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Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France*. University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2005. vii + 448 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-02520-4.

Review by Judith DeGroat, St. Lawrence University.

Anglophone commentators on the French *non* to the EU constitution and, more recently, the successful protests against the CPE, the so-called youth employment law, have dismissed or ignored a key factor in discussing the motives behind such positions. The French rejection of neo-liberalism, a rejection shared by students, trade union members, farmers and civil servants, is solidly based in an insistence that hard won social benefits must be maintained. Helen Chenut's study of working-class culture in Troyes throughout the Third Republic provides us with a remarkable case study that suggests that such convictions played an important part in French social, economic, cultural, and political history. Chenut frames her examination of a workers' counterculture that developed in opposition to an aggressive *patronat* through the lens of gender and class analysis, which allows her to shift the focus of what could be a traditional labor history to an exploration of the significance of consumer, as well as shop floor, actions and family, as well as union, politics in the development of working-class identity. The result is a thoroughly researched and compellingly argued synthesis of social history defined by the linguistic turn.

Chenut introduces the reader to the textile community of Troyes, in the Champagne region of eastern France, through an examination of the unsuccessful 1900 strike that wove together the "threads of working-class culture, the fabric of gender and class solidarity..., and the socialist-inspired mobilization and resistance" (p. 52) that defined the political culture of this factory town and connected it to the broader struggles of Third Republic France. Indeed, one of the many strengths of this study is its analysis of the struggles between factions, none of which developed a coherent view of the role of women in labor politics, and the damage caused by that failure to the movement. This micro-study is followed by a discussion of the development of the textile industry from family workshops to factory production and of workers' politics. Rather than a linear progression from family shop to factory, industrial capitalism in Troyes combined small and large scale production, even reintroducing the putting out system in response to worker militancy. As women moved into the factory setting, the socialist and labor movements had difficulty incorporating them into their political vision due both to traditional notions of the sexual division of labor and women's exclusion from electoral politics.

The discussion of gendered work identities reveals important elements of both male and female production roles and the changing meaning of those roles throughout the years of the Third Republic. Chenut presents a detailed analysis of the evolving notions of women's skilled labor. Even as they claimed their stake in the trade as *bonnetières* alongside their male counterparts at the turn of the century, they also witnessed its devaluation, by 1939, into "an increasingly disparaging term for the local factory girl, tarnished by vulgarity and by her association with men in the workplace" (p. 165). Chenut uncovers this process through a compelling combination of sources including interviews she conducted in the 1980s with women from Troyes, such as Suzanne Gallois, a militant syndicalist whose experiences included a shop floor apprenticeship before the Great War and union activism. These women insisted on the value of their work and their pride in doing it well even as they acknowledged the decline in their status in an industry that valued female labor for its low cost. Tracing a history of women's job training by older women, which was relatively brief and informal in comparison with men's

more formal apprenticeships, Chenut situates the case in Troyes in the context of the broader literature on the gendered divisions of labor and refines our understanding in the process. She makes clear what we lose when we accept contemporary definitions of female skill based on valuations of women's work determined using normative models based on male labor.

In contrast, Chenut's discussion of masculinity, while significant, calls for more. From the socialist editor who described a millhand as no longer a man because he had lost his will and freedom to the millowner, to the worker whose manhood was threatened by technology and competition from female labor, the study identifies crucial areas for further examination. Certainly the focus here on female labor and constructions of femininity provide us with a valuable addition to the history of gender and women's work and yet the tantalizing insights into the construction of working-class masculinity highlights the need for a greater integration of the insights of feminist gender analysis into the study of men's work in French history.

The examination of consumerism uses a gendered lens sharply focused on the responses of men and women in their demands for greater leisure and the right to consume. Troyes' consumer cooperative, *La Laborieuse*, is the centerpiece of this analysis. Again, Chenut presents the historiography of cooperative movements clearly and succinctly as she reviews and occasionally challenges the literature on gender and consumption. In particular, she disagrees with the argument that women were viewed solely as consumers by the cooperative movement, while men were recognized as producers as well as consumers.^[1] From its founding by workers in 1886 until it closed fifty years later, the members of Troyes' cooperative recognized both women and men as workers who consumed and so were part of building the oppositional culture central to the workers' identity in their clash with hostile capitalist mill owners. Certainly the membership, originally largely male, debated the rights and roles of women within it. At first only unmarried women could join as individuals, but Chenut argues that the working-class family was the entity identified as the ideal consumer; women's control of the family budget thus made them central to the cooperative mission. Part of that mission was to educate women to be class-conscious consumers who would resist the call of fashion, a topic through which Chenut further assesses the complex interworkings of gender and class. The feminist dress reform movement, as espoused by the socialist Madeliene Pelletier, could collide with the limited means of working-class women. At the same time, attention to fashion could distract from the political goals of syndicalism. Equally important are the insights provided here into the ways that the family budget reflected changing consumer patterns in the interwar period, as consumer markets competed with the cooperative. Photographs, cooperative records and personal testimony suggest that the women of Troyes combined attention to fashion trends with homemade modifications to reflect both their limited budgets and individual sense of style. This was evident in the changing appearance of the "queen for the day," chosen each year to represent the working class at the "employer-sponsored" textile festivals held in Troyes from 1909 on.

While women's role in textile production increased throughout the period examined, their place in labor politics remained uncertain. During the Great War, women moved into tasks defined as masculine labor with little difficulty. After the war, they returned to the work they had previously done with no acknowledgement of the skills that they had acquired. Instead, Chenut argues, millowners identified the speed of female labor as the skill they valued in women even as they made use of their wartime experience. In the strike of 1921, however, the cost of living and demands for the eight-hour day brought women and men together in opposition to the owners. Large numbers of women, both strikers and supporters, participated in the actions, although few women were among the leadership. Yet the strong female presence led employers to look to rural outworkers following the strike as a potentially docile workforce.

The official narrative of the strike gave little attention to women's participation and subsequent efforts to recruit women into political action did little to revise the male breadwinner model promoted by both

government and union officials alike. Chenut demonstrates that the gendered construction of unemployment also made it difficult for women to be counted as they lacked the designation of householder necessary to be eligible for relief during the Depression. At the same time, women were involved increasingly in union, Communist, and Socialist politics despite their exclusion from formal electoral rights, especially with the victory of the Popular Front, as Siân Reynolds has demonstrated.^[2] Still, Chenut finds that the same wariness which characterized the workers' response to left-wing officials following the 1900 strike continued to frame their attitudes in the interwar period. Politics, like workplace and household concerns, were local even as France, like the rest of Europe, was moving towards another war.

The title of this study truly reflects its content: *The Fabric of Gender* weaves together an impressive range of primary sources, including archival materials, film and photography, as well as the invaluable oral histories of female textile workers to present the history of a working-class culture formed in the context of a volatile industry controlled by an antagonistic employer class that fought workers' rights at every point throughout the Third Republic. The culture of opposition created by women and men of the Troyes textile workforce and their families depended on an understanding of society that included the right to a life that included material necessities and the time to enjoy them. That culture, which included work and political activism as well as consumption, was profoundly shaped by gender, the shape and influence of which Chenut reveals through the voices of these workers, as well as both those who supported and challenged them in their fight for social justice. Throughout the study, Chenut enriches her presentation with a strong and broad command of secondary sources, ranging from the social history of the 1980s and the gender history of 1990s to interdisciplinary works on consumer behavior and culture. Helen Chenut has produced a case study that illuminates French history beyond the boundaries of the textile industry of Troyes in the Third Republic to do what the best historical studies do: deepen our understand of the past so that we can make sense of the present. The demonstrations and strikes of the spring of 2006 had a powerful legacy upon which to draw.

NOTES

[1] See Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

[2] Siân Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996).

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