

## REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

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### **Oral History and Women's History: A Conference Report**

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The International Conference on Oral History and Women's History, held at Columbia University on November 18-20, 1983, demonstrated a broad range of uses of oral materials in a number of fields in women's history. It was a strength of the conference that the connection between oral history methods and concrete research problems was kept centrally in view throughout. The most interesting sessions attempted both to delineate the unique value for historians of women's retrospective narratives, and to interpret their substantive significance. The relationship between this mode of representation of experience and historical processes was explored most systematically in discussions of papers by the Italian participants. Their more-or-less common frameworks tried to specify the ways in which women's consciousness of family, work and collective conflicts is filtered through the medium of oral testimony.

The conference opened with a review by Joan Hoff-Wilson (Organization of American Historians) of the contributions of oral history research in women's history. She affirmed the increasing sophistication with which oral materials are being analyzed and synthesized with other kinds of documents. Hoff-Wilson also noted the political and conceptual obstacles which continue to impede the proper recognition among historians of the value of women's oral history. She observed that the history of sexuality, and that of variations in the racial, economic and regional experiences of women, have been neglected in oral history research. These critical observations were echoed in the later panel session on "Race, Class, Gender and Oral History" and the final plenary, in which the importance of fostering and

presenting oral history research concerning black and minority women in North American and Europe, and women in the Third World, were emphasized. In addition, only one paper at the conference focussed centrally on sexuality, a very fine study of "Sexuality of the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, 1940–1960" (discussed below). In light of the remarks of Hoff-Wilson and others, it seems reasonable to hope that these subject areas will be given greater attention in future conferences and publications in women's oral history.

The conference papers presented over two and a half days dealt with five broad subjects: 1) women's experiences of work, and the sexual division of labor, 2) the relation between women's economic role, and family and community organization and authority patterns, 3) women's participation in strikes and labor organizations, 4) women's relation to political movements, and to extreme political repression (under fascism), and 5) sexuality and the lesbian community.

Papers about women's experiences of, and responses to, the sexual division of labor were the most numerous. It was here also that the perspective of the Italian participants was most clearly defined. In an early panel session on "Theory and Method" Luisa Passerini (University of Turin) contrasted the languages used by men and women to describe their work lives. She argued that for men a self-consciousness predominates their work ethics and orientations, involving an artisan-like quality of identification. For women, work activities are not described in isolation from other everyday life activities, especially those related to family responsibilities. These observations on gender difference in the consciousness of work were elaborated by other Italian participants.

The paper of Adele Pesce (Federazione Lavoratori Metal-meccanici) on "Work Representation and Time in Women Workers' Memories" explored the way women factory workers experience time — both real and imagined — in a different manner from male workers. The archtypical woman worker interviewed by Pesce gets through the start of her monotonous job by daydreaming about her family and children. She thinks back, with guilt, to leaving the children hurriedly in the morning, unable to linger even though one child is upset and acting badly. Chained to her shift in the factory, she feels impotent. She spins out the fantasy of a special time this evening reading stories to the children. As quitting-time approaches, however, this reverie turns into its opposite. She can only think of the drudgery of household chores which await her. The incessant pressure of her daily routine has now robbed her of control not only over her real time (spent in the factory) but even over her imaginary time (of family pleasure).

The paper of Anna Maria Rivera (University of Bari) on "Women's Work and Identity: Life Stories of Old Peasant Women" examined the disjunction between the historical reality of the work of poor rural women, the historiographical representation of this phenomenon, and the women's own subjective representation of it. She described the rigid ideological distinction between "women's tasks" and "men's tasks," and the social censure and, in the case of young unmarried women, the allegation of sexual impropriety which were attached to women's paid labor under

male supervision in the fields. These cultural attitudes did not prevent the women, however, from performing “men’s” (as well as “women’s”) tasks well and with pride, from valuing their economic contributions as family wage earners and their dignity as women, and also, from participating in peasant movements and local food riots (which were, however, quickly forgotten). But Rivera argued that the peasant women’s personal self-affirmation and collective action did not lead to an open challenge to women’s economic subordination and the sexual division of labor. Their rejection of certain social stereotypes about women, and women’s work, constituted a form of “critical consciousness,” but one that was “often incapable of expressing itself on a social level.”

The examination of women’s consciousness by Italian historians was also developed in papers on political experiences, including, “Women of the New Left of the 1950s” by Simmonetta Piccone Stella (University of Salerno) and “Italian Women in Nazi Lagers” by Anna Bravo (University of Turin). The latter paper, which was very moving, emphasized the extent to which women survivors of Nazi concentration camps, in recounting how they helped other prisoners, conversed in an everyday, nonheroic idiom. Male survivors, by contrast, spoke in epochal and tragic tones, with a pronounced awareness of the total break between their concentration camp existence and the rules of ordinary life. Beyond the valuable insights of each of these papers, it was the framework of the Italian contributions —centered around concepts of the formation and public affirmation (and denial) of women’s identities, the divergent representations of social experience through the voices of different (female or male) actors, the blurring of dividing lines in women’s lives between family and “work,” and the reformulation of the contours and meaning of the latter category for women — which enriched the theoretical resources for women’s oral history.

Many other contributions from heterogeneous points of view sparked discussions on women’s experience of work, the analysis of family structure and power, women and the left, and other topics. “Subjectivity and Working Women in London in the 1920s and 1930s” by Sally Alexander (University of London) described young working-class women’s expressions of autonomy in their dress and cinema-inspired fantasies, their envy and mockery of the world of work of men, and their ambivalent feelings toward their mothers. Some listeners questioned Alexander’s attempt to fit her rich portrait of social consciousness into Jacques Lacan’s conception of subjectivity. “Age, Generation and Change: The Impact of Women’s World War II Experience” by Sherna Gluck (California State University, Long Beach) examined the effects on daughters of their mothers’ nontraditional jobholding during wartime. It prompted questions concerning the extent to which historians using oral interviews are able to specify the discrete factors which most influence daughters’ orientations. Diverse additional studies of women’s work included papers on deskilling, urban change, legal reforms, the persistence of family farms, the role of associations of women farmers, and the workplace relationships and the migratory

patterns of domestic servants. These were written by Helen Chenut (Women's Studies Institute, Paris), Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame (University of Quebec, Montreal), Cristina Borderais (University of Barcelona), Sarah Elbert (State University of New York, Binghamton), Yolande Cohen (University of Quebec, Montreal), Dorothee Wierling (German Open University), and Diego Leoni (Scuola Media Orsi, Roveretto, Italy), respectively.

Structural analyses of women's position in family and community organization were contributed by Diana Gittins (Plymouth Polytechnic, England) and Paul Thompson (University of Essex). Gittins' "Women's Work and Family Structure: the Devon Textile Workers" documented the ways mothers, daughters, and sisters anchored a great variety of extended household arrangements and family survival strategies in the late 19th century. Gittins argued that this variety renders a normative concept of nuclear household composition, and male economic providership, irrelevant to this type of textile community. Thompson's "Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power Between the Sexes" was an extensive comparative survey of the role of economic, spatial, cultural and religious factors in explaining differences in women's position in fishing communities in different countries.

Studies by Jacquelyn Hall (University of North Carolina), Devra Weber (University of California, Los Angeles), Sara Diamond (Capilano College) and Virginia Yans (Rutgers University) explored the neglected role of women workers in strikes and unions. Hall's account of the 1929 strike in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and Weber's analysis of the 1933 cotton strike in California, focused on Appalachian women's sense of personal freedom and self-sufficiency, and immigrant Mexican women's identification with their revolutionary heritage, respectively, as factors which heightened their militancy. Diamond's "British Columbia's Women Unionists Tell the Truth" recounted the conflicts between women activists and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union leadership in the 1940s. Yans' "Memory and Consciousness Among Jewish and Italian Garment Workers" characterized the Jews she studied as historical activists, and the Italians as more passive and centered on personal relationships. Her dichotomization of attitudes along ethnic lines, and ascription of differences to European cultural traditions, precipitated a good deal of controversy.

Impassioned controversy was also generated by a panel on "Women in Politics." The paper of Meredith Tax on "The Communist Party and Women: Learning the Truth" characterized the Communist women she studied as militant organizers in public "Women's Councils," but as meek and self-sacrificing in relation to their own male leadership. Commentator Dorothy Healey questioned the general applicability of the latter description. This session was noteworthy for the presence and participation of a number of older women activists who contributed to the debate on the basis of their own political experiences. The two other papers on the panel, by Simmonetta Piccone Stella, and Valentina de Rocha Lima (Rundacao Getulio Vargas) examined, respectively, the backgrounds and personal ethics of Italian

women who organized the New Left of the late 50s, and the importance of feminism in reconstituting the personal and public identities of Brazilian women who are political exiles.

In the one conference paper which dealt with sexuality, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (State University of New York, Buffalo) analyzed shifting attitudes within the lesbian community toward the delineation of "butch" and "femme" sexual roles. They noted the paradox that the greater public emergence of a lesbian community in Buffalo in the 1950s went hand in hand with a rigidification of internal norms of sexual behavior. Subsequent discussion sought to clarify this dynamic through reference to wider political and cultural developments which affected the lesbian community in the 1950s, and to later changes in lesbian consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s.

The conference was organized by the Oral History and Research Office of Columbia University, with the cooperation of the Barnard College Women's Center. The Oral History Research Office plans to publish selections from the panel discussions (on "Theory and Methods," "Race, Class, Gender and Oral History," and "Oral History and Community History Projects") in the *International Journal of Oral History*, and other papers in an edited collection. The author of this report has benefitted greatly from discussions with Temma Kaplan and Sherry Gorelick, as well as from Sherry Gorelick's generous sharing of her extensive notes, and from the cooperation of the Oral History Research Office staff. None of these persons is responsible for the contents of the report.