

## WOMEN'S WORK, MARKETS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ONTARIO

Marjorie Griffin Cohen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988.

### *Daniel Drache*

Canadian women scholars have long suspected that work in the home was integral to national economic development. Now, thanks to Marjorie Griffin Cohen's major treatment of the crucial role women's economic activity played in transforming a colonial economy into a modern, export-oriented one, the facts are splendidly documented for all to read. Her great accomplishment is to show how women's non-market activity in nineteenth-century Ontario became a kind of infrastructure that touched every area of economic development particularly at a time when the economy was being transformed by the forces of industrialism. Seen in this light, Cohen's historical examination of these issues is a *tour de force* with few equals. No doubt it will force political economists to take a long, hard look at the key relationship between the subsistence economy where women traditionally have found themselves — and still find themselves — and market activity, supposedly the main institution responsible for generating wealth.

The idea that the market is the only known method of providing individuals — as well as nations — the information necessary to make choices about the allocation of scarce resources, is a standard part of the mythology of modern neo-classical economics. But it serves social science poorly. In the capitalist world, markets function in ways which defy comprehension and impose terrible costs on society. Indeed, the market has never been an efficient allocator of resources as the theory trumpets. If anything, the marginalization and undervaluation of women's work shows just how limited conventional economic theory is, with its meaningless platitudes about the market/private property economies as the overwhelming reality of economic life.

Even marxist notions about economic growth have obscured the key importance of women's work to development. In Canada, for instance, the staple theory of

export-oriented development, developed by Innis and updated by modern neo-marxian Innisians such as Naylor and Clement, has ignored the place of women's work in the sphere of production — reinforcing the impression that the family and the household were only of limited importance to Canadian economic growth in the nineteenth century. More important was wage labour, the system of production and mode of capital accumulation. This was because staple production of Canadian resource exports such as timber, agricultural products, and base metals depended on foreign demand and foreign capital to build the rail-water infrastructure necessary to ship these bulky goods to distant markets. The subsistence economy of the household took a back seat to men's work whether it was in investment or production-oriented activities. For the male-dominated economics profession, the bedrock activity of production for the household was seen as little more than women earning pin-money to help out in hard times.

Cohen's book demolishes this stereotype and much more besides. She has effectively reworked the staple theory by asking a deceptively simple question: how was Ontario's wheat-exporting economy able to grow even when exports were in serious trouble and subject to enormous swings in price and demand? Her answer is also deceptively simple: she claims that other forms of market activity must have been more significant than had previously been thought. Indeed they were.

She shows that women's work in producing for the market was, in fact, as important as building roads and settlement in the nineteenth century. In an 'open' economy subject to dramatic fluctuations in income, family units were drawn early on into staple production to acquire cash for goods they needed. Women's non-wage and so-called non-market activities — shoe making, producing cloth, dairy, fruit, vegetables and poultry for sale — not only stabilized the family but often subsidized the subsistence wages of male labour. Seen in this perspective, Cohen's work is indeed pathbreaking. She has given us a way to link family production (which in the nineteenth century involved the largest number of people in the economy) to the ruthless mode of export-led staple production that skewed growth regionally. The core of her thesis is that when the

great staple trades such as timber and farm products declined, the so-called subsistence sector became not only the key to the individual survival of families but to the process of capitalist accumulation more generally.

The evidence of these 'other' market and non-market activities is impressive. Using a host of untapped archival material, Cohen recreates the world of women's work. In nineteenth-century Ontario, the market relied extensively on women's work for at least two reasons: first, by providing unpaid labour on the land, women freed men for varying periods of time for waged labour. This meant that employers could avoid paying wages equal to the cost of maintaining the family and his worker. With wages effectively subsidized, capital accumulation proceeded at a higher rate than would have occurred had the price of labour power been greater. Secondly, women's primary economic activity was not only to ensure goods and services for the welfare of the family, but also to provide the family with income. Thus, women again enabled capitalists to accumulate at a higher rate by their home production. Not only were women producing goods and services for the maintenance of the family welfare, but also increasingly for the market. This provided an important share of the family income through the sale for market exchange of surpluses such as poultry, garden produce, shoes, cloth and dairy products — all of which became significant to the growth of the economy and indeed local and regional markets.

This re-examination of the instrumental role of women in development challenges many other preconceived notions about gender and development. For instance, economists like to stress that women have only recently entered the labour force. How wrong-headed an idea this is. As Cohen stresses, industrialization did not restrict women's activities in the Ontario economy as it did in Britain. The reverse was true. With the coming of industrialization, women's participation in market activity increased in Canada. This was due to the fact that from the 1860s onward, Canada lost more than ten percent of its population each decade to the U.S. Faced with constant labour shortages, women filled the gap. This meant women's work was also transformed, shifting away from production for the

family to farm production oriented more to the market. For this reason, women's participation in Canadian development is not incidental but integral to economic rationalization and early labour organization. Indeed, the early women's rights movements in Ontario benefitted from the active presence of women in the economy and gave them a large constituency to draw on.

Of course, there were counter tendencies that worked against women's emancipation. Cohen is at her best in examining women's rights and male property rights in Tory Ontario. In a fascinating analysis, she shows that neither custom nor law at this time regarded the family as an equalitarian unit that shared the family assets in common. Control of property was in male hands alone. Patriarchy dominated the division of labour from its pre-capitalist origins. A woman had no legal rights to what was produced despite the fact that her labour was critical to the family's well-being. Everything was under her husband's control including the children, the family property and, most critically, her own labour. In the often-repeated words of William Blackstone, the eminent British jurist, in the eyes of the law "husband and wife are one and that one is the husband." Thanks to this splendid book, we understand in a deeper way how difficult it is to strike down gender inequality in the market and in the family structure.

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### **SEALSKIN AND SHODDY: Working Women in American Labor Press Fiction, 1870-1920**

Ann Schofield, ed. *Contributions in Women's Studies*, Number 96. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

#### **Linda Kealey**

The North American labour press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tried to attract readers not only through its news and editorial coverage, but also through fiction. Schofield's collection, culled from a broad selection of labour papers, stretches from the Knights of Labor in the 1880s through the American Federation of Labor in the early part of the century, with a slight nod toward the Industrial Workers of the World in one

piece of fiction. Her brief introduction contextualizes the stories and discusses the relationship of such fiction to labour history and women's history and suggests what such stories can tell us about popular understandings of literary forms. As the editor notes, the authors are by and large representative of large unions with female rank and file and few are workers themselves. While reflecting themes dominant among working-class women and men, their purpose is prescriptive, that is, aimed at shaping working women's responses to industrialization and the changing social conditions of women's work.

More than half the volume is devoted to a reprint of W. H. Little's *Knights of Labor* novel which provides the title to this volume. While the story follows the conventions of nineteenth century sentimental fiction, it also conveys the flavour of the knights' social philosophy, a philosophy described in detail in Susan Levine's study, *Labor's True Woman* (Philadelphia, 1984). Schofield's interpretation of this social philosophy unfortunately stresses the older view of the Knights as reform oriented and non-confrontational, a view that has been revised by recent literature on the Knights. While the fictional heroine of this story is a middle-class daughter of an industrialist who takes on the identity of a sewing girl and later helps to organize the sewing women into a protective association, the literary portrait of these working women tends to downplay working women's own initiatives in the labour movement; nevertheless, the fictional portrayal of factory life, particularly among women in the clothing trades, does suggest the realities of low wages and exploitation as well as the potential for resistance among women workers. More importantly, this novel, like many of the other briefer stories, suggests the tensions between femininity and waged labour which so preoccupied both social reformers and working people themselves in this period. The heroine, Mamie Symington, also challenges the boundaries of middle-class womanhood by taking an active role in challenging the grinding exploitation of the sewing women, albeit with the help of the handsome, university educated young man Mamie eventually marries. It is young Hal Hinston after all who draws up the constitution for the protective association,

thus underlining the accepted notion that women, even relatively liberated ones, were dependent on men and accepted male authority.

The message that women could be feminine and work for a living in dignity, despite obstacles, was an important one in the context of social ambivalence about the value and propriety of women's waged labour. Many of the stories in this volume point to the dangers inherent in low-waged work, particularly the temptation to immorality and prostitution. Indeed the only fiction from an IWW journal, "Mary Shaughnessy," portrays the inevitable downfall of a shop girl ground down by long hours and low wages and easily seduced and abandoned by the shopowner's son. Nevertheless, many of the other stories also stress that being a working woman might also lead to a sense of collectivity and resistance. For example, in "The Apple," a young girl employed in a sweat shop sewing garments was discovered by the boss to be eating the fruit while sewing; snatching the apple from her he indignantly threw it in the waste basket. Next day all 40 women workers put down their work and each took out an apple at the appointed hour and began eating, to the astonishment of the boss and his foreman. The apple became the symbol of resistance to the male bosses and catalyzed a new spirit among the formerly hopeless women workers. The apple, as symbol of resistance, also suggests a reading which recasts more basic imagery, particularly of Eve and her role as temptress in the creation myth.

Some of the stories in this collection were written by prominent ILGWU organizer, Gertrude Barnum, who used fiction to suggest that unionization would improve the wages and working conditions of women workers. "This Style: Six Twenty-Nine" relates the story of a dissatisfied hat trimmer who bemoans the acquiescence of her co-workers in their own drudgery while pausing with a friend in front of a store window mannequin labeled "This Style \$6.29." Upon attending a meeting of the Hat Trimmers' Union, the heroine discovers "a class of girls who do not wait for others to tag them with a price... a class of girls with will-power behind their pink cheeks who can open their mouths and put a price on themselves, and a good price, too" through their union. Barnum's skeptical heroine