

Society for French Historical Studies

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The Society for French Historical Studies met in Lexington, Kentucky, in March 1997 for its annual look at the state of scholarship in French history. As has been the case in recent years, labor was a marginal category in a conference increasingly devoted to cultural history. However, some of the more interesting work occurred at the intersection between histories of class and the new perspectives provided by scholarship on gender and the construction of identity.

Participants in a panel on “Gender, Work, and Politics in the *Longue Durée*: The Shifting Boundaries of Women’s Work” confronted why women’s work was valued and remunerated at a rate less than the work of men. Traditional explanations attribute the discrepancy to the ways in which women have participated in production: Female workers lacked formal training or skills, and their work patterns were unstable or truncated because of family obligations. Social scientists have improved upon such simplistic explanations with complex, well-researched monographs and more imaginative syntheses in the last two decades. Joan Scott, however, has challenged social historians to examine problems of causality more closely, suggesting the concept of gender as an analytical tool with which to assess long-term changes that are still understood largely as economic phenomena.

The three panelists responded to Scott’s call by addressing how women challenged the constructed gender boundaries of women’s work in France. Carol Coats examined the cultural assumptions shaping women’s work and women’s family roles during the sixteenth century. Comparing notarial records from the middle of the century to a set of records from 1610, she showed that widows saw the boundaries of their authority and autonomy increasingly constricted—a pattern supported by other local studies of widowhood during the period. Widows were increasingly denied access to traditional economic activities as well, such as hiring male apprentices. Clare Crowston assessed women’s guild systems in Paris during the eighteenth century, examining how gender assumptions contributed to the ways in which they were created and regulated. Economic competition

between tailors and seamstresses played a crucial role in the regulation of the seamstresses' guild, as Parisian authorities regulated their markets and the kinds of products seamstresses could produce. Crowston did a fine job of showing how economic conditions and gender constructions combined to motivate the authorities' responses.

Sue Grayzel's contribution to the panel examined the gendered boundaries of public and private spheres during World War One in France. She argued that women's political and public status was not elevated by their public work during the war. Instead, the theme of female laborers' "temporariness" overrode economic or political emancipation. Women's "real" role was defined as biological, and much to the delight of political economists and pronatalist policymakers, women returned home after the war. The gender boundaries that had been blurred owing to wartime exigencies crystallized again as women continued to be defined as mothers.

Papers assembled for a panel on "Working Men, Women, and Children in the Streets of Paris: Class, Gender, and Age, 1830–1848" followed similar explanatory strategies. They explored how class identities are gendered, but focused on the discursive processes involved. They, too, did not emphasize economic positions or wages as explanatory categories, instead attending to ways in which government and literary accounts portrayed the social dangers of workers, women, and lower-class children. The dialectics of discourse received far more attention than the dialectics of economic conflict. Each author also showed how official narratives about the lower classes expressed various contradictions as they sought to reconcile *laissez-faire* economic policies with restrictive social control measures.

Judith DeGroat's paper, "Working Women and the Streets of July Monarchy Paris," discussed legal prosecutions of women workers who were arrested during social disturbances. Such prosecutions indicate how discourses of "domesticity" and "respectability" were used to discredit the economic and political actions of women. The women arrested at strikes and riots were usually condemned or exonerated on the basis of reports about their domestic lives. According to DeGroat, government officials were suspicious of "public women" because they crossed the social and cultural boundaries that were supposed to separate women from men. These boundaries were constantly reaffirmed at legal proceedings in which both the police and the female defendants repeated the cultural discourse of gender ideologies. In the case of women, the language of "respectability" was more important than the language of "free-market" economics.

Casey Harison's paper ("Looking for Work, Looking for Trouble at Paris' Place de Grève, 1830–1848") analyzed the police reports on workers who gathered each day in the French capital to find work. The police emphasized the social dangers of persistent unemployment and sometimes called for government intervention in the labor market, even as they defended the assumptions of free-market economic ideology. Police agents defined the identities of workers, stressing the distinctive problems of

groups such as construction workers or migrants from the provinces. Harrison argued that the police narratives constructed images of a dangerous laboring class that could best be controlled by government action to assure food supplies and regular employment. The discourse of laissez-faire economics thus collided with an older police discourse of social control, but in both cases government officials expressed cultural expectations and linguistic stereotypes about workers. Police narratives helped to create the dangerous, “militant” worker.

Cat Nilan’s paper, “The Paris Street Urchin and the Counter-Discourse of Popular Identity in Bayard and Vanderburch’s *Le Gamin de Paris* (1836),” examined a popular Parisian play to show how images of vagabond children circulated in French society. There was much cultural anxiety about youthful street urchins, but one of the most popular theatrical productions of the era portrayed a *gamin* who arranged a marriage between his sister and her upper-class lover—suggesting the possible permeability of social boundaries. Nilan argued that *gamins* were sometimes viewed as objects for social control and sometimes as symbols of resistance to social barriers or social control. It was apparently much easier to overcome class conflict in a theatrical production than in the streets of Paris, but the popularity of the play may well indicate a widespread desire to resolve class conflicts and escape social anxieties. Representations of youthful *gamins* thus lead to more general themes in nineteenth-century French accounts of class, social control, and social rebellion.

These three papers demonstrated the kinds of new insights that can emerge from a cultural and linguistic approach to the social history of the laboring classes. Despite the historical value of these insights, however, they left open the question of how we should connect the dialectics of discourse to the dialectics of economic and state power to develop new histories of modern social relations.

Another paper, however, sought out such connections by viewing class identities from the point of view of consumption rather than production. Judith Coffin’s “Political Economy of Needs and Desire” looked at social-scientific research on standards of living and working-class consumption, concentrating on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, one of the first to try to theorize the relationships between class cultures and spending patterns. The paper considered the dramatic change in social-scientific views in the post-World War One period and the relationship of those changes to “Fordism.” It underscored, though, the limits of this reconceptualization. And it concluded by asking about the origin and larger political meanings of French hostility to gathering cost-of-living data and carrying out market and consumer surveys. It was one thing, Coffin argued, to look (as did Frédéric Le Play) at working-class or peasant families as members of social groups that were basically incommensurable, but another to look at purely individual variations and to measure them against a norm. (The paper linked closely to debates among Gary Cross, Michael Rustin, and Victoria

de Grazia in "Scholarly Controversy: Time vs. Money," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 43 [1993]:2–47.)

The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism: Labor, Politics, and Culture

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The history of Italian-American radicals in the United States is contradictory, even improbable. Other ethnic groups—Germans, Jews, and Finns, for example—gave widespread support to radicals and their organizations. Italian-American communities, characterized by conservatism, deference, and a strong focus on family as the primary social unit, seem a less hospitable location for radical activity. Yet, Italian-Americans from Sacco and Vanzetti to Vito Marcantonio are notable in the annals of American radicalism. These radicals, their relationships with their communities, and their role in American politics and culture have been poorly understood.

"The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism," held on May 14 and 15, 1997, in New York City, was a welcome effort to change this amnesia. The conference was organized by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY) and the CUNY Graduate School. Over 350 historians, sociologists, and other scholars of Italian-American politics, culture, and the arts from the United States, Canada, and Italy participated. They explored the importance of Italian-American radicals in labor and politics and their influence on working-class culture, film, and literature.

Rudolph Vecoli (University of Minnesota) confronted some of the paradoxes of Italian-American politics in his keynote address. Although Italian immigrants played a decisive role in the early trade union movement, their notions of working-class solidarity were "eroded and fragmented by the action of internal and external forces" that turned them toward a more conservative politics. In particular, the Italian-American Left confronted substantial sympathy among Italian Americans for Mussolini and fascism during the 1920s and 1930s. This, and not just a traditional, family-oriented culture, thwarted radical efforts to sink deeper roots