

COMMENT

“Each of Us is an Other”

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Abstract

Cobble’s study of American social democratic feminism is a fascinating narrative of the lives of women who crossed the boundaries of class, race and nation-states to build a better world. Her chronological account of the careers and activism of these women is not only a major contribution to the history of feminism but also a significant addition to the study of social democracy worldwide.

Cobble’s study of American social democratic feminism is a fascinating, sympathetic, *and* honest narrative of the lives of women who crossed the boundaries of class, race, and nation states to build a better world. Hers is not a romanticized hagiography of feminist women from all walks of life, but rather a sound analysis of their aspirations, realizations, and failures. Cobble provides impressive empirical evidence of the activism of US-born and immigrant working-class women to stress the multi-class composition of their movement. By so doing, she contradicts the popular depiction of the movement as “bourgeois feminism” (p. 34) that was out of touch with daily life. The pages are filled with details about the background of “famous and not so famous” (p. 2) women, whose interactions allowed them to develop strategies for different audiences. Within this heterogeneous movement, many of them used their privileged position to reach the highest ranks of national and international governance, whereas working-class women informed their more fortunate peers of the living conditions and actual needs of female wage earners.

Cobble’s chronological account of the careers and activism of these women is not only a major contribution to the history of feminism, but also a significant addition to the study of social democracy worldwide. Its century-long perspective takes the reader on a well-written geo-historical tour to better understand the beginnings and evolution of ideas, networks, and concrete actions. Yet, despite the many names and issues raised – which include important details about intimate lives – she cannot cover every aspect of this complex history. Despite the heft of the book, she left me wanting more.

Inspired by Cobble’s last words (“Each of us is an Other”, p. 445) and by my research on the history of subalternity and international organizations, I would like to know more about those female “others”, who were relegated to the margins of

the world of work and of the feminist movement. Even though US feminists wished to end the alleged alterity that justified women's subordinate position in patriarchal societies, they originally seemed to have sided with men when it came to the analysis of what Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas call "intimate labor".¹ In this sense, the "Other" in Cobble's quote does not apply to women involved in commercial sex (and to a certain extent domestic work). In the new millennium, thankfully, that is no longer the case, but during much of the feminist movement's history, thousands, if not millions, of women figured only marginally in that story. In my view, this had to do with the social Darwinist roots and the limited definition of work among social reformers at the national and international levels.

Cobble demonstrates that the founders of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) "moved the United States from elitism and helped undermine the prevailing social Darwinist disdain for working people" (p. 15). The "working people", however, did not include all female workers. Several feminist leaders, who were wholeheartedly involved in social work during the Progressive Era, used eugenic theories and methods to fight "urban degeneration" and reform "the unfit". Influential women such as Edith Abbott, Jane Addams, and Sophonisba Breckinridge understood "social betterment" in terms of "diagnosis" and care of the "feeble-minded". As Angie Kennedy argues, Addams "explicitly lauded the work of the eugenics movement and used its language in her book on prostitution and vice, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*",² published in 1912. For their part, Edith Abbot and her sister Grace – an eminent immigrant and child welfare advocate and an important ally of the feminist movement – were linked to the Rockefeller Foundation and the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), both of which played a crucial role in the dissemination of eugenic ideas in prostitution debates.³ In the early 1920s, Grace Abbott pushed the League of Nations to initiate an international investigation on trafficking for prostitution. It was "absolutely necessary", she said, "to secure the facts to refute sensational exaggerations or general denials as to the traffic".⁴ The League's Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children approved the US proposal and appointed a Special Body of Experts, which included Dr. William Snow, Director of the ASHA and vice president of the American Eugenics Society – where also Grace Abbott held an honorary post. During the 1920s, the League focused solely on trafficking and legal methods to combat it, but, in the early 1930s, the organization stepped into the realm of national politics, initially to fight the regulation of prostitution, and by mid-decade commercial sex as a whole. It then built a web of international experts that circulated various ideas about the "mental deficiency" of women who sold sex. Those experts and feminist activists followed the tradition of

¹Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Culture, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford, CA, 2010).

²Angie C. Kennedy, "Eugenics, 'Degenerate Girls', and Social Workers During the Progressive Era", *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 23 (2008), pp. 22–37, 29.

³Molly Ladd-Taylor, "Saving Babies and Sterilizing Mothers: Eugenics and Welfare Politics in the Interwar United States", *Social Politics*, 4 (1997), pp. 137–153; Randall Hansen and Desmond King, *Eugenics, Race and the Population Scare in Twentieth Century North America* (New York, 2013).

⁴Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children [hereafter "Committee"], Second Session, Geneva, 22–27 March 1923, pp. 27, 61, League of Nations Archive [hereafter "LNA"], C.225.M.129.1923.IV.

“leftist reform eugenics”,⁵ which rejected racism and stressed the possibility of rescuing wayward women and girls.

I wonder how the view of prostitution among full-rights feminists evolved during the interwar period and subsequent years. Sex work does appear in Cobble’s publication, but only for the end of the twentieth century onward. I also wonder what the relationship was between full-rights feminists of the first generation, and women active within the radical labour union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”). The Wobblies’ inclusionary policy shows that the idea of prostitution as a form of work at the time was not an anachronism. Indeed, the IWW expanded the category of labour to include sex workers.⁶ In interwar Germany, too, sex workers mobilized to resist abuse and demand better working conditions; some even formed their own union, the Association of the Legal Prostitutes of Hamburg and Altona.⁷ In many other places, they were not allowed to form unions, but viewed themselves as part of the working class. In Argentina, for example, women who sold sex used the print media to call for better working conditions and respect as workers. One told a reporter: “we have not become what we wanted to become, but the fact is that we are workers, the worst class of workers, but we have the right to live as decent people”.⁸ What did full-rights activists make of that interwar activism around sex work?

Both the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) discussed prostitution and its relation to domestic work after 1933, once Marguerite Thibert – the French socialist and feminist who led the ILO’s Section on Conditions of Employment of Women and Children – was invited to participate in the League’s anti-traffic committee.⁹ Amidst the trauma of the economic crisis, they touched upon the issue of women’s wages, working conditions, and unemployment. From the reports the League’s anti-traffic committee had received from women’s organizations, they concluded that a large proportion of women involved in commercial sex came from domestic service.¹⁰ This was an issue that resurfaced in each yearly meeting but no consensus was reached. According to British delegate S.W. Harris, too much emphasis was laid on the connection between wages and prostitution¹¹

⁵Alison Bashford, “Internationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Eugenics”, in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York, 2010), pp. 154–172, 155; Magaly Rodríguez García, “Beware of Pity: The League of Nations Treatment of Prostitution”, *Monde(s)*, 19 (2021), pp. 97–117.

⁶Heather Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women and the Industrial Workers of the World in the Pacific Northwest, 1905–1924* (Corvallis, OR, 2018); Nicholas Thoburn, “The Hobo Anomalous: Class, Minorities and Political Invention in the Industrial Workers of the World”, *Social Movement Studies*, 2 (2003), pp. 61–84.

⁷Victoria Harris, *Selling Sex in the Reich: Prostitutes in German Society, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 61–64.

⁸“La vida miserable y trágica de las cabareteras revelada ante varios funcionarios oficiales”, *El Gráfico*, 19 October 1937, p. 12, quoted in Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln, NE, 1991), p. 200.

⁹Françoise Thébaud, *Un traversée du siècle. Marguerite Thibert, femme engagée et fonctionnaire internationale* (Paris, 2017).

¹⁰Committee, Minutes of the Sixth Session, 26 April 1927, p. 16, LNA C.338.M.113.1927.IV. For discussions within the European dominated feminist lobby within the League, see Christine Machiels, *Les féminismes et la prostitution (1860–1960)* (Rennes, 2016), pp. 143–176.

¹¹Committee, Minutes of the Sixth Session, 26 April 1927, p. 17.

and, in 1929, the French abolitionist Avril de Sainte-Croix informed the members of the committee that the letters she had received from British colleagues suggested that “poverty was not the only cause of prostitution, but that idleness, coquetry, greed and bad company also play a part”.¹² They all agreed, however, that the issue of wages paid to young women was part of a larger economic question and that it needed to be studied in coordination with the ILO.

Thibert seemed determined to tackle the problems faced by working women but her conclusions on prostitution did not differ from the ideas of her abolitionist colleagues within and outside the League, who viewed commercial sex and trafficking as one and the same thing. Furthermore, the effects of unemployment and the economic crisis on women’s lives were undermined during those discussions. They acknowledged the influence unemployment and low wages played in the movement of women to the sex sector, but stressed, above all, the “demoralization” of young people. The representative of the International Union of Catholic Women’s Leagues, Ms Lavielle, for example, argued that during an investigation only a few women had mentioned unemployment as the cause of prostitution and believed that “the replies of prostitutes were often merely pretexts”.¹³ In her view, many of them simply refused to work. While the Polish delegate, Mrs Grabinska, disagreed by arguing that unemployment “constituted a serious danger” for young women, the ILO representative chose the middle way. Thibert claimed that she had tried to study the subject but that an analysis based on statistics had led to no satisfactory results.

All the participants in those debates perceived prostitution as an evil, not work. They understood work as something positive which kept men and women at safe distance from an “immoral life”.¹⁴ In contrast, the ILO viewed domestic work as a profession but, until 2011, not one that deserved an international convention. In the 1930s, it believed that women who took up domestic service ought to “feel that they had a real vocation and should not be ashamed of their work”.¹⁵ But pride did not buy food and other commodities, so a countless number of women (and men) kept looking for alternatives in sectors for extra-reproductive bodily services, such as the sex industry, and, later, commercial gestational surrogacy and the selling of organs or other human assets.¹⁶

Discussions on commercial sex never disappeared from feminist circles but the issue gained importance as sex workers became increasingly vocal from the 1970s onward. Carol Leigh coined the term “sex work” when she noticed that a workshop

¹²Committee, Minutes of the Eighth Session, Geneva, 19–27 April 1929, p. 116, LNA C.294.M.97.1929.IV.

¹³Committee, Minutes of the Thirteenth Session, Geneva, 4 April 1934, pp. 16–27, 26–27, LNA CTFE/13th Session/PV (Revised).

¹⁴For an analysis of the ILO’s century-long refusal to consider commercial sex as a form of work, see Eileen Boris and Magaly Rodríguez García, “(In)Decent Work: Sex and the ILO”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 33 (2021), pp. 194–221.

¹⁵Committee, Minutes of the Fifteenth Session, 22 April 1936, p. 4, LNA CTFE/15th Session/PV.5.

¹⁶Mahua Sarkar, “When Maternity is Paid Work: Commercial Gestational Surrogacy at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”, in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker and Susan Zimmerman (eds), *Women’s ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards, and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 340–364; Janet Golden, “From Commodity to Gift: Gender, Class, and the Meaning of Breast Milk in the Twentieth Century”, *The Historian*, 59 (1996), pp. 75–87.

on prostitution at the Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media conference included the phrase “Sex Use Industry”. Insulted, she proposed to talk about “Sex Work Industry” instead.¹⁷ She became increasingly involved within organizations like COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) and became an icon of the sex workers’ movement. The new terminology – along with debates on pornography, the rights of trans women, and so on – led to a rift within the feminist movement and to the so-called sex wars, which last until today.¹⁸

Cobble shows that late twentieth-century full-rights feminists accepted the idea of intimate labour as work, but I wonder how they reacted to the inertia of national and international elites. Did they, as Terri Nilliasca claims, put too much emphasis on access to wage labour?¹⁹ Did they, despite their inclusion of immigrant and minority workers among their ranks and their formal pronouncements for the passage of regulations on household work, remain too passive about the myriad of abuses domestic workers faced? Why were they unable to mobilize their social democrat counterparts within the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to tackle those issues sooner? And what about their position vis-à-vis radical feminists who refused and still refuse to listen to sex workers’ urgent call for state protection in the United States and abroad?²⁰ The structure of the ILO and the international trade unions undoubtedly impacted the outcome. To be fair, Cobble does not engage in a blame game, even as she recognizes limits and failures.

Cobble clearly shows that “full rights feminists in the United States and elsewhere were not practicing a marginal politics” (p. 424). Many women, however, did, and still do, remain on the margins of feminist structures. In the epilogue, Cobble ends with six insights twentieth-century full-rights feminists might give to those of the twenty-first. Yet, those imaginary advices seem directed at women who have already found channels to express their grievances. What about others? What advice would past full-rights feminists give to contemporary cis and trans women whose legal and societal status as illegal migrants, and as unacknowledged or despised workers, puts them at the mercy of benevolent bosses, clients, family members, neighbours, activists, or scholars to save them from oblivion? Aisha, a Colombian trans sex worker active in the Americas and Europe, asked me a few years ago: “Who will mourn me if they find me dead in my workplace?”²¹ Can today’s full-rights feminists open their doors to women like her?

¹⁷Carol Leigh aka Scarlot Harlot, “Inventing Sex Work”, in Jill Nagle (ed.), *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York and London, 1997), pp. 223–231.

¹⁸Ann Ferguson, “Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminism”, *Sign*, 10 (1984), pp. 106–112.

¹⁹Terri Nilliasca, “Some Women’s Work: Domestic Work, Class, Race, Heteropatriarchy, and the Limits of Legal Reform”, *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, 16 (2011), pp. 377–410, 377–379.

²⁰Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and P.G. Macioti, *Sex Workers Speak: Who Listens?* (London, 2016). Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/sex-workers-speak-who-listens/>; last accessed 18 October 2021.

²¹Informal interview with Aisha by Magaly Rodríguez García, Antwerp, August 2017.