* 3/2 and 4/1 (1996): 205-48
33. Robert Harney, "Montreal's King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4 (1979); Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1832* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979); Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990).
34. Varpu Lindstrom Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of the Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada, 1890-1930* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-39* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992).
35. Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: The Lives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991); Agnes Calliste, "Canada's Immigration Policy on Domestic Workers from the Caribbean: The Second Domestic Scheme," and "Women of 'Exceptional Merit': Immigration of Caribbean Nurses to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 6.1 (1993): 85-102.
36. Alicia Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Jo-Anne Fiske, "Fishing is Women's Business: Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Women and Men," in Bruce A. Cox, ed., *Native Peoples / Native Lands: Canadian Inuit, Indian and Métis* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), 186-98.
37. Roediger quoting Terra Hunter in "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History," *International Review of Social History* 38 (1993): 127-43.
38. Linda Briskin, "Autonomy, Diversity and Integration: Union Women's Separate Organizing in North America and

Western Europe in the Context of Restructuring and Globalization," forthcoming, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22/5. My thanks to Linda for offering me a pre-publication copy of this paper.

39. Norman Geras quoted in Keith Jenkins, "Introduction," *A Postmodern History Reader*, 23. For a few critiques, see Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); for feminist materialist ones, Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1996); Rosemary Hennessey, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

40. For example, Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Late Nineteenth Century Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

41. For the view that academic scholarship has moved "beyond" such dichotomous debates see Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, "Introduction," in Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *On The Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 10; and for a critical note on the triumph of liberal pluralism, Bryan Palmer, "Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein's Meaning," *Canadian Historical Review* 80/1 (1999): 676-87.

42. John Hall, "Introduction," in John Hall, ed., *The Reworking Class* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4.