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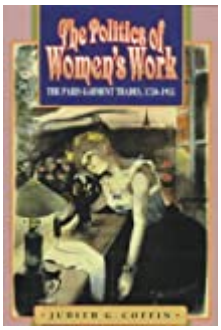

Judith G. Coffin. *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xiii + 289 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03447-8.

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The author's goal is to combine "a social history of the 'battalion' of needleworkers with an intellectual history of the increasingly urgent and freighted debates over female wage labor" (p. 4). This is a welcome ambition, and far more difficult than that modest statement makes it sound. Much recent feminist writing has moved away from social history toward the study of discourse, and there has even (for example, in the study of women in the French Revolution) been some tension between these two approaches. So a study that brings them back together is very welcome. But it is not easy. The dominant discourses, those that most conspicuously construct gender in any period, are generally those of the social elites and are often expressed in male voices. It is not hard to contrast the experience of working women with the dominant images and expectations, but to show the ongoing interplay between the real lives of working women and the broader construction of gender within society is far more challenging. Yet Coffin does just this. She achieves it largely through critical use of the growing social science literature. In the process, she demonstrates that the feminization of the clothing trades was in part a reality and in part a perception fashioned both by different sorts of representations of women's labour and by broader concerns about family, work, and modernity. The final result is an excellent model of the way that social, cultural, and political history can be combined.

The central theme is the redefinition of women's work from the Old Regime through to World War I. The feminization of the garment trades begins, Coffin suggests, with Enlightenment assessments of feminine nature, and the corresponding gender division of labour. The struggle between the Paris seamstresses and the male tailors' guild serves as a case study for the growing appeals, by the seamstresses themselves, to images of "useful womanhood" as justification for their monopoly on making women's clothes. This is the first example of something that Coffin does superbly well throughout the book: demonstrating the way that female voices, of various kinds, were central in defining gender roles, though from a defensive position that greatly limited the options. Her main point in the brief study of the period between 1750 and 1800, however, is that before the nineteenth century there was no unease about women's work: it was not seen as an infringement of a "natural" division of labour.

The second chapter picks up the story in 1830, looking at the development of the sewing machine, the reorganization of production, and the gradual appearance of "women's work" as a social problem. This development had several roots. One was the debate over the new technology: would it displace women or, as the liberal economists argued, liberate them? Another was the tai-

lors' perception that falling piece-rates and unfair competition were results of feminization (rather than the reverse). There were many and conflicting voices: those of female reformers like Flora Tristan, Jeanne Deroin, and Paule Minck were present, but suppressed. Those of liberal and Socialist reformers were louder. Jules Simon and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu were significant figures, the first condemning factory work and the second extolling the virtues of mechanization. Yet what rose out of this mid-nineteenth-century cacophony was the identification of "women's work" as a central issue within wider debates over political economy, technology, and the future of capitalism.

This brings Coffin to what is clearly her favourite terrain, and to the most developed part of her analysis. Chapters three to six all deal with the period between 1870 and 1900, from a variety of angles. The first examines the marketing of the sewing machine and is the section that will be of most interest to historians of consumerism. It is a superb study of the interaction of technological innovation (of a fairly limited kind) with skillful advertising and with methods of marketing (credit, installment payments) that appealed to a working-class clientele. At the same time, Coffin provides a sensitive commentary on the gender and class stereotypes on which advertisements for sewing machines both drew and helped to fashion. In particular, they disseminated an increasingly common identification of sewing with women and with the home, weaving in images of modern comfort. Along with all this, Coffin shows how the increasingly eroticized imagery of the advertisements was accompanied by an equally obsessive and eroticized medical concern about the effect of the machines on women's physical and psychological well-being. How late-nineteenth-century male medical observers thought women could experience orgasms through pedaling a sewing machine is hard to imagine, but their descriptions enjoyed enormous popularity at the time, just as they will no doubt provide endless entertainment for readers of Coffin's book. But to writers of the time, they reinforced fears of moral and national decline and contributed to the perception of "women's work" as a serious problem. At the same time, all of this writing, along with the advertisements and the marketing of domestic consumerism, and the portable sewing machine itself, also fostered the feminization of the garment trades that had begun long before.

The fourth and fifth chapters are firmly rooted in the methods of social and economic history. They examine the resurgence of homework in the clothing trades in the late nineteenth century, finding its roots in general economic trends as well as in the factory legislation that led employers to perceive factory labour as more expensive and troublesome than homeworkers. To those who thought about it at the time, it seemed self-evident that these homeworkers would be mostly women, and that they would be poorly paid: women, they assumed, had family roles that kept them at home, and their economic needs were less than those of men. The real story is more complex, and emerges in all its complexity in Coffin's exposition. Women's motives were mixed: the desire for independence was an important one, while the pace of the work and the incidence of sexual harassment in workshops were others. Also significant was the self-fulfilling cultural expectation that only single women would go to the workshops, while the efforts of reformers, trade unionists, and clergy, and the household tasks of married women were all contributing factors.

The last three chapters of the book are concerned with the politics of women's work: with the debates on the sweated trades (now perceived to be women's work); with debates over unionization and protective legislation; and those over the "woman question." Throughout this section, Judith Coffin again displays the sensitivity to a wide range of conflicting voices that is a hallmark and a strength of her book as a whole. The contribution of each is described and assessed with detachment. French feminism was cautious and narrow, but it was active in labour issues, despite the widespread perception to the contrary. Social Catholics, often neglected in the secondary literature, receive ample discussion here: more sensitive to working women's needs than many Socialist and liberal feminists, they called for the regulation of homework and for minimum wages. Yet their motives, of course, were in part natalist, and the strength of this pro-natalist strand in French feminism was a key factor in making it less effective politically than the English or American movements. Consumers' organizations also played an important role in these debates. Having unpicked the many threads of these debates, with as much skill as the seamstresses who are her subject, Coffin once again rises above the melee and points to the way that, in the crucial debates over the Minimum Wage Bill eventually passed in 1915, gendered assumptions about homework and about women's needs and expectations gradually narrowed the bill from an attempt to introduce a "living wage" for all to the implementation of a lower "women's wage." Never losing sight of wider horizons, though, she also points out that unlike the English labour movement, French unionists and Socialists were unable

to impose a vision of domesticity that (in principle at least) excluded women from waged work. For this reason, and because of the needs of the French economy, "domesticity" and "separate spheres" are, she concludes, inadequate descriptions of French gender ideologies.

This summary does scant justice to the depth of Coffin's work or to the many stimulating observations that she makes along the way. There is valuable material here, which I have skimmed over, on the growth of department stores, on the development and methods of social sciences, and on ideas of the body. There are new insights into such widely studied phenomena as right-wing nationalism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and *fin-de-siecle* fears of national and racial decline. There are also intriguing suggestions that are not developed fully. One (my inference from what Coffin says) is that low birth rates are crucial to understanding why both French understandings of gender and the character of the French labour movement–and of course national politics–were different from those in other places. Another is the hint that the political structure of the Third Republic, combined with its gender politics, were central to explaining why French women did not get the vote until 1944. I would very much like to see Coffin develop this last point in some future work.

The luxury of extra space afforded by H-France allows me to congratulate Princeton University Press and the author on the superb production of the book. I think I noticed one typo in the whole text. The index is also extraordinarily good, not only listing all the things one might look for, but even indexing discussion within the footnotes, which, I might add, are extraordinarily comprehensive.

I have some very minor reservations. Coffin insists repeatedly that needlework has not always been seen as women's work, that it was a construction of nineteenth-century commentators and not a product of women's household duties. As a reminder that the attributes and perceptions of femininity have varied over time, this is timely and salutary. It is true, too, that women did not always sew for their families and that definitions of male and female tasks at any particular time are unpredictable. Yet this is one of the few instances where I feel she overstates her case: why did it always seem to be women who did mending (as opposed to tailoring) as a casual job in eighteenth-century Paris? Why was it that in bookbinding it was women who did the sewing? In the second half of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, sewing does seem to have been done overwhelmingly by women, even if it was only beginning to be typecast as a central element of femininity. I would like to hear from historians of earlier periods on this point.

I have some regrets, too. Coffin neglects the social history of the garment trades in the first half of the period she is studying. And above all, she says next to nothing about the First Empire and Restoration, which along with the revolutionary years against which they defined themselves were key periods in the rethinking of gender.[1] I know that the sources for this period are poor and hard to use, but would still have liked some reflections on women's place in the industry during the period of early industrialization and of the short-lived implantation of the cotton industry in Paris. A comment of another sort altogether: I found the "social science" structure of the book (perhaps reflecting its origins as a thesis?), with an introduction explaining the purpose of each chapter and conclusion summing up the argument and giving the direction of the following chapter, often helpful but sometimes mechanical. These are minor reproaches of a work as wide-ranging and as rewarding as this one.

I have already used Coffin's book in my own writing, and have passed it on to a postgraduate student of Australian labour history, who has been desperately searching for new approaches that will enable the study of women workers within a broader cultural context. I will be recommending this book to students for a long time to come, and urge all those interested in nineteenth-century French history, in labour history, in gender history, and in feminist history to add it to the reading list.

Note

[1]. See especially Genevieve Fraisse, *Muse de la raison: la democratie exclusive et la difference des sexes* (Paris: Alinea, 1989); and Margaret Darrow, "French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 41-65.

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