

Condition and Consciousness

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“Condition and Consciousness: An International Conference on German Women in the 18th and 19th Centuries” took place at the University of Minnesota on April 15-17, 1983. The conference brought together scholars from the fields of social history and literature. One of the major themes participants kept returning to was work and the perception of work done by women in the past. There was an interesting juxtaposition of papers on work patterns as indicated by structural and quantitative data, with others centered on accounts by women of their work and its meaning to them. There was also a juxtaposition of class positions presented since both working-class and middle-class women were discussed.

Jean Quataert presented some results of her research about the gender division of labor in the home weaving industry in Saxony. Rosemary Orthmann presented some of the earliest analysis from her project on working-class women in Berlin. There were several papers on the entry of middle-class women into the paid labor force: Patricia Herminghouse’s analysis of professional women writers and James Albisetti’s account of women’s entry into the professions in late 19th-century Germany.

A number of provocative literary analyses examined various kinds of texts for their assumptions concerning the place and meaning of work in women’s lives. Renate Möhrmann, for example, looked at the portrayal of working women in women’s fiction; Kay Goodman described the reception in various political milieux of the “revisionist” ideas of the Swedish writer Ellen Key.

There were also a number of papers that touched on the use of literary sources in working-class history. For example, M.J. Maynes described a set of working-class women’s autobiographies written at the turn of the century; John Fout pointed to the social-historical uses for a survey of working women’s conditions in turn-of-the-century Vienna.

I have indicated the papers and topics of most concern to ILWCH newsletter readers. I have left out a number of quite interesting analyses of other aspects of German’s women’s social and literary history that were also touched upon during this very lively meeting. We do intend to publish the proceedings in the near future, but any inquiries can be addressed to me.