

# EDITOR'S REMARKS

## Concepts and Controversies

The time-honored study of workers' organizations has of late been supplemented, if not overwhelmed, by research into the history of everyday life. Has the change been all to the good? Do new pitfalls lie in wait for the unwary practitioner of the social history of working people? We hear these questions asked with growing frequency today. They have kindled intense controversies in this issue of ILWCH.

Historians of women in the modern epoch have devoted serious attention to the lives of working-class women during recent years. In doing so, they have not only challenged the male-orientation of most previous accounts of workplace struggles; but also and more fundamentally, they have insisted that a meaningful conception of class must encompass much more than just the relations of production. Moreover, enough fine research has by now been published to allow us (and even compel us) to scrutinize critically the terms in which we have cast the history of working women. Because "the family" has loomed so large in this conceptual framework, and because *Women, Work, and Family* by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott became, almost the instant it appeared, a major reference point for discussion of the working-class family in history, it is appropriate that a dispute about the use of "the family" as a focal point for the discussion of working-class women should begin with that book.

Patricia Hilden has opened the debate with a highly critical review, protesting the very act of folding women's history into family history. In her reply Joan Scott has both defended and reassessed the terms in which she and Tilly cast the question. Scott also raises the basic problem of the role of social theory in historical analysis. The debate thus started surges on through the book reviews (e.g., Kirk's critique of *Picking up the Linen Threads*) and conference reports (e.g., Judith Smith's comments on the Smith College Symposium on New England labor history). We hope the discussion continues in future issues of ILWCH, and to that end we hereby solicit other comments or reviews touching on the concepts and methods through which we explore the past experiences, consciousness, and social roles of working-class women.

Other significant areas of dispute are suggested by Tony Judt and Judith Evans, as they examine recent historiographical developments in Europe and in and about Latin America. Judt discerns in the European shift from labor to social history a crisis of Marxism, reflecting "the evening of the labor movement." He also finds there an opportunity to create a new methodological coherence and a theory which can restore to our view the role of ideas. By way of contrast, it is a

growing awareness of the social and political role of Latin American workers which, in Evans' view, has both induced a convergence of North American and Latin American styles of analysis and sharpened the theoretical tools that have shaped the new body of empirical research.

Better communication between scholars and labor activists is often urged as a means to improve both parties' understanding of what they are doing. In a provocative report on a recent New York State Labor History Conference, however, Michael Frisch expresses uneasiness about the ideological context in which the exchange is often placed, and especially about the uses made of oral history. But reports from labor history societies in the North of England, the American Southwest, and Pennsylvania's Beaver Valley suggest not only that workers are playing a growing role in the retrieval of their own history, but also that they have sometimes given their researches quite different meanings from that which troubles Frisch.

In a word, it is the creative quality of the many controversies heating up these pages that challenges us to continue and expand them in the future. Consensus may never be found in the pages of ILWCH. We hope clarity will.

D.M.