

bilize a raucous and contentious public sphere,” sought to simultaneously discipline the realms of speech and labor. Silence and hard work: These were the definitive elements of social discipline in emergent bourgeois societies.

Maxwell-Stewart presented a provocative and imaginative reading of convict tattoos as a site of contestation. Normally used to identify convicts as “subjects of state power,” tattooing also served as a form of convict self-expression. But Maxwell-Stewart’s bold claim that the convicts’ texts inscribed on their own bodies served as a “challenge to the state” seemed to stretch the definition of agency and resistance to the limit.

At the final plenary session, David Phillips (University of Melbourne), a South African historian of Great Britain who lives and works in Australia, offered concluding remarks reflecting the cosmopolitanism of the conference and his own background. New vistas for Australian history had been opened up, Phillips suggested, as convictism had been recentered as part of an ongoing larger project in the global and comparative history of labor coercion, engaged in by scholars from every continent, much as the conveners of the conference had hoped. As an American historian interested in slavery, emancipation, and convict labor, the converse proved true as well; my introduction to Australian history added important new comparative dimensions to my own thinking about the dialectic of freedom and unfreedom in the modern world.

## American Historical Association Annual Meeting

*Dorothy Sue Cobble and Belinda Davis*

Rutgers University

*Teal Rothschild and Louise A. Tilly*

New School for Social Research

The history of subaltern groups took center stage at the American Historical Association’s 111th meeting, held January 2–5, 1997, in New York. Fully one-third of the 154 panels focused on the history of labor, women, or racial or ethnic minorities. Sessions spanned an impressive chronological and regional reach, covering topics from “Social Rank, Liberty, and Peasantry: New Perspectives on Central Europe in the Middle Ages” to “Downsizing in the 1990s.”

Race and gender themes also were prominent in panels specifically focused on work and unions. Deborah Gray White (Rutgers University), the featured luncheon speaker at the Coordinating Council for Women in

History meeting, offered a compelling analysis of the rise of black feminism in the 1970s taken in part from her forthcoming book, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women In Defense of Themselves*. White opened her talk with a chilling portrait of the gender ideology of the black nationalist movement and its ability to silence black women by seeing any assertion on their part as an assault on black manhood and a betrayal of the race. Because black women also felt marginalized by the white feminist movement, they formed their own organizations separate from black men and white women. White focused on one such organization, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in 1973. She detailed its distinct feminist agenda and indicated its broad and diverse base of support by reading from the letters that poured into the NBFO offices from black women across the country. White argued that although the NBFO itself disappeared, black feminism survived and gathered force, resurfacing in literature, in the trade unions, and in politics. The audience received her talk enthusiastically and an energetic discussion ensued. Questions arose over the definitions of feminism, womanism, and black nationalism. White also elaborated on the class dimensions of the NBFO and the contrast with the ideology of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

Two panels on American labor in the post–World War Two era raised a series of unresolved historical debates. The first (Campaigns for Gender and Racial Equality: Unions in Recent US and Canadian History) featured papers by Pamela Sugiman (“The Politics of Gender and Race among Auto Workers in Canada”) and Dennis Deslippe (“A Hidden Lineage of Second-Wave Feminism: African-American Women Unionists and Equal Employment Opportunity Law, 1964–1980”) with comments by Alice Kessler-Harris (Rutgers) and Joan Sangster (Trent). Sugiman, a sociologist from McMaster University, compared the “distinct histories” of black men and white women in auto employment in Canada and their “separate struggles for equality.” In contrast to those in the United States, Canadian auto plants hired few black men and virtually no black women until the 1970s. As in the United States, Canadian auto employers segregated black men into particular jobs—usually the least desirable—but they provided greater wage equality and job security to black workers than auto employers in the United States. White women in Canada experienced more “formalized discrimination” than black men, Sugiman asserted. She concluded by sketching the different responses of black men and white women to their treatment. Black men organized few campaigns for racial justice and showed little evidence of “race consciousness”; white women successfully mobilized against gender discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s and amended legislation and union policy.

Deslippe offered a revisionist account of the origins of “second-wave” feminism. He argued that “rank-and-file union women should be located at the center of second-wave feminism” and that African-American women did not see civil rights and women’s rights as oppositional but as comple-

mentary. Even within unions with poor records on race relations, such as the Textile Workers International Union, African-American women raised charges of sex as well as race discrimination, relying upon the legal avenues under Title Seven that became available after 1964.

Both commentators noted how these case studies belie the conventional view of the ineffectiveness of state remedies in combatting occupational segregation. They also drew attention to the ways in which “employers, workers, and unions” all contributed to “the construction of and maintenance of difference.” Discussion centered on the precise mechanisms of racial discrimination in the Canadian context and the evolution of women’s views of discriminatory treatment in the postwar period. Despite the explicit comparative focus of the panel, surprisingly little interest was evident in exploring what can be learned from placing national histories side by side with struggles for racial and gender equality.

A second panel, “American Labor and the Struggle for Workers’ Rights in the Post–World War Two Era,” offered presentations by James D. Rose (“‘2B or not 2B’: Workers’ Shop Floor Rights and the 1959 Steel Strike”); Michelle Brattain (“Southern Textile Workers, ‘Fair’ Employment, and White Rights”); and David Witwer (“The Rights of Union Members in their Unions: Fear of Reprisal Ends [FORE] and the Practical Effects of the Landrum Griffin Act of 1959”). Christopher Tomlins (American Bar Association) and Elizabeth Faue (Wayne State University) provided commentary.

James Rose’s paper challenged the standard portrait of a complacent, economic labor movement in the 1940s and 1950s. He traced the ongoing struggle over the meaning and enforcement of the infamous “2B” contract clause in the steel industry from the late 1940s to the 1959 Steel Strike. “2B” provided a contractual basis by which the union could resist management’s efforts to reduce the work force and intensify work effort. Management assumed that the “management rights” clause would protect them from union protests over management decisions—but arbitrators sided with the union, provoking management efforts to rid themselves of this obligation to share decision-making. They underestimated the depth of rank-and-file support for “2B” and met with defeat in a 116-day standoff in 1959.

Michelle Brattain focused on white textile workers in northern Georgia in the postwar period. She argued that despite the racial liberalism of the international union, Georgia unionists forged a class identity that equated worker rights with white rights. Unionization politicized these workers and emboldened them on the shop floor, but their newfound union power reinforced racial hierarchies in employment and bolstered the Tammany wing of the Democratic party.

The third paper moved the discussion from white rights to dissident rights. David Witwer traced the history of the dissident movement within Local 282 of the Teamsters International and concluded that the

1959 Landrum-Griffin provisions bestowing democratic rights on union members had little practical effect on protecting dissidents at the local level.

Elizabeth Faue asked how these papers help us “re-vision the history of the postwar working classes” and whether they support the traditional trope of a labor movement in free fall from the “promise” of the 1930s. She offered constructive suggestions to each of the panelists and called for additional research on how the dominant sector of the work force, that is, service and clerical workers, understand their rights. Christopher Tomlins answered Faue’s question in part by posing a paradigm for post-World War Two labor history that rejects assumption of a unitary economic identity formed in production. Particularly in this period, Tomlins asserted, historians must be attentive to “cross-cutting cleavages” and multiple identities. Brattain’s paper, for example, reveals the role of racial supremacy in supporting a vibrant union culture and has “corrosive implications” for a labor history framework that assumes a “single line of cleavage.”

A panel chaired by Howard Rock on “Race and Class Politics of Antebellum US Artisans” began with Michael Kaplan’s discussion of “Working Men, Party Men, and the Politics of Violence in Antebellum New York.” The city’s men of wealth, he suggested, were the crucial connection between local and federal politics. This group of individuals denounced the wealthy and championed the working classes while simultaneously vying for elite resources. This in turn gave each “player” a familial role as “one of the boys.” Public displays of morality and violence could transform the authority of the magistrates. Seeking to shape and manipulate popular culture was a key component of local politics, since it could unlock access to resources and improve the material situation of the working classes as a whole. Anthony Gronowicz, speaking on “Artisans and the Racial Politics of New York City’s Democratic Party,” attributed the city’s hostile racial climate to divisions in the labor market and to the racism of the Democratic party. The Democrats were committed to maintaining inequality generally and to defending slavery more specifically. This pervasive ideology sparked race riots, which ironically reinforced both the racism and the local political power of the party.

Michele Gillespie moved the discussion from New York City to Savannah, Georgia, where skilled working men received little respect for their labor because, in the antebellum South, working with one’s hands was considered to be “black.” With little local manufacturing, job competition among poor working whites and blacks was fierce in Savannah, which served to lessen the status of white workers even more. Thus white male mechanics were disempowered by the politics of slavery, Gillespie claimed, retaining only limited political power and mobility.

Commentator Christine Daniels observed that skilled artisans were a heterogeneous group, often with little in common across different regions and trades. The compromised social, political, and economic status of

workers in each of the papers was nevertheless typical of skilled workers in the United States, and not dependent on slavery in a historical frame. The papers, she felt, did not adequately address the range of ambiguities and tensions that existed among artisans. Richard Scott likewise warned against generalizing about the experiences of antebellum artisans, noting that artisan history is increasingly becoming ethnic history. Race, particularly in New York City, propagated very diverse views, he claimed—both in and out of the Democratic party.

A roundtable on “Human Rights, Citizenship, and Revolutionary Traditions” addressed an important subject that cuts across national and class lines. Lynn A. Hunt (University of Pennsylvania) discussed the emergence during the French Revolution of the concept of the rights of man (historically equated with human rights) as the basis for citizenship, but separate from the latter. The relationship of rights and citizenship remained a subject for debate: For example, Jeremy Bentham, who saw human rights as an invention of the American Revolution, declared them “nonsense built on stilts.” Eighteenth-century debates were inconclusive, for despite the acceptance of the notion of human rights, there was no consensus on meaning. By 1948, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights took human rights to inhere in citizenship; it set aside their origin in revolution and ignored the long history of the concept. Linda Kerber (University of Iowa) emphasized the reciprocity of citizen’s rights and obligations and showed the inconsistency of early American concepts of rights, which stressed universal participation (“no taxation without representation”) but excluded women and slaves from the suffrage. Yanni Kotzolis (New York University) pointed out that in Imperial Russia, human rights were historically a nonissue. Citizenship there was conceived as a status, not the base of rights, which were seen as a product of attaining humanity. Enlightened Russian thinkers saw their fellows as necessarily backward, as were peasants and Asians, because of their incapacity for rational thought. Ben Kiernan (Yale University) placed severe Cambodian suppression of human rights within the context of citizenship. There only peasants have full rights; others with less status, such as ethnic minorities, can only be “candidates.” Drawing on the studies by Benjamin Anderson and Ernest Gellner, he showed the exclusionary connections between and among nationalism, citizenship, and rights which applied only to others, not the governing elite. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Indiana University) discussed the case of China, which has posed the problem of communicating about rights acutely. For the Chinese, human rights do not apply to all. The reality of revolution there involved the demonization of certain groups, who were systematically humiliated and punished. Not only the tabula rasa of the Chinese revolution but earlier Chinese history as well inscribed exclusion as theory and policy. Lynn Hunt closed with questions about why universalism is so difficult: Why do revolutions reject history and exclude? Why is universalism so difficult to maintain?

A roundtable on “Theorizing Gender in a Global Context” was intended as a response to Joan Hoff’s 1995 article in *Journal of Women’s History*, which claimed that the work of Western historians on Western peoples was having the effect of stifling the feminist and gender scholarship of developing nations. Panelists’ contributions suggested that, far from suffering, the latter work is thriving—and offers considerable lessons and inspiration for those studying gender history in the West. Dorothy Ko, a historian of China, and British imperial historian Patrick McDevitt, speaking on Ireland, both emphasized bearing in mind the Western legacy of gender history written with a conscious feminist political interest, including promoting activism. In this light, Ko noted, Western historians should not be too quick to judge recent Chinese work as essentialist “bad history” although it appears to conflate sex and gender. She periodized the development of women’s history in China, observing that recent strategies serve to escape both Maoist scholarly strictures and dependence on ill-fitting Western models, thus furthering scholarly and more broadly political interests simultaneously.

Alice Nash’s remarks on Native Americans in the context of early American history struck a similar chord, as did the extended comment of audience member Jirina Smejkalova on the case of the Czech Republic. These comments suggested that the only scholars and activists suffering under the weight of Western presumptions are those in the West, who are unable to understand these different historical traditions and trajectories in their own context.

Yet precisely this lack of perspective, especially among up-and-coming generations of scholars, did cause concern for one panelist. Tim Burke related his misgivings regarding recent paradigm shifts on gender in African history. Burke observed how he recently taught the literature of African gender history—indeed, “RaceClassGender” history—as African history. While his students found this completely acceptable and “natural,” Burke found that, precisely because these categories were not problematized, his students had not worked through the process by which historians had come to mainstream such categories. In this context, Burke, along with Ko, McDevitt, and Smejkalova, emphasized the continued importance of doing specifically women’s—and men’s—history.

Oddly, the meeting’s program woefully undercounted the panels featuring “labor” topics in its subject index, neglecting such obvious choices as “Who Cares WHO BUILT AMERICA? The Public, the Past, and the American Social History Project after Fifteen Years”; “Artisan Politics and Popular Associations in Mexico, Colombia, and Cuba in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”; “Out of the Closet: Clothing, Class, Gender, and Masquerade”; and “Spinning Lives: Silk Production, Gender, and Family in Italy, Japan, and Mt. Lebanon.” Although hidden in some respects, labor history was a vibrant feature of the meeting—in contrast to the meager labor history offerings of the April 1997 meeting of its profes-



sional competitor, the Organization of American Historians (OAH). This is a reversal of recent trends, and it will be interesting to see whether OAH reacts to its older and sometimes stodgier counterpart by offering a fuller slate of labor history next year.

## North American Labor History Conference

*Kathleen A. Brown*

St. Edward's University

*Gigi Peterson*

University of Washington

The eighteenth annual North American Labor History Conference took place in Detroit, Michigan, on October 17–19, 1996. Detroit, with its rich legacy of labor organizing, has been greatly affected by national and global economic transformations. It symbolizes the challenges facing both labor organizations and historians. Two major themes of the conference aimed at addressing these challenges. One was the problem of historical memory—how it is produced and used. The second, related to issues of memory, was the need to expand definitions of worker and work experience. Labor history is now examining communities, not just sites of waged production, as locations in which class identities are forged. Recovery and incorporation of individual voices is essential to understanding relationships between community, identity, and experience.

Several participants explored the recovery of memory. Some discussed the methodological challenges of working with different sources, from oral histories to fiction, from graphic arts to African nicknames for colonial-era labor bosses. Their studies also raised questions about the links between memory and the effectiveness of organizing efforts. What issues, symbols, and language have resonance for particular groups of workers? Presentations emphasized diversity. Laurie Green (University of Chicago) described African-Americans in Memphis who sought to escape the plantation mentality of their rural past and infused their labor struggles with concern for broader social rights. Tony Buba and Raymond Henderson, coproducers of a documentary about black steelworkers, also found that their subjects placed labor experiences in a much larger social context. As they put it, “each interview was larger than the mill.” Like the paper of Derek Valliant (University of Chicago), their “Struggles in Steel” demonstrated that black and white workers often had very different memories. Tom Sugrue (University of Pennsylvania) found similar disparities in his