

French Theories in American Settings: Some Thoughts on Transferability

Nell Irvin Painter

The JOURNAL OF WOMEN'S HISTORY begins publication by reprinting an essay by several French historians connected with the prestigious French historical journal, *Annales*, which has long stimulated the thinking of historians working in several fields. A lively debate should ensue, further encouraged by the responses by American historians that accompany the French essay. Although its style may challenge American readers, we enrich our own thinking through exposure to that of other intellectual worlds.¹ In the last generation, for example, Europeans have contributed analytical subtlety and concepts of class formation and revolutionary potential to American scholarship.

The *Annales* piece says much that is either new or bears repeating: that the field of women's history began with militants rather than with scholars; that habit of thought and action are fundamental components of women's culture; that women's culture is a basic part of society; that violence and vengeance pervade relationships between women and men; that women got the vote later than men—on purpose; that political (or public) history ignores women. Yet not all here translates smoothly into the American context.

Even as I remain mindful of the frustrations that feminist historians continue to face in the United States, I suspect that feminist theory may well have made more headway here than in France. Many of our colleagues ignore our insights, but at the same time, others heed our messages. In many intellectual circles in this country, feminist history has become exceedingly influential. Much remains to be done, but feminist theories of history are altering the writing of history in general and have spawned the (controversial) new field of men's history. If part of the message of the *Annales* essay now seems somewhat stale, it should be remembered that it was first published in 1986, at about the same time that Joan Scott was offering an appropriate paper on the subject at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association.²

My main concern, however, is that Europeans sometimes provide Americans inappropriate, or should I say incomplete, models. In my field of labor history, for example, the enormous contributions of European styles of analysis must be balanced against their silence on fundamental facts of American history: the existence of race as a potent social and economic category and the relationship between race and class. It is true that Euro-

peans like Comte Joseph de Gobineau invented the scholarship of racism in the late eighteenth century, but until quite recently race has not figured as an important theme in European social thought. In the United States, however, race and labor have gone hand in hand ever since the institutionalization of slavery.

Despite the salience of race and racism in American history, they have been difficult for American historians who were not black to confront. (Genocide, gays and lesbians, and, of course, women also have long histories of oversight. These are topics that have been, as the French would say, "*occultes*.") The civil rights movement and the concomitant black studies movement would have seemed to have ended the silence on race: Most certainly the field of African-American studies has grown tremendously, with many of its most active participants being non-black scholars. Yet the very vigor of African-American studies provided historians of labor a pretext for continuing to produce lily-white analyses—race, they could say, belonged exclusively to black studies. Turning their backs on African-American studies, many labor historians took the further step of embracing paradigms from European history that seemed more sophisticated theoretically than American analyses but that have disregarded race.

The result has been an outpouring of interesting yet flawed labor history that pretends that non-black workers are not affected by the existence of a workforce segmented by race.³ Although they know that non-black as well as black workers have been affected by racism in this country, labor historians sometimes only admit to this fact when the question is put to them directly. They often prefer to wrap themselves in fashionable Europeanisms and to write as though their favorite, northern, European-American workers lived out destinies divorced from matters of slavery and racism, as though, say, Chartism meant more in the history of the American working class than slavery.

With such struggles over American labor historiography in mind,⁴ I confess the fear of having to start all over again with historians of women. My nightmare is that this *Annales* article, with the customary European blindness to matters of race, will play the E. P. Thompson role in women's history, with historians of women adopting the myopia along with the genius of European thought.

Perhaps things ought also to be going the other way around. As we read them, French scholars should be consulting Americans who recognize the importance of race, for late-twentieth-century European populations, including the French, now include large numbers of southern-European, Arab, and African working-class immigrants. A glance at French newspapers reveals the popularity of demagogues like Jacques Le Pen, whose xenophobia has begun to alert Europeans to the power of race right there at

home. Le Pen is the best-known racist now active in Europe, but the continent is full of racists and proto-racists of the sort who are familiar to Americans. It would be a pity if European historians remained blind to the importance of the relationship of race and class in their own societies, several of which were imperialist, continuing instead their traditional preoccupation with peasants and shopkeepers of European ethnic backgrounds.

In one sense, Americans who came of age intellectually in the 1960s have an advantage in the late twentieth century, with its heterogeneous populations. For the movement in the United States that spawned the New Left and modern feminism was a movement of people of color. French historians of our generation, in contrast, look back to *mai* 1968. They have nothing like our civil rights movement unless they adopt the Algerian war of independence, which does not figure as a moment of intellectual awakening in the *Annales* piece. We know that we can still learn from Europeans, but they may also stand to learn a good bit from us.

American historians also have another contribution, concerning class, for the *historiennes* of *Annales*. Years ago, it was fashionable in this country to write, as they do (*mutatis mutandis*) as though American women formed an undifferentiated mass, assumed to be white, educated (i.e., relatively wealthy), and northern. After a good deal of debate, many of us writing in women's history have come to expect a series of adjectives to precede the word "women." Realizing that much unites women (i.e., subordination to men within the same context), much also divides. Class has split American women just as race has, with race and class (or religion and class) often reinforcing one another. We now recognize that many common generalizations about women, such as that women are relegated to the private sphere, are shortsighted. In this case, it is because large numbers of poor women have always worked for wages, usually outside their homes. Further, masses of American women have worked for wages as household workers or domestic servants inside other women's homes. Employers of household workers have nearly always been women, so that in the widespread phenomenon of domestic employment, women have been engaged on both sides of a cash transaction, an aspect of public life that cannot be reduced to "maternal power."

To ignore the kind of employer-employee relations that characterize household work is to overlook the most widespread economic relationship in which women have been engaged and to ignore the most fundamental class relationship between women. In the American situation, such blindness is particularly crippling theoretically, for household workers have been distinguishable from their employers by religion, ethnicity, and race as well as class. Over the decades, the practice in the United States of employing household workers of another identity—Irish-Catholic in the Northeast,

Scandinavian in the Midwest, Chicana in the Southwest, African-American in the South—reinforces the distance between women at the two ends of the employer-employee relationship. Change over time has widened the divide, as Euro-Americans have left household work and women of color have not. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, household work has been identified mostly with racial-ethnic women.

To neglect household labor as women's work, therefore, is to make women of color disappear from women's history. I would add that with household labor as the most important women's occupation in the nineteenth century and with women of color as the mass of household workers, no historical generalization about women workers in the United States that overlooks this occupation or these workers is valid.

I am encouraged by the phenomenon of professional organizations'—such as the American Studies Association, in 1988, and the Berkshire Conference, in 1990—taking diversity of race, class, and gender as the theme of their annual meetings. The French historians writing in *Annales*, male and female, might see their own society in a new light, were they exposed to this aspect of American discourse. Meanwhile, we should not be tempted to adopt uncritically any analysis that ignores fundamental themes that have shaped both the experiences and the interpretation of experiences of Americans of all classes and races.

NOTES

¹ Readers seeking a deeper understanding of the assumptions embedded in this *Annales* essay would do well to consult Karen Offen's informed explanation, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14, (Autumn 1988).

² Scott read her paper at the December 1985 meeting of the American Historical Association. It was published as "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, (December 1986) and is included in her book of essays, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

³ It is as though the low wages paid southern workers in, say, the textile industry did not affect the jobs of northern textile workers, as though southern white workers' wages were unaffected by the reserve of black workers who were ordinarily paid much lower wages.

⁴ For an example of such controversies in labor history, see Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers in America," *The International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 2, (Winter 1989), and Nell Irvin Painter, "The New Labor History and the Historical Moment," *The International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 2, (Spring 1989).
