Postwar Women’s History: The “Second Wave” or the End of the Family Wage?

NANCY MACLEAN

I

A half-century has brought a world of change to women’s lives and American ideas about gender. What would have seemed unthinkable fifty years ago is now taken for granted. Today, a majority of women with children under one year are in the labor force. Most children will spend at least some of their years growing up in a single-parent household. Women can be found, sometimes in considerable numbers, in all the occupations that once barred them entry, from medicine to firefighting. Others interpret the Constitution on the Supreme Court or win Pulitzer prizes for their prose. Women serve as conduits to the divine in some religious denominations, and as decorated officers in the armed forces. The culture itself has altered on gender in ways unlikely to be reversed. Lesbianism not only dares to speak its name; it does so in the voices of likeable characters on prime-time television. Wife-beating, rape, and incest, once abetted by public silence, are now popular topics for daytime talk shows as well as award-winning works of literature. Backed by Title IX’s guarantee of equal access to sports, young women are growing up with a novel sense of their physical power along with new arenas for their minds.

Of course, much has remained the same, and new obstacles have emerged. The resistance to altering gender roles and widening women’s possibilities has been vocal and influential. It has also been subtle and institutional, even badgering and internal. A still sex-segregated labor force and persistent assumptions that housework and childrearing are ultimately women’s responsibility, for example, remain heavy anchors of continuity. But to understand women’s history since 1945 and the historiography that has arisen to interpret it, the place to start is with an appreciation of just how much has changed – and how rapidly. It is fair to say that we are in the midst of an epochal transformation. “We are witnessing the breakup,” the economist Barbara Bergmann declares, “of the ancient system of sex roles under which men were assigned a monopoly of access to money-making and mature women were restricted to the home” (Bergmann, 1986, p. 3).

The surge to prominence of the field of women’s history since 1970 is yet another sign of the shifts underway. All but nonexistent in 1945, it has become one of the
most vibrant specialties in the discipline, one few departments would do without. The field itself arose from the women’s movement, as feminists who were also students and professors of history began to look to the past for bearings. “The recognition that we had been denied our history,” recalled Gerda Lerner, the pathbreaking historian of American women, “came to many of us as a staggering flash of insight, which altered our consciousness irretrievably” (Lerner, 1979, p. 159). Not surprisingly given the field’s origins, its questions about the postwar years from the outset revolved around aspects of that struggle: its roots, nature, impact, and limitations. Having ties to an ongoing movement for social change gave vitality to women’s history and endowed it with broad appeal. Galvanized by practical struggles for gender justice, women’s historians unearthed vast riches in the way of primary sources and produced engrossing accounts of myriad aspects of women’s lives and gender politics, making their discipline the most magnetic for the early movement.

The themes of the women’s liberation movement have also indelibly imprinted the historiography, making for some of its distinctive contributions and also for some of its limitations. Above all, the movement’s conviction that “the personal is political” – that personal experiences are shaped by forces in public life and therefore can be altered by changes there – led to new scrutiny of “private life.” One sees this in the capacious definition of the “political” that women’s historians (and increasingly other scholars as well) employ: it takes in developments in childrearing, romance, household labor, and community networks as well as electoral politics, social movements, and state action. The work of feminist historians has in turn shifted the whole discipline, combining with the efforts of social historians and cultural historians to produce a profound epistemological shift. In seeking to answer new questions, scholars moved beyond the study of elites and began sifting through the artifacts of everyday household life, the ephemera of local movements, the records of hospital medical boards, the lyrics of popular music, trial transcripts, episodes of radio and television shows, and oral histories with individuals from all walks of life.

The movement contributed in another way to a fresh historical literature. Its unprecedented challenge to the sexual division of labor made scholars alert to the prevalence and power of all such boundaries in history. Writing on subjects as varied as occupational distribution and erotic preferences, women’s historians have revealed how patterns that Americans had long taken for granted were in fact, as the literature came to put it, “socially constructed.” Not only did scholars show how these differences were historically created by human actors and their institutions. The best of the new studies offered insight into the wider cultural and political work such boundaries performed, and thereby made the discipline as a whole aware of, as one title puts it, *U.S. History as Women’s History* (Kerber et al., 1995).

Having themselves confronted demeaning gender stereotypes in their era’s most radical movements, women’s historians were attuned to the subtleties of political language and practice. Some produced works that cumulatively exposed how deeply gender exclusion is built into American political culture. Yet, sharing the movement’s vision of people as subjects of their own history as well as victims of others’ power, such scholars also recovered women’s “agency,” as it came to be called, in shaping their lives and finding leverage in the country’s political culture for claims of independence, freedom, and equality (Kerber, 1980, 1999; Baker, 1984; Evans, 1989). Movement experience had also imparted a sense of the power of bonding among
women – what activists spoke of as “sisterhood” – and of the efficacy of small groups in working for large changes. Building on this, women’s historians documented informal women’s networks and voluntary organizations, albeit divided by class and race, that grew from sexual divisions of labor even as they reconfigured them. Some analyzed how such networks become radicalized in hard times, as in the cases of the kosher meat boycott of 1902 or the militant housewives’ leagues, black and white, nationalist and communist, of the Great Depression (Hewitt, 1994; Hine, 1994; Orleck, 1995).

And yet, for all that it propelled scholarship forward in the first few decades, the continuing strong pull of the women’s movement as the ultimate question for the years after 1945 may now be restricting the field’s vision. Unlike other eras of women’s history, this one has not yet generated overarching interpretive paradigms with which to assess the impressive empirical data scholars have amassed. For the postwar years, there is little to compare with the imaginative breakthroughs of the literature on earlier periods. One thinks, for instance, of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s creative entry into the world of colonial goodwives; of Nancy Cott’s dialectical reading of the bonds of womanhood; of Linda Gordon’s recovery of the enigmatic politics of voluntary motherhood; or of Elsa Barkley Brown’s incisive critique of the hold of “dichotomous thinking” about race, class, and gender among historians (Ulrich, 1982; Cott, 1978; Gordon, 1976; Brown, 1994, p. 278). Similarly, one could point to the broad literatures and complex debates that have coalesced under the rubrics of “domesticity” for the Victorian era or “maternalism” for early twentieth-century women’s politics. Why is there no parallel for the post-1945 years? Perhaps the history itself is simply still too close to acquire the strangeness from which fresh thinking comes. Whatever the reasons, women’s historians of the postwar period have not yet generated interpretive frameworks that go beyond looking backward, forward, or sideways from the women’s movement.

Yet perhaps now, a quarter-century into the project of recovering women’s past, it is time to broaden the field’s reach in the post-1945 era, and to ask some different questions of the novel situations in which American women find themselves at the beginning of a new century. These questions may help to make better sense of a paradox of the movement’s recent history: despite having produced the world’s strongest women’s movement and the vastest public policy apparatus to fight sex discrimination, the United States still has one of the largest wage gaps between the sexes. That gap, the labor economists Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn have demonstrated, is due less to the usual suspect (sex discrimination) than to a rarely imagined culprit: the country’s unmatched and ever-widening levels of overall economic inequality. The wage gap remains so large less because of gender, that is, and more because of such things as low unskilled wages generally and low levels of unionization. “American women,” explains Blau, “were essentially swimming upstream in a labor market increasingly unfavorable to low wage workers” (Blau, 1993, p. 85; Blau and Kahn, 1996). The pay gap is one instance of a truth that the field might grapple with even more than it has: that women’s fate is not decided apart from other forms of inequality but is intimately bound up with them.

In fact, this essay will argue that the story that best anchors the gender history of the greatest number of Americans in the second half of the twentieth century is not the women’s movement per se. It is the unraveling of the whole family wage system.
that was once hegemonic in American culture, law, and social policy, if honored in
the breach in real life. Based on the idea of the male breadwinner as provider for
dependent wife and children, that system emerged as a jerry-buit compromise
between social groups with different interests: white male wage earners, their employ-
ers, middle-class reformers (women as well as men), and public officials. First artic-
ulated by early nineteenth-century trade unionists and reformers, it became possible
to growing numbers of households with improved wages in the first half of the
mid-twentieth century. Even as a significant share of Americans fell outside of its net –
not only widowed and single women but also less-skilled workers in general, and low-
wage workers of color in particular – its assumptions structured the political economy
they had to navigate in the labor force and the welfare state. “By the advent of the
New Deal,” the historian Linda Gordon has shown, “the family-wage norm was a
dead weight crushing the imagination of welfare reformers” (Gordon, 1994, p. 291).
And yet it persisted. Defining male labor as the norm and female labor as an aber-
ration, it helped to shape a labor market biased toward men (especially white men)
and to dictate social welfare policy aimed at shoring up male-dominant households.
A myth insofar as it claimed to describe rather than prescribe behavior, the family-wage
norm still served as the grounding principle for what scholars have called the two-
track welfare state that took shape in the United States in the Progressive era and the
New Deal years. The superior, entitlement track of this system rewarded male wage
earning through such policies as workmen’s compensation, unemployment insurance,
and Social Security; its inferior, means-tested track grudgingly sustained women and
children cut off from access to male wages through mothers’ pensions and later Aid
to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) (M. May, 1982; Ehrenreich, 1983;
Gordon 1990, 1994; Fraser, 1997). That family-wage norm and the policies sus-
taining it shaped the context in which women would make their own varied histo-
ries. A case in point: exclusion from the family-wage system as from the rights of
citizenship profoundly affected the lives of most African Americans over these years
(Quadagno, 1994).
Always partial and rickety, that family-wage structure has collapsed in the last
quarter-century. Once, it was self-reinforcing, as women’s lack of good job prospects
and of reproductive control combined with the stigmas attached to divorce and
homosexuality to bolster the male breadwinner system. Now, however, men’s ability
to support families on a single wage has broken down just as all those other braces
to the system have crumbled. No longer gender-specific, breadwinning has become
an almost universal adult role. Any number of signs point to the historic change still
underway. Most women now remain in the labor force through their adult lives, and
they have access to better jobs. Contraception and abortion are widely available. Mar-
riage is less permanent as divorce has become commonplace. Childcare and domes-
tic labor have increasingly become commodities available for purchase. Norms of male
gender in many communities are coming to include responsibility for childcare and
housework. And in the wake of the Reagan–Bush administrations and the Clinton-
backed welfare “reform” of 1996, the family-wage-based New Deal social policy
edifice has itself been renovated in the minimalist style of neoliberalism.
Ultimately, it is this complex process of the breakdown of a family-wage system
decades in the making that helps make sense of much recent gender history. It has
freed some women for unprecedented achievements while leaving others more
It is vulnerable to old abuses. It is, arguably, behind many other stories as well. It made for sharp disagreements between white feminists and feminists of color over family politics. It furthered the separation of sexuality and reproduction, and increased the visibility of queer life. It anchored the rise and later dismantling of welfare in the form of AFDC, as Marisa Chappell has persuasively demonstrated (Chappell, 2002). It divides women into feminist and anti-feminist camps. It shapes the lives of immigrants as well as of native-born feminists and anti-feminists. It has contributed to an epochal upheaval in ideas about gender in almost every area of human endeavor. And it makes sense of the changing gender history of men along with women.

Why not, then, reexamine the history of women from 1945 to the present in terms of the relationship of different groups to that evolving family-wage system? It is striking, after all, that the white middle-class women made most comfortable by this system were those whose public activity entered “the doldrums” in the years of its greatest power (Rupp and Taylor, 1987). It is also notable that in the family wage’s heyday the wage-earning women and women of color excluded from its purview became most active. Experimenting with other tools to protect their interests, above all labor unions and civil rights organizing, they usually, not coincidentally, organized in the company of same-class or same-group men: their life paths, after all, were less distinct from men’s than those of white middle-class women. Only later, as the system began to disintegrate, did the latter come to the fore again in large numbers: some to dismantle a system whose constraints now outweighed its benefits for them, others to staff barricades in the embattled system’s defense. What will end up replacing the family-wage system in the coming years is still uncertain. Many of our public arguments about gender, family life, and employer and government obligations are about this vacuum and how to fill it (Coontz, 1992; Stacey, 1996). But the family-wage system’s demise seems indisputable. This essay surveys the field of post-1945 women’s history by addressing first the achievements and arguments of that scholarship on its own terms, and then sketching how a shift in focus to the fate of the family-wage system might bring both broader reach and deeper understanding.

II

One of the first significant works in the field set the terms of debate on postwar women’s history that are still in use. They concerned the relationship of the recent past to the women’s movement. William Chafe’s *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920–1970* (1972) looked at the years after woman suffrage became law. Chafe sought to trace popular ideas about woman’s place through a half-century to see how they fared in upheavals such as depression and war. Offering a behaviorist analysis, he concluded that “only when events made it necessary and desirable for females to assume a new role could there be a realistic chance for modification of women’s status” (Chafe, 1972, p. 111). The major such event in his account was World War II. Where “the Depression had fostered a wave of reaction against any change in women’s role,” the war quickly and “radically transformed the economic outlook of women” (p. 135).

Chafe pointed to many indicators. The number of women in the workforce doubled, as did the number of employed wives. Female union membership quadrupled. Black women, like black men, got better jobs than ever before. Like “Rosie the
Riveter,” women entered production and craft occupations that were once male preserves. And both the government and the press extolled these developments. The war, Chafe announced, was “a watershed”; “a catalyst which broke up old modes of behavior and helped forge new ones” (pp. 136, 247). For a time, it delivered more improvement for women than fifty years of feminist organizing. While spotlighting the drama of sudden alteration on a mass scale, Chafe also stressed that “a permanent change in women’s economic status ... required a continued redistribution of sexual roles, a more profound shift in public attitudes, and a substantial improvement in the treatment and opportunities afforded the female worker” (p. 150). None of these, he noted, was forthcoming. Viewing the changes in women’s roles as temporary, most Americans saw no reason to abet them. Still, the shifts in behavior and family life implied by married women’s employment boded more dramatic equalization over the long term.

A new field likes nothing better than a target argument, and the notion of World War II as watershed attracted sharpshooters from many sides. Based on careful empirical research, the ensuing studies clarified the stakes of different interpretations for understanding modern feminism. Collectively, the challengers disputed the idea that anything fundamental had changed in the war years. The growth in married women’s employment started in the Depression, some pointed out, in the service of family need rather than feminist aspirations. Good wartime opportunities and patriotism served as added pulls, but without altering the basic calculus. Moreover, employers, government, and workers alike treated women’s entry into once-male preserves as a stopgap and shored up traditional gender thinking by analogies between this labor and housework. As if to make sure that employed women got no wider ambitions, public officials refused to relieve the burden of mothering and domestic labor. Unlike some European nations, the United States built few public childcare centers, nor did it enact any creative policies to ease the load of the double day. As well, discrimination against black women remained pervasive (Clive, 1979; Anderson, 1981; Hine, 1994). Even in the military, women faced sometimes preposterous efforts to maintain Stateside gender norms such as demands that they wear skirts through European winters and the swamps of the Pacific. American women in uniform could not go around “wearing the pants” (Meyer, 1996, p. 155). Providing a richer sense of the wartime years, Chafe’s critics made clear how deep the resistance ran even when change in gender arrangements seemed at first sight dramatic.

In 1979, Sara Evans issued what for want of clear challengers still stands as the bookend on the other side of Chafe’s work in this historiography. It established the women’s liberation movement as the centerpiece of the postwar story. Evans’s *Personal Politics* argued what its subtitle pithily declared: *The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. The book was a stunning contribution to historical thinking about what preconditions a social movement requires: in the case of women’s liberation, she argued, it was experience in other struggles that made new ways of seeing possible. In the black freedom movement and the campus New Left, young white women who had never before known other possibilities found an ideology to guide and inspire change, experience in organizing, role models of freer womanhood, and networks of communication with which to spread new ideas. They also met with challenges to that newfound sense of self-worth after 1965 in the form of black separatism and white male chauvinism that led
them to strike out on their own. “Feminism,” in Evans’s memorable formulation, “was born in that contradiction – the threatened loss of new possibility” (Evans, 1979, p. 221). Assuming with the movement that “the oppression of most American women centered on their primary definition of themselves as ‘housewife,’ whether they worked solely inside the home or also outside it,” Evans argued that the greatest contribution of the women’s liberation movement was its thoroughgoing critique of “personal” life and its challenge to that circumscribed, gender-specific identity. In this, the youth movement was, she said, quite unlike the older, more professional women who gravitated to the National Organization for Women (NOW). Less bothered by the public–private division and arriving at activism by a different path, they concentrated on discrimination in public life.

Persuasive in its interpretation of how many white women changed in the 1960s, Evans’s work largely accepted the activists’ own view of the 1950s as a kind of nowhere land. Betty Friedan had first drawn the portrait of egregious gender indoctrination and strictly enforced conformity in her bestselling 1963 manifesto, The Feminine Mystique. In recent years, popular works such as Brett Harvey’s The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History enlivened the critique. “In the fifties as in no other decade,” Harvey wrote, “the current of the mainstream was so strong that you only had to step off the bank and float downstream into marriage and motherhood” (Harvey, 1993, p. xiii). In Harvey’s treatment of topics ranging from “sexual brinkmanship” to the effect on women of the GI Bill, the era became one of stunning regression. In such recounts, which established the standard for the field, the 1950s became at worst a wasteland, and at best an age that rumbled with underground innovations in lifestyles but was incapable of generating political alternatives because it had so systematically suppressed them. Its doomed ideas merely ensured that when change came, it would be explosive. Writing at the end of the 1980s, Elaine Tyler May synthesized earlier accounts to provide a lively interpretation of the whole Cold War era as one in which public and private life converged on the goal of “containment.” The familial ideal of the era, she showed, was not an archaic traditionalism, but rather a radically restructured household form. It addressed anxieties from two decades of depression and war, built on the new conditions of suburban life in a mass consumer society, and encouraged expressive individualism in a shrunken emotional universe. In the end, it would be difficult for such families to carry the weight of expectations invested in them (E. May, 1988).

So astutely had Evans anchored women’s liberation that few treatments of the largely white sections of the movement since her book have taken issue with it on fundamentals. Even the most recent works on “second-wave” feminism, whether interpretive or collections of fresh primary sources, essentially accept her interpretation while enriching it with new detail. Historians have agreed, for example, that feminism is best understood as an antidote to the 1950s and an outgrowth of the youthful left, black and white, and as one of the most – if not the most – influential social movements of modern American history (Wandersee, 1988; Brownmiller, 1999; Baxandall and Gordon, eds., 2000; Rosen, 2000). Some accounts have celebrated the movement’s achievements; others, while appreciative, have been more critical. Early on, for example, the activist and political scientist Jo Freeman called attention to problems the women’s movement had inherited from the New Left, among them a reliance on personal networks in organizing that effectively excluded women of
color and those less advantaged by class and education, and a suspicion of leadership that bred what she called “the tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman, in Baxandall and Gordon, 2000, pp. 73–5; also Freeman, 1975). Yet most agreed that radical feminism in particular had wrought a conceptual revolution. The edgiest of the era’s feminisms, it invented “sexual politics.” Under that heading came new understanding of abortion rights as essential to female self-determination, of rape as a political act, of sexist language as an influence on thought, and of wife-beating as a logical outcome of overweening male power (Ferree and Hess, 1985; Echols, 1989).

In this interpretive framework, black feminism appeared sui generis. It helped to define a new category, women-of-color feminism, soon enriched by contributions from Latinas, Native Americans, and later Asian Americans. The distance was mutually constructed to some degree: most black women initially suspected that, as the historian Deborah Gray White put it, “woman’s liberation was a white woman’s bid to share power with white men” (White, 1999, p. 214). Articulating their own feminist politics in contrast, African American women insisted on the irreducible importance of race in American life. They pointed to how it shaped white women’s experiences, views, and goals as well as black women’s. Indeed, some argued that race was most insidious when dominance and privilege rendered it invisible. Black feminist scholars exposed in women’s history, as in most currents of feminist activism, what the poet Adrienne Rich called “white solipsism”: the propensity “to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world” (Lerner, 1972; Davis, 1981; Giddings, 1984; Higginbotham, 1995; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Rich, 1979, p. 299). As the historian Elsa Barkley Brown brilliantly aphorized the inescapable conclusion: “All women do not have the same gender.” Nor were the differences static or unconnected: gender and race, it became clear, would best be understood in relational terms (Brown, 1995, p. 43).

Yet the prevailing framework’s compulsion to categorize and divide various strands of feminism also hid from view the cross-fertilization among them and their own dynamism. While all variants of black feminism explored the interactions of race and gender in American society, for example, the differences in analysis and vision among black feminists paralleled those among white feminists. Pauli Murray and Shirley Chisholm could thus be said to broadly share the liberal feminist approach; Michele Walker and Alice Walker the radical or cultural feminist approach; and Angela Davis and the Combahee River Collective the socialist-feminist approach. Whether such categorization was itself the most interesting line of analysis to pursue is an open question, however. At least as interesting was the way Latinas and then Asian American women followed a parallel trajectory of first solidarity with same-group men, then critique of the masculine posturing that often accompanied nationalism, followed by the appropriation and tailoring of feminist ideas to their own purposes (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Garcia, 1997; Asian Women United of California, 1989; Ruiz, 1998). Working-class white women engaged in a similarly selective application of movement principles to their workplaces, families, unions, and communities (Baxandall and Gordon, 1976; Seifer, 1976; O’Farrell and Kornbluh, 1996; MacLean, 1999). Feminism is not and has never been a single entity, these varied genealogies remind us. As Nancy Cott said of another context, it “was an impulse that was impossible to translate into a program without centrifugal results.” Just as the forms of gender inequality varied with the conditions of women’s lives, so too

Other scholars filled in the portrait of the women’s movement by examining the wing that women’s liberation-based scholars tended to dismiss: so-called liberal feminism. Most of these studies, perhaps fittingly, focused on the public work of their subjects. Cynthia Harrison charted the fate of women in national politics from World War II until the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the founding of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women by John F. Kennedy. Even in the absence of a large-scale feminist movement, she showed, these largely white and in many ways conventional women won significant policy changes through a shrewd marshaling of scant resources with a sympathetic administration (Harrison, 1988). Susan Lynn documented the groundbreaking interracial work of women in the YWCA and the American Friends Service Committee between the end of the war and the resurgence of protest in the 1960s, alongside their labors for peace and social reform (Lynn, 1992).

Others have since complicated the very idea of liberal feminism. The historian and documentary filmmaker Joyce Follet traced a group of older midwestern feminists, among them trade unionists, public officials, civil rights activists, and others. She showed how their life experiences and ideas defied rigid schemes that claim awareness of the personal dimensions of gender subordination as the unique insight of college-trained youthful radicals (Follet, 1998). Even the division between liberal and radical ideas seems more porous today than it once did. We now know, for example, that Betty Friedan, the best-known voice of mainstream feminism, first learned politics on the left and in the company of militant trade unionists (D. Horowitz, 1998).

Here, then, is the core of the standard narrative that is being taught in schools around the country. It posits a long conservative period from about 1946 to 1960 in which women’s aspirations were systematically circumscribed to domestic life. Then, the reawakening of the left side of the political spectrum in the 1960s helped revive feminism. At once inspired and irritated by their male comrades, feminist women constructed a movement composed of two distinct wings, a liberal one of older women in government service, unions, and the professions, and a radical one of younger women’s liberationists, themselves divided between self-styled radical feminists (later, cultural feminists), socialist feminists, and feminists of color. Pursuing projects congruent with their analyses, these tendencies endured in ensuing years. Examples of the division of labor would be the Equal Rights Amendment for liberal feminists, rape crisis centers for radical feminists, reproductive rights or support for women’s labor activism for socialist feminists, and woman-centered anti-racist initiatives for feminists of color (or “womanists,” as some called themselves following the writer Alice Walker). As the wider movements of the 1960s receded and American politics grew more conservative, liberal feminists – always better organized and working nationally as well as locally – became the most visible face of feminism. But that face had altered through dialogue with more radical tendencies, such that ostensibly liberal feminists can now be found working on once-radical issues such as reproductive rights or comparable worth.

This account has much to recommend it. It captures broad trends clearly and economically. It recognizes political differences meaningful to the subjects of the story. It accounts for change over time. Above all, it has acquired the standing that comes with age – the interpretive equivalent of seniority rights. And, yet, the very neatness
of the story seems increasingly suspect to some, the present writer included, who believe that its categories bleach out and isolate what should be a vibrant story with many connections to other histories.

III

Without slighting the considerable achievements of the existing literature in postwar women’s history, then, I would like to suggest a somewhat different framework for consideration. This one would recognize the historical importance of second-wave feminism, yet would decenter it from its current place so as to make room for other important developments and account for them better. A focus on the waxing and waning of the family-wage system would help not only to better incorporate the revisionist findings of recent years on various topics, but would also bring into view subjects necessarily neglected when a white-dominated movement is assumed to be an era’s pivotal development. Ironically, this approach also better captures the truly epochal significance of second-wave feminism: by situating it in the context of the specific social system that it both emerged from and helped to undo – much to the consternation of anti-feminists, who had their own complex relation to that system. The long decade popularly referred to as the 1950s, the years from 1946 to 1960, appears today as both the apex of that family-wage system and the beginning of its decline. And in fact many of the revisions and new visions now emerging in the field concern what exactly was going on in that period.

One question being aired with growing frequency is just how reactionary were the 1950s for women and gender? On the one hand, few would gainsay that the period from the late 1940s to the early 1960s was notably conservative. The heyday of the Cold War, it was also a time of domestic reaction. As communists were hounded and their ideas virtually outlawed, progressive Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions were cut adrift and with them the activists who had pressed hardest for racial and gender justice. Within the federal government, public officials consumed with fear about changes in public and private life purged not only suspected communists but also suspected homosexuals – the latter in much larger numbers (D’Emilio, 1983; E. May, 1988; Johnson, forthcoming). Unorthodox sexuality, like dissent of any kind, became more dangerous than at any time in recent memory. And yet, as true as all of this is, some scholars have come to question the view of the 1950s that came from Friedan’s journalistic indictment.

The most obvious way Friedan’s now virtually hegemonic view of the 1950s skews understanding is how it made a small minority stand in for women as a group. In Friedan’s lexicon, “American wom[a]n” and “suburban wife” served as synonyms (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). The author’s primary informants were her fellow Smith College graduates, a far more white, suburban, middle-class and upper-class population than American women at large. Their dissatisfaction with lives restricted to home and motherhood did resonate with women in other groups. Yet for low-income white women and black and Chicana women still living in segregated communities plagued by interlocking forms of discrimination, Friedan’s pronouncements about the state of American womanhood seemed at best partial. Some working-class women and women of color also took offense at her prescriptions for change, most notably the idea that her constituency might solve its “problem that has no name” by getting
advanced education and “meaningful” jobs and, by implication, hiring other women, presumably less unreasonably stymied, to clean their homes and care for their children. “If the care of a house and children is so unrewarding and unfulfilling to a wife and mother,” one woman queried Friedan, “why isn’t it so to other women, and why should other women do such work?” What about, asked another, “the poor thing who must tie herself to the bonds of housekeeping in my place? What of her? We must emancipate her too” (Foner, 1998, p. 296).

Even if one restricts the Friedan view of the 1950s to women who were white and middle class, it still impedes understanding of how change occurred. For one, it neglects to consider women’s social opposites and how they were changing. One of the first historical studies to examine men as people of gender, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *The Hearts of Men*, made the 1950s a much more interesting and internally conflicted age. Creatively surveying sources of male popular culture from the newly launched *Playboy* magazine to social criticism of imperiled manhood in the corporate colossus, Ehrenreich argued that the male breadwinner ideology had begun to come undone in the very years of its heyday. Where after the war, men still expected to grow up, marry, and support their wives and children with their earnings, by the 1970s growing numbers chafed under those responsibilities. Some simply went AWOL or deserted. In Ehrenreich’s reading, the male “flight from commitment” was less a response to feminism than a goad to it: women came up with new ways of thinking about and organizing their lives because they needed to (Ehrenreich, 1983).

Since then, Friedan’s synthesis has suffered a devastating challenge from the historian Joanne Meyerowitz, whose systematic study of the kinds of popular culture sources Friedan used drew quite different conclusions. Those sources were nowhere near as unequivocally hostile to women’s aspirations as Friedan made out. Black publications especially, but white ones too, endorsed individual achievement as well as domestic ideals for women. “Friedan,” Meyerowitz explained, “drew on mass culture as much as she countered it”: “her forceful protest against a restrictive domestic ideal neglected the extent to which that ideal was already undermined” (Meyerowitz, 1994, pp. 232, 250). Even the outlawed abortion of this era appears differently in the light of careful research. Challenging the notion that the Supreme Court or dissenting doctors won legalization, Leslie Reagan has shown how ordinary women were the original and most important source of pressure for reform. “Their demand for abortions, generally hidden from public view and rarely spoken of in public,” she writes, “transformed medical practice and law over the course of the twentieth century” (Reagan, 1997, p. 1). Documenting a crackdown on abortion that began in the 1940s, Reagan at the same time uncovered the refusal of women of all classes and contexts to honor a law that would make them bear children against their will. That stance finally convinced doctors to put aside their own professional conservatism and press for legal reform in the interest of their patients. Accounts such as these, more attuned to the complexities of social change, provide a stronger framework for interpreting information long available on how everyday life was changing in the years after World War II.

Seen in hindsight, those data capture the beginning of the end of the family-wage system. As early as 1972, Chafe understood that seemingly dull census numbers were adding up in potentially exciting ways. By now many scholars, especially demographic historians such as Robert Wells, have identified the key trends. The one that received
the most attention was the steady rise in employment among married women and, later, women with young children as well: prima facie evidence of the demise of the family wage. Thus, where once the typical female worker was a young woman in the labor force briefly before marriage, now she was an adult with children working to support her family (Weiner, 1985). The rise in women’s paid employment both reflected and furthered another trend: the growing use of contraception and abortion as women sought to plan their childbearing and as couples looked to sexuality more for pleasure than for reproduction. Once an economic asset for the labor or wages they could contribute to family support, children were now an economic burden for American parents – especially after Social Security and pensions came to provide financial support in old age. Seen in long-term perspective, the changes are dramatic: from 1800 to 1970, for example, while the birth rate dropped by more than half, life expectancy doubled. For women, it reached seventy-nine years by 1997 – as compared to forty-eight years in 1900. Modern couples thus envision much more time together after their children are gone – and wives can expect many years on their own after their husbands die: developments historians have barely touched.

Marriage itself was becoming an increasingly insecure institution in the postwar years, as men and women alike came to need it less and to want more from it. As divorce rates mounted and “blended” families became the norm, Americans seemed to be redefining the purposes of marriage and family life (Wells, 1982; D’Emilio and Freedman, 1988).

Moreover, while it was barely visible in the census data, the antithesis of a society based on male-dominated households was taking root: a lesbian subculture involving larger numbers of women from more diverse origins than ever before. Its expansion presupposed the spread of female employment and higher education, as these won some women the autonomy to bypass traditional marriage in favor of life paths based on their own sexual orientations. With independent incomes and the relative anonymity of urban life, working-class lesbians in particular had the freedom to create new communities constructed around their own bars as gathering spaces (Faderman, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1993). As well, this subculture built on the wartime experiences of lesbians and gay men, who found partners and community in unprecedented numbers while in uniform (Berube, 1990; Meyer, 1996).

But it was not a matter of new behavior leading inevitably or simply to social change. Many people began thinking in new ways in the postwar years, or at least creatively appropriating to new purposes ideas then in circulation. One of the first to see this was the labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris. Faced with a booming, inflation-prone economy and a Cold War adversary that employed women workers in huge numbers in challenging work, the United States government came to identify women as an untapped national resource: “Womanpower,” as one 1955 White House Conference dubbed their potential. Working women, for their part, turned the government’s talk of “the free world” against longstanding discrimination as they called on Americans to practice the meritocracy the United States boasted of to the world. “Complaints of various kinds of discrimination,” Kessler-Harris found, “flooded the Women’s Bureau” well before sex discrimination on the job became illegal (Kessler Harris, 1982, p. 308; also Hartmann, 1994). Consumer culture, too, may have
prompted changes. Once scorned by Frankfurt School social critics as an anaesthetic if not a tool of capitalist mind control, consumer culture now appears to have been at least partially responsible for drawing more married women into the workforce and so advancing the changes that followed. As old luxuries became necessities and as service industries expanded their labor demands, more women left home to earn the money to buy these things: houses, college educations for their children, cars, refrigerators, and all the rest.

Some have also argued that commercial mass culture in the 1950s and early 1960s was not the mind-numbing force once thought. Looking at popular television shows, movies, and music of the era, the cultural historian Susan Douglas has argued that “growing up female with the mass media” helped bring millions of women to feminism. The media did this not intentionally, but incidentally, through their very contradictions: the mixed messages that at once goaded women to claim equality and told them they were subordinate sex objects. Popular music was another important site of cultural change. When young white teenage women chose rock and roll and rhythm and blues, music grounded in African American culture, they were opening doors to a world their elders hoped to wall off – and thereby in a small but significant way disrupting contemporary constructions of racial difference (Douglas, 1994, p. 7; Breines, 1992).

The long 1950s were also a time of cogent and influential social criticism. C. Wright Mills, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul Goodman, Margaret Mead, Arthur Miller, and Lorraine Hansberry, among others, all produced popular work with important implications for gender, family, and community. Women read this work as avidly as men, and it deepened what the Beat fellow traveler Joyce Johnson called “the psychic hunger of my generation.” Even words that speakers aimed at men landed beyond them. “Never for one minute did I think JFK was talking only to boys,” writes Douglas of Kennedy’s call to her generation in his inaugural address; “he was talking to me as well” (Ehrenreich, 1983; Breines, in Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 391; Douglas, 1994, p. 23).

When all of these strands are considered together, the long 1950s seem less the killer of major social change than its chrysalis. And the Friedan-inspired view of the 1950s appears as the organizing tool it was: as the sociologist Wini Breines said of women’s liberationists, “we learned to understand our own lives as a flight from that time” (Meyerowitz, 1994, p. 383). Certainly it was a time when women of many groups other than the white middle and upper classes were doing significant organizing. It hardly seems coincidental that those active in the most creative ways were from groups left out of the family-wage bargain, who therefore had to find other ways of making do.

For black women in particular, the 1950s was hardly “the doldrums”; it was the germinal phase of one of the most significant mass movements in history. Scholars have come to realize how in that struggle, as Charles Payne puts it, “men led, but women organized” (Payne, 1990, p. 156). While women’s historians had noted the prominence of black women in grassroots civil rights activism, it was students of the black freedom movement who recovered their work. By now, the biographies and local studies have multiplied. Among the stories best told are those of JoAnn Gibson Robinson, whose group organized the infrastructure for the Montgomery bus
boycott; Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper turned freedom fighter who inspired a generation of activists; and Ella Baker, whose profoundly democratic approach to social change continues to captivate scholars and activists alike (Robinson, 1987; Crawford, 1990; Lee, 1999; Grant, 1998).

Nor was it only in the civil rights movement per se that black women worked for change in the 1950s and 1960s. Labor historians have mined rich veins of activism by and for black women in trade unions of this era. The best-documented case is the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), where Addie Wyatt and others stood up for civil rights and gender equity within the union itself and in contracts with employers. Not coincidentally, the UPWA was a left-led, highly democratic union with a sizable black membership; those in more conservative, bureaucratic unions with a largely white male base would find the struggle less inviting (Halpern, 1997; R. Horowitz, 1997; Fehn, 1998; Follet, 1998).

In fact, the progressive wing of the labor movement was the site of significant organizing among white women as well as black from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Like the civil rights work, it goes overlooked in the middle-class-derived “doldrums” model. Here, again, the pioneering work was done by those who lived outside the protection of the family-wage norm. The case of the United Auto Workers (UAW) is perhaps best known, thanks to the pioneering research of Nancy Gabin, who has revealed how from the late 1940s onward activists made use of the UAW’s democratic ideology to bargain for women’s needs with employers and combat the union’s internal sexism. “If there had not been a few people like us doing the kinds of things that we have done,” one of these women pointed out, “much of what we have seen happen in the women’s movement might well not have happened” (Gabin, 1990, p. 188). The UAW was the largest union to host such activity, but it and the UPWA were not alone. The left-wing United Electrical Workers (UE) fought for principles that would still be considered radical today, such as differential pay raises for women to close the gender wage gap. And union men fought alongside union women for such demands. It was in working as a labor journalist for the UE in the 1940s that Betty Friedan first glimpsed feminism in action (Kammenberg, 1993; D. Horowitz, 1998).

Given its scope, such labor organizing suggests a need to rethink postwar women’s politics away from the prevailing focus on exclusively female and overtly feminist currents. “If feminism is taken to be a recognition that women as a sex suffer inequalities and a commitment to the elimination of these sex-based hierarchies,” the labor historian Dorothy Sue Cobble reasons, “then the struggles of union women for pay equity and for mechanisms to lessen the double burden of home and work should be as central to the history of twentieth-century feminism as the battle for the enactment of the Equal Rights Amendment” (Cobble, 1994, p. 57; also Ruiz, 1987; Rose, 1994). This political work and the victories it won for working-class women are of special interest because of the tendency in much scholarship to give the middle term of “race, class, and gender” less rigorous attention. Such working-class initiatives might offer an alternative historical model to the individualism for which white middle-class feminists are so often criticized. At the least, overlooking such political work leaves the historiography ill-equipped to understand change because it cannot appreciate where it started. As one UE activist told an interviewer: “When I meet younger women in higher jobs, I say ‘You’re welcome,’ because many of them are
in their jobs because my generation laid the foundations for them” (Kannenberg, 1993, p. 323).

IV

A new and more flexible framework would help not only in assimilating to a core narrative some of the revisions already appearing in the scholarship. It would also better accommodate the many questions left orphaned by the current approach because they do not fit well within its confines. So much has happened on so many fronts since the grassroots women’s movement peaked a quarter-century ago in the mid-1970s that it would seem foolish to retain that movement as the point at which all interpretive lines must converge. Shifting attention away from the white, middle-class women who dominate the existing storyline, a new framework would turn our eyes toward others whose experiences could provide a fuller, richer, and more multilayered understanding of the period.

One area that desperately needs attention, and that fits better with the rise and fall of the family-wage system than with the resurgence of feminism, is gender in the new immigration. American society has been virtually remade by the influx of over 12 million people between the Immigration Act of 1965 and 1990 and more since, large numbers of them women and girls. Yet one would hardly know this from reading the literature on US women’s history since 1945. Moreover, like the so-called “new immigrants” at the turn of the twentieth century, many recent immigrants are understood by the white majority to be racially different: somehow Other by appearance or culture, whether Latinos, West Indians, Asians, or Africans. Against the backdrop of global labor flows in an information age and growing fission in racial politics, what distinctive gender dimensions do the various new streams of immigration have?

These immigrants, like those of earlier eras, seem to have experienced tensions between first and second generations based on the rival pulls of the world they have left and the one they are joining. Scholars of early twentieth-century immigration have pointed to the powerful lure exercised on young women by commercial leisure, personal consumption, and the new freedoms perceived to come through these. Outside work, these proved the key means of initiation to an individualistic American culture, a culture about which many nevertheless remained ambivalent (Ewen, 1985; Gabaccia, 1994). One encounters these themes again in the oral histories of parents and the writings of young Asian American and Hispanic women – the rival accusations of being “old-fashioned” and patriarchal and of forfeiting a precious heritage for illusory gains.

But this generation’s gender stories are likely to differ from older ones in important ways that deserve attention. What, for example, of Muslims who choose to wear the veil, of women who came as war brides or through arranged marriages (Glenn, 1986; Yuh, forthcoming), or of the sojourners – male and female – who return to their countries of birth with new resources? How do the experiences of highly educated women émigrées, many of them employed in traditionally male professions, differ from their homebound or wage-earning counterparts in 1900 and today? What difference does it make to immigrant women’s traditional role in sustaining ethnic identity and imparting it to the next generation that global travel and
communication are now so much easier? So far, fiction writers have said more on such questions than historians.

With renewed large-scale immigration and surging native-born female employment has come a revival of the mistress–maid dynamic that historians wrote so well about for the nineteenth century, thinking it largely a finished story by the 1970s. Barbara Ehrenreich, having recently worked as a participant-observer in the trade, has written brilliantly about the many unsettling questions this growth industry poses for feminism, hence women’s history: about domestic labor itself, the women doing the work, and the families that employ them. Surely, the breakdown of the family-wage system helps to explain both demand and supply (Ehrenreich, 2000). The racial dynamics of such service employment, or what Evelyn Nakano Glenn has called “the racial division of reproductive labor,” also deserve closer attention from historians in this context (Glenn, 1994).

Scholars of gender might also undertake new kinds of community studies to explore the changing spatial dynamics of postwar US life. As growing numbers of immigrants in varied occupations settle in the suburbs, perhaps these long-stereotyped communities will be reconsidered by historians. Long the fortress of the family wage, suburbs now account for the vast majority of residents in the United States – more than live in cities and rural areas combined. As well, those once excluded from these communities – notably African Americans and immigrants of color – are now settling in established suburbs or creating new ones. In a pioneering treatment of these patterns and of gender in their making, Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen explored how suburban Long Island residents themselves understood their communities and how the communities changed in the wake of civil rights and women’s liberation (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000). This work is an important beginning. Still, historians have yet to produce scholarship on gender and postwar suburbs that rivals the sophistication of colonial and nineteenth-century community studies.

As future women’s historians rethink how gender varied and changed over time in urban and suburban settings, they might also look in new ways at the later years of the Great Migration, when so many African Americans (as well as whites) left the South. Although most of the scholarly literature has focused on the population shift in the World War I era, in fact the numbers of black southerners heading North and West grew exponentially with World War II labor shortages and the collapse of the sharecropping system. In the 1940s and 1950s the numbers ran triple their counterparts for the years more studied; in the 1960s, another 613,000 left the South. Did women have distinctive reasons for leaving? Few empirically minded researchers have followed up on Darlene Clark Hine’s suggestion that black women may have emigrated as much to escape rape and domestic violence as economic subjugation and Jim Crow (Hine, 1994). The lone study of women’s migration from the South in the World War II era, by Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, uses oral histories with Bay Area migrants to reveal how many managed to build communities of mutual care and sustenance and improve their own lives in the process (Lemke-Santangelo, 1996). Looking only at those who achieved economic security, however, her work bypasses questions about the origins and development of contemporary urban poverty.

More broadly, historians could explore the gender dimensions of the widening class structure among African Americans in the postwar years, with increasingly concentrated poverty at one end and unprecedented occupational mobility after the
1960s on the other. One thing is clear. The in-migration of people from the rural South coincided with the out-migration of living-wage jobs from cities. Weakening prospects for economic security dramatically affected family formation, and so contributed to the steep rise in welfare caseloads since the 1960s. The prominence of race, gender, and sexual themes in the public debate over welfare that has so profoundly shaped national politics in recent years thus has deep roots in the evolving systems of race, gender, and economics (Piven and Cloward, 1971; Stack, 1974; Gordon, 1990; Quadagno, 1994).

With new jobs opening up to blacks from civil rights organizing while old ones disappeared, the 1960s and 1970s would prove a formative time for modern urban black communities and for gender in them. Yet historians have yet to catch up to social scientists in coming to terms with the changes and their meaning. The distinctive qualities of black middle-class life in cities might draw attention, particularly now that the sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy has so insightfully captured how young women and men navigate growing up with a unique set of pressures (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Indeed, as the number of professional and better-off African Americans grows, scholars will likely pay more attention to the black middle class and the upwardly mobile women in it. Always more cut off than white women from the promises of the family-wage system, black women innovated from the materials at hand to find new ways of combining work, education, family, and community. In the postwar years, for example, black women were earning post-secondary degrees and building professional careers at higher rates than either black men or white women (Giddings, 1984; Jones, 1985). Their experiences and strategies deserve attention along with the more tragic stories of the women condemned to intergenerational poverty and endless frustration by a political economy stacked against them.

Lastly, curiosity about the demise of the family-wage system might bring more historians to probe questions of subjectivity. Perhaps because of the way the women’s liberation movement, following the New Left, valued experience and action to the neglect of ideas, the intellectual history of women since 1945 – or even of feminism for that matter – is remarkably thin. The gap is especially puzzling in light of the conceptual revolutions that feminism has wrought in most academic disciplines as it changed the culture at large (DuBois et al., 1987).

Yet there are beginnings. From her ethnography of the Silicon Valley, the sociologist Judith Stacey, for example, has charted connections between socioeconomic change and increasingly complex blended family structures on one side, and New Age religious culture and what she calls postfeminism on the other (Stacey, 1990). Pointing to such diverse developments as the popularity of Robert Bly, the Promise Keepers movement, and the Million Man March as the main nexus of the emerging sex/gender system becomes the mother–child bond, Stacey sees a culture “desperately seeking daddies” (Stacey, 1996). The spread of anorexia nervosa, now afflicting black middle-class girls along with white, can also tell us about gender in contemporary American middle-class culture, according to the historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg. In a time of profound social change and in an economy in which “hedonism and discipline must coexist,” this disease that in some ways resembles the fasting of medieval women seeking holiness “appears to be a secular addiction to a new kind of perfectionism, one that links personal salvation to the achievement of an external body configuration rather than an internal spiritual state” (Brumberg, 1988, pp. 260, 7).
Similarly, the surge of spiritual interest in recent years might be usefully explored in light of the ever-more hegemonic therapeutic culture in American life, with its thick gender content and deep but ambivalent connections to feminism. Second-wave feminism is almost unthinkable, after all, without vulgar Freudianism as its prompt and without humanistic psychology as its beacon. Ideas mattered to the emergence of this movement, as did the feelings to which these particular ideas gave legitimacy – namely, concern with “identity,” “authenticity,” and the realization of individual “human potential” (Herman, 1995; Buhle, 1998). Historians of postwar women, usually secular in their own orientations, might also seek out fresh ways of understanding why millions of American women embrace faith of one kind or another. The United States is the most religious of industrialized countries, after all, and seeking to understand that pattern and its consequences might enrich women’s history scholarship – and even shake up what historians think they know about ostensibly secular institutions (Fitzgerald, 2001). Some outstanding models of analysis of the fusion of the sacred and the secular in women’s lives can be found in African American historical writing. Kimberly Philips, for example, has explored “the braiding of faith and personal agency” and the role of churches as sites of intracommunity contestation, while Charles Payne has rigorously examined how spiritual conviction worked for adult black women in the Mississippi freedom movement (Philips, 1998, p. 230; Payne, 1990). Perhaps one day scholars of gender might even look to the mounting corpus of poststructuralist writing as a mass of primary sources with which to explore the assumptions, anxieties, and altered visions of this transitional era.

There might also be imaginative ways of connecting the gender content of the varied subjectivities of our own era with the demise of the family wage and the rise of a globalizing, information-driven economy. Historians of the post-1945 period could learn much from the rich historiography on the market revolution, the Second Great Awakening, and the remaking of white middle-class gender in the North in the nineteenth century. At the least, we might begin to think about the varied spiritualities of the postwar era in conjunction with its evolving social, political, and cultural divisions. Among white women, for example, we know that the social gospel of liberal Protestantism offered many a way into interracial reform long before it was popular (Evans, 1979; Lynn, 1992). But religion energized the right as well as the left. Conservative female activists in causes ranging from Boston’s anti-busing movement to the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment have drawn strength from Catholicism and certain strains of evangelical Protestantism, a reliance that needs closer historical attention (Mansbridge, 1986; Formisano, 1991). Faith has also tended to play a powerful role in community organizing across the political spectrum. Given the prominence of women as grassroots leaders in such local organizing of all descriptions in the last quarter-century, including in many working-class communities of color, historians have done astonishingly little to document, let alone to analyze, their efforts (Rose, 1994; Kaplan, 1997). A scholarship that explored the workings of faith in such diverse settings might find ways of blending the best of the many subfields that have enlivened recent history. Attuned to political economy and social history, its practitioners could develop a deeper grasp of consciousness and a better-anchored version of cultural studies than that now dominant.

The kind of framework suggested here would also make for better integration of organized anti-feminism into the narrative of postwar women’s history. Prior to the
late 1970s, a kind of teleology about feminism’s future went unquestioned, even when the movement was criticized for racial or class chauvinism. The assumption, rarely argued but widely shared, was that once women were aroused, their politics would naturally move in a progressive direction—perhaps now deepened by antiracism and attention to class inequities. The rise of a mass female anti-feminist movement in the 1980s came as a jolt to that very American faith in progress. Now, suddenly, feminists had to confront living—and loud—evidence that some women liked the system feminists aimed to change. At the least, they had to confront what Deirdre English called “the fear that feminism would free men first” (English, 1983).

As the lifelong conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly built a women’s movement strong enough to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, and as tens of thousands of women rallied against abortion rights by the late 1970s, a handful of feminist social scientists tried to understand what was happening. Using ethnographic methods, they found that feminist and anti-feminist activists, despite both camps being broadly middle class and white, tended to live contrasting lives with different values. The sociologist Kristin Luker starkly yet empathetically contrasted the two sides in the abortion conflict, showing how activists’ positions emerged from their divergent views about motherhood, ethics, sex, the good society, and the role of government. In effect, each group saw the issue in zero-sum terms: if the government endorsed the values of their opponents, their own way of life would suffer. “Each side,” explained the anthropologist Faye Ginsberg, “constitutes itself in dialogue with the ‘enemy,’ real and imagined” (Luker, 1984; Ginsberg, 1989, p. 196). Historians have yet to contribute their own research to this literature; when they do, a family-wage framework should aid understanding.

It should also help in comprehending men as people of gender in the years after 1945, perhaps the newest frontier for historians. Judith Stacey has argued that “the sort of family values campaign we most urgently need is one to revise popular masculinities” (Stacey, 1996, p. 77). Surely one way to promote such a revision is to dig beneath stereotypes, whether conservative or feminist, and seek to recover the complexities of manhood as idea and lived experience among different groups in the past. Some have already begun this work. The literature in African American studies about black masculinity in different contexts is rich and growing (Liebow, 1967; Harper, 1996; Carby, 1998; Hine et al., 1999). A similar exploration is beginning in Chicano studies, as evidenced by Ramón Gutiérrez’s exploration of the gender and sexual politics of the Chicano movement and its historiography, and in Asian American studies, as in Yen Lu Espiritu’s thoughtful synthesis of how labor conditions and immigration law have structured gender relations among Asian Americans over time (Gutiérrez, 1993; Espiritu, 1997). Among the studies focusing on whites, labor historians have so far produced the most exciting work, such as Joshua Freeman’s exposition of the gendered work culture of construction worker “hardhats” in the early 1970s (Freeman, 1993). But this project is just beginning: a great deal remains to be done.

V

The resurgence of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s will necessarily be a big part of the historiography of postwar US women and one of its most exciting objects of analysis. But it need not be the only one, nor the one to which all other developments are
forced to speak. Chances are that if we move away from the women’s movement story for a time to ask other questions of other groups and other developments in American life, we will come back to that story with fresh eyes. Able to be surprised and more deeply curious about what is in the sources, historians might also conceive more broad-gauged and generative interpretations. Beyond its capaciousness – its ability to embrace the gender histories of American women and men in both public and personal life in all their variety and complexity in the post-1945 years – a framework based on the unraveling of the family-wage system might have other advantages.

For some time now, historians of the 1960s have polarized in their interpretations of the meanings of these struggles. Some, largely but not only white men, argue that the excesses of the later years undermined the New Deal coalition and swelled the ranks of conservatives. Others, including scholars of color and white feminists, see this reading as a profound capitulation to the right that devalues the contributions of feminism, Black Power, and lesbian and gay liberation and that ignores the situations that made independent movements seem necessary to participants. The clash pivots on counterposing class politics – usually understood as politics agreeable to the officiadam of the labor movement and the Democratic Party – to so-called identity politics. As the quarrels multiply, the rancor deepens. This, the philosopher Nancy Fraser warns, is a hazard characteristic of our age. When oppositions are created between what she calls the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution, all parties who would benefit from progressive change lose – “stuck,” as Fraser puts it, “in the vicious circles of mutually reinforcing cultural and economic subordination” (Fraser, 1997, p. 33).

The case of the anomalous gender wage gap mentioned earlier illustrates this. An inequity experienced by women turns out to build on wider economic inequality, such that it is hard to imagine a solution that does not incorporate both dimensions: recognition and redistribution, gender justice along with class fairness. Indeed, ironically, experts estimate that insofar as the wage gap has narrowed in the United States since the 1980s, about one-third of the change comes not from the improvement of women’s earnings but from the reduction of blue-collar men’s earnings with economic restructuring. The family-wage framework thus offers a way for historians to come to terms with the tensions so pivotal to our politics and so deeply rooted in our history and everyday life, while escaping dead-end debates over them. With the family-wage system as the object of inquiry, we might turn away from the circular firing line and turn our energies toward matters of common concern. We might, that is, approach with more curiosity both the current impasse in the politics of redistribution and the roots of the appeal of the politics of recognition. Such an approach could more effectively account for the distance women have traveled on so many fronts since 1945, while better illuminating the road ahead. Rather than persist in the bashing of “identity politics” in the name of “class politics” or vice versa, then, we might instead look to one of the core historical institutions that shaped each of these currents and left different groups of Americans with such conflicting feelings about them.

REFERENCES


Hartmann, Susan M.: *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982).


Stacey, Judith: In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).


