

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Society for French Historical Studies

Kathleen Alaimo

Columbia College-Chicago

The 1986 meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in Québec, March 21–22, featured several sessions concerned with labor and working-class issues.

Claire G. Moses (University of Maryland) chaired one of the most intellectually coherent sessions, “Nineteenth-Century Social Legislation and Urban Women: Cultures in Conflict.” The intended focus of the papers in this session was working-class women. As commentators Leslie Page Moch (University of Michigan-Flint) and Patricia O’Brien (University of California-Irvine) pointed out, all three papers revealed the centrality of the state as an agency for the imposition of a particular set of values.

In a paper titled “Women’s Proper Roles: Women Textile Workers and Reform Legislation,” Gay L. Gullickson (University of Maryland) examined the role of women and children in the textile industry in Rouen, Le Harve, and Dieppe through an 1837 survey which was commissioned to establish guidelines for legislation to regulate the labor of women and children in the mills. Gullickson had little to say about women but provided much information on ages (as young as four years old), wages (as low as two francs per week for children under seven years of age and not higher than eight francs per week for adolescent girls), and hours (fifteen hours per day) of child laborers. The reason Gullickson had little to tell us about women working in the mills is related to her focus on reform legislation; she concluded that no one was opposed to female labor in 1837 on moral or any other grounds but argued that there was a consensus on the need for an established minimum age and regulated hours for child and adolescent workers. Thus the law that was adopted in 1841 established regulations regarding child laborers. Women were added to the group of those considered in need of protective legislation by an 1874 law. As for women’s proper roles, Gullickson’s paper suggested that clear formulation of the domestic ideal was not yet achieved by 1841 and that we must look to the period 1840–70 for the development of that ideal.

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 31, Spring 1987, pp. 89–92

© 1987 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

Mary Lynn Stewart (Simon Fraser University) examined the conflict between the goals of factory inspectors and the needs of working women through an 1892 law regulating the work of women and children. In her paper, "Ethics in Conflict: Work Inspectors and Working Women, 1892-1914" Stewart argued that many of the regulations were ill-conceived (maximum hours but no minimum wage). Women workers objected to the interruptions caused by inspections, the imposition of fines on employers, and the prohibition against cleaning in-operation machinery because of work stoppages, lay-offs, and cuts in pay. In the context of the piece-rate pay system, the limitations on hours of work were impossible for working women to accommodate. Stewart cautioned against viewing the resistance of working women as "pre-industrial" or "primitive." Rather, she suggested that we remember the double burden women carried: work and family. Bourgeois and petty bourgeois inspectors of the 1890s could not or would not understand this double burden, and therein lies the conflict of cultures which was at the heart of the debate over protective labor legislation for women. Stewart also discussed the role of female factory inspectors who, in their own battle to achieve status within the male bureaucracy, were hampered by gender-specific restrictions on their role as "inspectresses" and by the attitudes of factory owners. One question to consider: What were the views of working women toward female inspectors?

Rachel G. Fuchs (Arizona State University), using the records of *L'Assistance Publique*, presented a sophisticated interpretation of the changing attitude of the state towards unwed mothers in a paper titled "Morality and Poverty: Single Mothers and Welfare Inspectors in Paris, 1880-1904." According to Fuchs, unwed mothers in the early nineteenth century were viewed as socially deviant and poor *because* they were immoral. By the 1860s, growing concern for the children of single mothers had led to the development of temporary aid programs. By the 1880s, the health of babies had become such an overriding concern that it resulted in a more tolerant attitude toward unwed mothers. "Marital morality" gave way to "maternal morality." Rather than seeing the cause of poverty in women's immorality, reformers began to view poverty itself as the obstacle to "proper" morals. While the primary goal of reformers was to preserve and protect babies, the auxiliary objective was to alleviate poverty and thereby change working class morals (i.e., make them more akin to middle-class values). Fuchs cited several reasons for this new attitude: the "crise de depopulation"; the strength of the centralized, bureaucratic state; the success of such interest groups as hygienists; the recognized importance of working-class women; fear on the part of reformers of either socialism or anti-republican clericalism among the poor.

Gullickson's and Fuchs's papers suggest that by the second half of the nineteenth century middle-class interest in the stage of life and especially in the special needs of infants, children, and adolescents were at the heart of much reform activity. This activity aimed at the successful socialization and physical

protection of working-class offspring, an outcome which apparently could not be left to unsupervised working-class parents.

This theme was addressed in a paper by Kathleen Alaimo (Columbia College-Chicago) in a session entitled "Youth in France since 1870," chaired by Theresa McBride (College of the Holy Cross). In her paper "Creating an 'Adolescence' for Working-Class Youth: *écoles primaires supérieures* and *oeuvres post-scolaires*, 1880–1914," Alaimo argued that new ideas about adolescence that developed at the end of the nineteenth century became the basis for extensive bourgeois efforts to guide and control the socialization and education of working-class youths. Alaimo suggested that middle-class reformers armed with physiological-psychological theories of adolescence proceeded to create a network of adolescent institutions which would deliver the bourgeois republic's message of hard work and patriotism to working-class youth. Alaimo gave special attention to higher primary schools and the *Cours d'adolescents*. Continued education with a distinct practical character and lessons in Republican *solidarité* provided the orientation for educational institutions designed for the working class. Alaimo also drew attention to the gender-specific differences in curricula for boys and girls.

A paper by David C. Wright (University of Wisconsin-Madison), "Generational Change and the Socialists of Twentieth-Century Limoges," was part of the session on French youth. Wright applied generational analysis to the shifting fortunes and shifting focus of Socialists in Limoges, suggesting that the experiences unique to a generation (i.e., World War I, the Vichy regime) as well as changes in occupational and educational status dictated the kinds of issues socialists emphasized, their degree of radicalism, and the types of programs devised. Wright's paper was rooted in generational theory as well as detailed studies of individual socialists in Limoges.

Joel Colton (Duke University) chaired a round-table session titled "Fifty Years Ago: the Popular Front." Colton opened the session by questioning whether the popular front could have been more bold in its initiatives, noting that it was not really an experiment in socialism.

Marc Lagana (Université du Québec à Montreal) addressed a much neglected question, that of the colonies. He discussed the commission established in 1936 to investigate the colonial question and formulate a new colonial policy based on the idea of "rénovation"; the commission was responsible for the collection of information about the colonies, colonists, and colonized. According to Lagana, not only did the popular front fail to deal properly with the colonial question, but also the socialists were particularly responsible for this failure.

Michael Seidman (Rutgers University) reminded the audience of the value of examining the popular front from the perspective of social history, particularly the relationship between Parisian workers and their immediate supervisors (foreman) as well as between workers and the left leadership. According

to Seidman, workers who supported absenteeism, lateness, pilfering, and wild-cat strikes were concerned with setting a slower production pace in the workshop environment. In the general discussion, Seidman indicated that he did not think the aim of the mass movement was takeover of the means of production and tentatively suggested that Blum's limited initiatives had met the demands of the workers, whose primary concern was less work.

Irwin Wall (University of California-Riverside) emphasized the constraints and contradictions which served to rein in Blum's activities. Wall suggested that Blum had neither the time, the majority support, nor the strength to carry out reforms successfully. Blum failed to embrace the mass movement because he was constrained by the *mur d'argent*, foreign policy, and austerity. Wall drew attention to what he called the spiritual connection between Leon Blum and Francois Mitterrand.

Other points made during the discussion concerned the role of the Communist party during the popular front (was it truly revolutionary?; was it deeply involved in the mass movement, particularly in '36?; what was its position on the colonial question?). Regarding the socialists' position towards the colonies, Wall suggested the socialists sought assimilation, while Lagana argued that economic development and political integration/submission were the goals.

An afternoon schedule of seminars offered a number of topics of interest to students of working-class history: "Paternalism and Class Relations in Nineteenth-Century France: New Directions for Research" led by Elinor Accampo (University of Southern California); "Popular Front Jubilee: Research Questions and Issues Surrounding the Catholic Response to the 'Main Tendue' " led by Oscar Arnal (Waterloo Lutheran Seminary) and Francis J. Murphy (Boston College); "The Search for Social Peace, 1890-1914: Solidarity" led by Bonnie Gordon (University of Arizona) and Judith F. Stone (Reed College).