

## EDITOR'S REMARKS

Among literary critics of the post-structuralist persuasion a fierce debate about epistemology has been raging for some time; “language” has emerged from it as the determinant of social relations. Labor historians have not only rejected the post-structuralists’ exaggerated claims, but have also distanced themselves from the less blatant and more subtle aspects of these critics’ discourse, which might have enriched both their theory and scholarship. In this issue’s Scholarly Controversy, Joan Scott attempts to demonstrate how language can serve in the perception and definition of gender and thereby enrich working-class history. She challenges the conflation of language and words and sees this tendency as an obstacle to bringing gender as an analytic category into the practice of labor history. She criticizes Gareth Stedman Jones for using theories of language in his “Rethinking Chartism” in an essentially conservative manner—by using a close study of the vocabulary of the movement to shift emphasis from the economic to the political sphere. “Jones stops short of opening up . . . important conceptual questions because he treats language simply as a vehicle for communicating ideas rather than as a system of meaning or a process of signification.” Thus, Scott argues, Jones reduces Chartism to a formal political struggle or strategy and thereby reduces the relational meanings of class: antithetical, inclusive, exclusive—a way of thinking about all of social life. In “rereading Chartism,” she deftly reveals how the linguistic construction of class (rationalism, politics, producers are men) by the Chartists inevitably meant that the working class would be represented by men; that a masculine construction of class would create a gendered family division of labor.

While applauding Scott’s efforts to carry out a difficult and necessary task, each of her three critics turns cautionary about the exploration of language by labor historians, and each has a different vantage point. Bryan Palmer cautions Scott and Jones about exaggerating the importance of language and thereby threatening to collapse together class and class consciousness. The important role of capitalist accumulation and the necessity of institutionalizing the reproduction of labor must not be set on a shelf, he argues, in the process of establishing the relationship of language, gender, and class. While deploring some of the intellectual posturing and pretentiousness of the post-structuralist literary debate, Christine Stansell agrees with Scott that “historians’ willful disinterest” in it has led to some missed opportunities. Stansell welcomes Scott’s attempt to use feminist theory to address gender relations even in situations and places where female influence and participation was slight or absent. But she challenges the implication that language in and of itself will bring gender to the forefront and argues that only social analysis of the activities of real women can

do so. Anson Rabinbach welcomes Scott's rereading of Chartism using the more subtle understanding of language and gender as a means of uncovering the formation of class. He underlines Scott's complaint that historians have resisted paying attention to "rules, conventions, metaphors, and narrative strategies" in their sources. At the same time he alerts us to the "terrifying relativism" that the post-structuralists have unleashed. He criticizes Scott for failing to heed her own call for investigating the internalized system of meanings in introducing an opposition between the Chartists' rationalism and Owenite utopian movements that is more apparent than real. Going further than Scott in demands for rethinking by labor historians, Rabinbach challenges us to put "working class" itself on the top of the list of concepts to be investigated by "plural visions of social identities."

Our two review essays are a contrast in focus. Linda Kerber provides a painstaking analysis of Sean Wilentz's recent seminal work, *Chants Democratic*; R. A. Markey offers a broad survey of the rich but largely unknown history of Australian labor. The substantive article by Helmut Gruber on sexuality in "Red Vienna" continues our exploration of the social and cultural history of the working class begun by Ellen Ross in *ILWCH* No. 27.

We are taking the occasion of an interesting report from Louise Tilly on "the working-class historian tourist" to begin a new section titled *Archives and Artifacts*. There, we will report on recent developments in various archives and other repositories of printed material as well as on sites, structures, restored workplaces, and art collections housing or embodying artifacts of labor history. The information will have to come from readers willing to share their discoveries.

H. G.