

BOOK REVIEWS

KESSLER-HARRIS, ALICE. *Gendering Labor History*. [The Working Class in American History.] University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 2007. 374 pp. Ill. £14.99; doi:10.1017/S0020859009000054

Alice Kessler-Harris is one of the most influential US historians of women, gender, and labour. Her book, *Gendering Labor History*, presents an overview of her work in the form of seventeen essays, divided into four sections: Women and the Labor Movement; Gender and Class; Labor and Social Policy; and New Directions. Together these essays, originally published between 1975 and 2004, show the development of her intellectual agenda – from including women in trade-union history, to arguing for the reciprocal interaction of gender and class, developing a gendered analysis of US social policy, and, finally, broadening the scope toward a global history of women’s wage labour.

The first four essays take us back to the 1970s, when the focus was on recovering the history of women workers and including them in labour history. The well-known opening article, “Where Are the Organized Women Workers?”, immediately demonstrates Kessler-Harris’s ability to identify key issues and change the prevailing perspective. Instead of wondering why women were not organized – “given a chance, women were devoted and successful union members” (p. 23) – she asks how women were kept out of trade unions. The answer to this question lies in efforts by employers to prevent women from unionizing, as well as in the lack of support from male unions and outright hostility toward women workers, often expressed in the form of “the home-and-motherhood argument” (p. 25). In clear language, Kessler-Harris writes that “the AFL [American Federation of Labor] was a conservative force whose relatively privileged [white, male] members sacrificed the larger issue of working-class solidarity for a piece of the capitalist pie” (p. 25). The three other essays in Part 1 also discuss the complexities of women’s relation to and role in the labour movement, including an article about trade-union activist Rose Schneiderman, who later became the president of the Women’s Trade Union League, a “middle-class ally” of women workers. “Rose Schneiderman and the Limits of Women’s Trade Unionism” describes the process through which Schneiderman came to believe that protective labour legislation for women was the only way effectively to ease the lives of women workers.

Many of the issues discussed in the first section return and are developed further in the course of the book. Among them is the role of masculinity in shaping identities, union membership, and social policies, as explored in “Treating the Male as ‘Other’: Redefining the Parameters of Labor History”, and “Measures for Masculinity: The American Labor Movement and Welfare-State Policy during the Great Depression”. Kessler-Harris’s sophisticated analysis shows that gender divided the working class against itself: male workers focused on preserving their sense of masculine independence and pride and their right to earn a family wage, rejecting “women’s work” as competition, and, in concert with middle-class reformers, supported government policies intended to keep women in the home. In the 1930s their notion of masculinity also led AFL-organized male workers to reject a proposal for a new federal unemployment insurance programme because government support was seen as an attack on men’s “free labour”. “American trade unionists believed ‘socialistic’ programs that created universal entitlements available to all would undermine manhood by creating dependent and cringing males” – a different position from the one supported by European labour (p. 239).

Thus, these essays convincingly demonstrate the central role of gender in the history of the US labour movement as well as in shaping social policy, with the acceptance of

protective labour legislation for women, but not for men (until decades later), as the key example. The essays also illustrate that the turn to gender among feminist historians such as Kessler-Harris was not a rejection of class *per se* but “an attempt to understand it in its full complexity” (p. 7). Kessler-Harris sees gender as relational and as a process shaping conceptions of work and home and the aspirations and goals of both men and women. By asking questions about gender and class in their mutual interaction, she is able to argue – convincingly, in my view – that protective labour legislation served to “sustain the patriarchal family – to reconfigure what we came to call the ‘gender order’ in the interests of maintaining male power” (p. 9).

The essays in Part 3 further examine the reasons for women’s continuing inequality in the labour market, with a particular focus on social policies. The first of these essays, “The Just Price, the Free Market, and the Value of Women”, historicizes the notion of comparable worth. “The Debate over Equality for Women in the Workplace: Recognizing Differences” reviews the various feminist positions with regard to sexual difference: from taking it as the cornerstone of social policy (the earlier social feminist advocacy of protective labour legislation for women) to rejecting it in favour of an abstract notion of men’s and women’s sameness, and hence right to equal treatment. Kessler-Harris’s (perhaps utopian) conclusion is that the earlier feminist assertion of women’s difference may deserve a new look, not to reconstitute women as a “special group” but to create a situation in which childcare and the running of households become “shared or socialized” (p. 207), the responsibility and concern of all citizens rather than of women alone.

Focusing on the case of night-work laws, “The Paradox of Motherhood” asks why, although concern for the welfare of mothers dominated the earlier discussion about protecting women workers, the US had no maternity leave or other forms of maternal protection for women in the workplace until 1993. The answer shows that women’s citizenship rights were different from men’s. Whereas men remained excluded from protective legislation but had their “right to work” recognized, women were “protected” in the name of a homogenizing and essentializing notion of motherhood – for the sake of the nation which needed healthy children, and with or without their consent. “A rhetoric that reduced women who worked to inadequate mothers left little room for policies that might allow mothers more rights at work” (p. 235). In other words, the idea of motherhood was protected, but women who became mothers had no job protection or other rights that might have helped them to combine wage work and mothering.

Part 4 again charts new terrain. The first article here proposes a redefined notion of “economic citizenship”, which, in the view of Kessler-Harris, should encompass a whole range of economic and social rights necessary to support acceptable labour-force participation, including adequate housing and universal healthcare. Economic citizenship redefined would allow men and women “genuine choices – to work at home, in caring jobs, or in the marketplace” – without the gendered conflict that we have seen for so long and with “the possibilities for both men and women to enjoy caring and wage work” (p. 269). Finally, “Reframing the History of Women’s Wage Labor: Challenges of a Global Perspective” is a welcome attempt to discuss the role of gender in a global history of women’s paid work. The piece ends with a number of essential questions, fitting for such a broad topic that we are only beginning to study.

The essays are preceded by a thoughtful introduction, in which Kessler-Harris reflects upon what has been achieved in labour history but also on the limitations and continuing challenges. Inspired by E.H. Carr, she argues for a history “fostered by the challenging events of the day” (p. 3). The entire book demonstrates that her work has very successfully managed to do just that: it is history that speaks to contemporary issues, with women’s continuing inequality in the labour market and its consequences for women’s social status and citizenship as the central issue. Her closing text is a beautiful autobiographical narration (from 1999, republished in 2001) in which she outlines her intellectual and political

trajectory and pays tribute to the scholars who have most influenced her. She also asks how we can continue to contribute to the broader goals of social justice and equality in a time of increasing global inequality, a weakening of progressive forces, and an ever more powerful role of the market (this was written years before the current major economic crisis and US President Barack Obama's election of course). Strikingly, though, she ends on an optimistic note, in line with the overall tenor of the book. There is not only the strong belief that history is important in shaping our aspirations and visions, but also that it can contribute to a better world for all.

Reading this book was for me a rich and rewarding experience. Alice Kessler-Harris's profound knowledge and impeccable scholarship, her ability to ask crucial questions, the continuing interaction with contemporary activism and political concerns, and a moral integrity that shines through all the essays combine to make this an important and powerful book. By highlighting the impressive contributions of one of the main feminist labour historians of our time, *Gendering Labor History* simultaneously underscores the amazing progress that has been made in complicating and diversifying labour history, the book's meta-narrative. Because the essays illustrate the various steps that the process of gendering labour history has gone through, the book will also be very useful as a teaching tool. Even if "the notion of labor history retains its male framework", as the author puts it in the Introduction, the field is now unthinkable without gender, and Alice Kessler-Harris has been in the forefront of creating that change.

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DARLINGTON, RALPH. *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism. An International Comparative Analysis.* [Studies in Labour History.] Ashgate, Aldershot (etc.) 2008. xiii, 323 pp. £60.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859009000066

Syndicalism, sometimes also known as revolutionary syndicalism, was a specific independent current within the international workers' movement, reaching its peak in the years before World War I and rising briefly again – albeit overshadowed by the rise of communism – during the postwar revolutionary crisis. For a long time it was primarily analysed on the national level, with the French *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) serving as a paradigm for other, considerably less successful, movements. The Spanish *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), in contrast, mainly appeared as a sub-category of anarchism.

This has substantially changed since the publication in 1989 of Wayne Thorpe's study of the international network of syndicalist organizations.¹ It focused on the efforts to form an independent Syndicalist International. This was followed by a volume of essays, which Thorpe co-edited with Marcel van der Linden, consisting of twelve national case studies that examined the concrete activities of the various organizations.² This multi-lateral approach brought to light commonalities as well as differences in the causes behind their development, their achievements, and the effects of these movements, including the reasons for their decline. More recently, a new comprehensive two-volume history of the International Working Men's Association has appeared, an international organization that

1. Wayne Thorpe, *"The Workers Themselves": Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht, 1989).

2. Wayne Thorpe and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Aldershot, 1990).