

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History edited by Lex Heerma VAN VOSS and Marcel VAN DER LINDEN, New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, 250 pp., ISBN 1-57181-787-5.

Judy Haiven

Volume 59, Number 3, été 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/010931ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/010931ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Haiven, J. (2004). Review of [*Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History* edited by Lex Heerma VAN VOSS and Marcel VAN DER LINDEN, New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, 250 pp., ISBN 1-57181-787-5.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 59 (3), 625–626. <https://doi.org/10.7202/010931ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2004

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

et travailleuses sont poussés à la limite de leurs capacités, et chez ceux où les postes ne sont adaptés à l'anthropométrie moyenne que d'un sexe, une petite différence de force physique ou de taille peut avoir des répercussions sur la santé. Ce fait revient dans l'une des études de cas, qui en parle de façon plus nuancée.

Ceci dit, le livre est brillant, bien écrit, stimulant et informateur pour quiconque s'intéresse aux questions sociales en santé au travail.

KAREN MESSING

Université du Québec à Montréal

Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History

edited by Lex Heerma VAN VOSS and Marcel VAN DER LINDEN, New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, 250 pp., ISBN 1-57181-787-5.

Class and Other Identities is about the roles that religion, class, gender and ethnicity play in the writing of labour history. Through a mainly European lens, the book looks at each aspect in a chapter on its own.

Incidentally, the best way to read this book is from back to front. For starters, the annotated bibliography is invaluable because it gives the reader a taste of dozens of recent books on working men's and women's history, identity and ethnicity from 1990 to 2000. A second excellent morsel is the "Brief Guide to Relevant Websites" which highlights online tools for labour history researchers including historical journal listings and even labour history exhibitions and archives online. Finally the back of the book gives an inventory of the "Main West European History Periodicals 1911 to 2000" which is also a delight to read. I had no idea that, for example, the *Journal of the Scottish Labour History* was published for fifteen years, or that *Llafur: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History* continues to publish into its 30th year.

All this is to say that what happens at the end of the book is just as interesting as what happens at the beginning of the book. *Class and Other Identities* looks at a number of different debates on the confluence of social class and labour

history. Some of the debates are more familiar than others.

At the start, the authors try to debunk the notion that "great men make history". They believe that in the study of history, topics such as war, imperialism and diplomacy should not be put on a pedestal. In the study of history, the authors point out: "The powerless, poor and 'red' did not fall within its field of vision." (p. 11). In fact, according to van Voss and van der Linden, the shift away from the "great men make history" way of seeing the world began in the nineteenth century. The book outlines five stages which move labour history into a more sociological context. It is interesting to look at the fourth stage, exemplified by writers in the 1960s and 70s. This was the heyday for labour history for two reasons. First, business, cultural and political history began to enrich the study of social history and labour history. Added to this was a level of internationalization of the discipline, as seen by the fact that US scholars were, for the first time, starting to take an interest in the field of labour history. A second reason given in the book is that labour history was spilling over to the social sciences. Anthropologists, sociologists and geographers were trying to marry ideas from their disciplines to notions in labour history. Labour

history was becoming more popular, dynamic and focused on social movements and organization.

However, according to van Voss and van der Linden, the 1980s – the fifth stage – changed that situation. Labour history fell out of favour with academics. Part of the reason for this was the ascendance of the discipline of women's studies because it tended to segregate the history of women from the history of men. Though it is pointed out that women's history is about all of mankind, not just half of it (p. 16), many academics saw the split between men's and women's history as encompassing more than just a division of historical facts. There are the issues of gendered language, private and public space, paid work, domestic work versus work outside the home – these issues remain at the root of the schism. Another reason for the shift away from labour history is that other identities such as religion or ethnic minorities were involved and had to be 'counted'.

Mike Savage's chapter, "Class and Labour History" goes beyond a Marxist perspective on labour history. Savage refuses to 'reduce' political and industrial conflict to class elements, instead he flags a new dimension – that working class life is characteristically built around insecurity, which means labour history should be looked at in "the contexts in which workers' lives are lived" (p. 69).

In the chapter "Gender in Labour History," Eileen Yeo outlines how gender is featured in class identity. She writes about the myth and reality of masculinity from the factory floor to

the union hall and women's struggle to escape life in the "private sphere" of the 19th century. My interest in human resource management was sparked when Yeo referred to middle class women's role in industry prior to World War I. She writes that social work, as a profession, got its start when women worked as 'welfare officers' who watched over women workers in heavy industry. In that context, women got caught between the professional/managerial class and the working class. We know that twenty or thirty years earlier, it was mainly men who worked as 'welfare officers' and formed the first ranks of 'personnel officers'.

The book ends in a kind of puzzle. Does the exploration of social class widen or narrow the discussion of labour history? In the final chapter "Two Labour Histories of One?" Alice Kessler-Harris comes down somewhere in the middle. She opts for an expanded view of class which includes citizenship, gender, political rights and identity. But at the same time she tips her hat to the economic-focused view which was enunciated by the American leader Samuel Gompers who in 1898 told Congress, "a declaration of political liberty which does not involve an opportunity for economic independence is a delusion." (p. 147). Kessler-Harris says that labour history should be interpreted through the workers' relations to production and to consumption because there is more complexity to working class history than seeing it as merely class-based.

JUDY HAIVEN

Saint Mary's University

Le travail en chantier

par Marcelle DUC, Toulouse : Octares Éditions, 2002, 202 p., ISBN 2-906769-87-8.

Derrière ce titre « jeu de mots » bien pensé se révèle un ouvrage fort intéressant

sur l'organisation du travail, vue sous l'angle de la coopération, dans l'industrie