

Reviews

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Gail Braybon

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THE POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD

Jane Lewis

Croom Helm 1980 £10.95

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'Our purpose is not simply to rediscover women, nor only to counter blatant masculine bias (though both tasks have their satisfying and illuminating moments).

The knowledge of women which is gradually being compiled forces us to rethink and re-analyse the existing approach to history. Men and women interact as part of the same world; redressing the balance must therefore mean asking new questions of the whole, seeing sources in a new light, making new syntheses'.¹

This is how a recent article in *History Workshop Journal* described the impact of feminist history. Two books about women in the early twentieth century provide excellent examples of the role of feminist historians in re-invigorating the discipline as a whole.

Gail Braybon's *Women Workers in the First World War* provides an important challenge to labour histories of the period in several important respects, not least in her theoretical approach. She does not attempt to derive the oppression of women in any way from their class position, but states unequivocally: 'The patriarchal system coexists with the capitalist system; the



working class have always been exploited by the latter, but women have also been oppressed by men of their own or other classes in a multitude of ways'.

Other recent socialist feminist work has moved in the same direction. For example, Mary McIntosh's and Michele Barrett's work on the family wage has suggested that working class men must take responsibility for the family wage as a method of collective bargaining that has done much to oppress women and little to help the working class. However, they have stopped short of seeing patriarchy as a separate system of oppression, which is not in the last instance related to the capitalist mode of production. Ms Braybon, on the other hand, insists that patriarchal oppression cuts across class oppression. The political consequences of this — namely the isolation of working-class women from both their working class brothers and middle class sisters — are convincingly demonstrated in her historical analysis.

She also challenges the assumption that women's large scale entry into the labour force in wartime led to any long term improvement in their status. The extent of women's war work was, she argues, exaggerated. They were accepted reluctantly by employers and, with few exceptions, trades unions alike and were generally confined to semi-skilled and repetitious work. At the end of the war, they were easily driven back to the home or to traditional low paid women's work, such as domestic service and laundry work.

Women's role in the labour force cannot be separated from their 'primary' role as wives and mothers. The strength of this ideology is demonstrated both in the chapter 'Biology as Destiny; women, motherhood and welfare', and throughout the book in countless examples of employers', trades unionists' and media attitudes to women's employment — their concern with the effects of women's work on family life and their inability to reconcile the fact that women's war work, by raising their standard of living and providing mental stimulation, often made them better mothers, with the fact that 'a mother's absence from the home was automatically morally harmful.'

Ms Braybon defines her work as 'isolating one phase of a continuum' and therefore being 'relevant to the present.' It is certainly the case that many of the attitudes and problems she describes are all too familiar to us today: the use of women as a cheap reserve army of labour, the reluctance of many trade unionists to prevent this by fighting for equal pay, since this undermined the ideology of the male breadwinner, the ease with which such equal pay legislation as existed could be evaded by rescheduling the labour process so that women were never actually doing the same work as men.

¹ *Labouring Women*, by Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, Eve Hostettler, in *HWJ*, Autumn 1979.

However, I think that the degree of continuity is exaggerated. As Ms Braybon herself says, women's own expectations were raised by their wartime experience and even if men successfully imposed the status quo in employment, some gains were made. For example, the vote was won.

The stress on continuity sometimes leads the author to miss nuances in an argument which significantly shifted the terrain of struggle. For example, while it is generally true that labour women accepted women's primary role as wives and mothers, they were transforming and questioning their definition of motherhood. The following statement from the feminist B L Gutching illustrates this: 'The mother who prefers to work may have quite as much mother love, and, although clinging less to the home, may very likely have a wider knowledge of life, a keener sense of citizenship than the domesticated woman, and this possibly makes up to her children in one way what she lacks in another'. This is not just a 'defensive statement', but a re-definition of motherhood which subverts its traditional meaning and extends the arena of struggle.

It is also significant in this context that the examples of progressive labour movement attitudes, from journals like *The Communist* and *Out of Work*, all occur relatively late in the period. They could therefore be taken as examples of progress that had been made in the war years.

In this context, more attention could be paid to working women's organisations such as the Women's Labour League and the Women's Cooperative Guild. The isolation of working class women, highlighted in the book, makes these early attempts to assert their autonomy in the labour movement particularly significant. However, Ms Braybon was tragically hampered by lack of funds and access to sources, and these organisations provide sufficient material for a book in its own right.

Jane Lewis's *The Politics of Motherhood* is located more in the genre of social policy than labour history. However, like Gail Braybon's book it is written against the tradition, rather than in it. Insights from both feminist and labour history, combined with thorough academic research, lead to a convincing alternative interpretation to the more orthodox accounts of the evolution of a benevolent system of welfare services.

In her analysis of child and maternal welfare services in the period 1900-39, Ms Lewis shows that the services offered represented only a partial response to the demands of women's organisations. The political implications of the high infant and maternal mortality rates were such that the

problem had to be constantly redefined by official policy makers. Infant mortality was blamed on maternal ignorance and maternal mortality was seen as a specifically medical problem, to be solved by more medical intervention at the moment of childbirth.

This was partly a result of pressure from the medical profession, particularly from its most powerful members, hospital specialists, rather than GPs. More importantly, it separated maternal mortality from women's health in general, and evaded the directly political issues of the effects of poverty and malnutrition on the one hand, and repeated pregnancies and the demand for birth control on the other. Women's needs were met, only when they coincided with the broader economic and social objectives of official policymakers. Birth control was only granted in line with the government's 'informal' population policy — it was, significantly, available in depressed areas in the thirties — and economic assistance, in the form of family allowances, was finally given in the context of the Keynesian economic strategy adopted after World War Two.

Jane Lewis pays careful attention to the demands of women's organisations. She shows how and why one aspect of their demands, namely skilled medical attention on confinement, was singled out at the expense of better economic and social conditions and an integrated system of ante-natal and general health care. She discusses the contradictory nature of the welfare services, the fact that infant welfare centres and better medical care at childbirth were needed and welcomed by working women, but that the application of skill and expertise brought with it a loss of popular control and the disruption of local working class traditions. There is perhaps a slight tendency to romanticise the latter. For instance, the handywoman, who traditionally assisted the midwife and also helped with the housework during confinement, and was superseded by the trained and state-registered midwife, undoubtedly lacked medical skill and on balance probably did more harm than good.

Similarly, because of the need to redress the balance of those histories which stress the usefulness of welfare services, there is a tendency to overemphasise the disparity between women's demands and the services offered and to underplay the effects of working women's struggle. Women's organisations were an undoubted source of pressure on official policy, and played a part in determining the form of provision, particularly at local level. There is scope for more work in this area.

However, these are minor criticisms of an otherwise outstanding work. Both these

books are superb examples of feminist history. They combine a scholarly command of the material with the ability to 'ask new questions' of the discipline. The outcome is an exciting and informative reassessment of the period, of interest to both professional historians and socialists and feminists generally. It is unfortunate that the publisher's policy of producing only expensive hardback editions may make them inaccessible to many of the latter.

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