Comment: Conceptualizing Gender in American Business History

Business history is not a field whose problematic I know, although these papers and one I read by Angel Kwolek-Folland, which was given here last spring, provide a helpful introduction. Instead, I come from exactly those fields, as the papers point out, that have been the traditional ones for thinking about women and gender: women’s history and labor history. The challenge is to extend insights from those fields to business history.

Reading these rich and carefully argued papers shows that gender is a useful category of analysis in business history, but also that using it is no easy matter. To the extent that gender is tied to women’s history, it carries traces of that field’s preoccupations. And reconciling questions about women’s access, experience, and status with questions about firms, markets, and economies is not an easy task. The history of women in business surely supplements an existing business history, but how does it substantially change it? I will argue that these papers begin to show how, but also that the effort is incomplete as long as the analysis rests exclusively on the emancipatory impulses of women’s history. That creates a tremendous problem because the emancipatory impulses of women’s history are important; they are tied to the project of women’s history, and to the initial theoretical formulations about gender. But I think to the extent that those impulses alone drive the analysis, the attempt to engage business history will founder.

Both papers do an impressive job of documenting the presence of women in the world of economic exchange. Wendy Gamber’s accounts of dressmakers and milliners and Kathy Peiss’s of “Avon ladies” make women visible actors in worlds that have been represented as largely or exclusively male. The papers recover something of the experience of selling cosmetics and producing and marketing hats. They also give a real flavor of those experiences, showing both the empowerment of women entrepreneurs who, ironically, escape stereotypes of femininity as they market the very products that depend on and reinforce those

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stereotypes, and the tension they face as they negotiate the gendered terrain of wholesale and retail exchanges.

The papers enlarge our sense of the scope of women's activities in nineteenth and twentieth century America, placing them outside exclusively domestic locations, and thus adding another nail to the coffin of "separate spheres" as a way of conceiving of women's experience in the past. The separate spheres notion conflates ideological precept and analytic category, as Linda Kerber has pointed out. It has obscured the actual history of women and also reproduced as fact the prescriptive ideologies of the nineteenth century.¹

But if separate spheres isn't the apt characterization, some kind of segregation did still exist in the world of business. In cosmetics, products for women were developed and sold by women; in millinery likewise, vendors and consumers were female. Specialization rested on sex-segregated markets and these seem to be of a piece with a more general phenomenon of segmented markets, those in which specialty products are aimed at a special group of consumers. (An example of this is the ethnic grocery stores and other kinds of ethnic services that Lizabeth Cohen described in her study of Chicago's immigrant communities in the early twentieth century.)² Given market segmentation, is it surprising that one segment is a gender segment? Is gender, then, as distinctly different a phenomenon as these papers imply? Whether or not it is, it has a distinct ideological effect: the reinforcement of differences between the sexes.

Both papers demonstrate the inaccuracy of the notion of women's passivity and of their incapacity for economic activity. Instead, they show not only that women participated in business (as labor historians have shown that women worked for wages), but also that the activity was empowering. Peiss notes that, "women turned the cultural basis of their exclusion from the general pursuit of business—their femininity—into a resource for entrepreneurship, ownership, and profit." She also suggests that there may even have been an oppositional dimension to this activity. Gamber uses her evidence to offer a telling critique of those analyses of women's culture that, even as they insist on women's activism, insist also on the fundamental difference of women. Instead, she argues that economic activity carried its own requirements and that women, like men, adapted to them.

Finally, both papers offer evidence that women were indeed present in the business world although they have been absent from the dominant narratives about it. This serves to make a number of important points. First, it peoples the world of business with a diverse group of actors, making not only women visible, but men as well. Until now we have had a notion of a neutral world of markets and exchanges, with the actors rarely identified. One of the results of looking at women is to make the predominance of men visible. Second, this approach proliferates the type and nature of activities we normally associate with business. Indeed, I thought the end of Peiss's paper made an eloquent claim for complicating the notion of what business is, who participates in it, and what in fact it actually does. Third, the papers raise questions about why the dominant narrative of business history has ignored this gendered part of the story for so long. It is this last question that one has to push hard to make gender or, more precisely in this case, women's history the subversive or disruptive tool that it can actually be.

How does a focus on women and gender allow us to raise new questions for business history? I will look at each of the papers in turn to try to suggest some answers.

I'll start with Kathy Peiss's paper. It seems to me one of the things that we could do is use her example of a sex-segregated market to ask more general questions about segmented markets and how they operate. When I read Peiss's paper, I remembered an article I had cut out from the New York Times, the headline of which was “New Face of Russian Capitalism.” The subtitle was “How Avon and Mary Kay adjusted to the local market.” In an accompanying photograph there are three women looking in a mirror with a rapt, attentive sense of self-discovery. The article says:

There are more than fifteen thousand Avon ladies in Russia and not one of them rings a doorbell. Bowing both to security fears and old time Soviet etiquette, Russian representatives of the world's largest direct sales cosmetic company, do not go door to door. They do not even make house calls to establish customers, instead they sell lipsticks, wrinkle creams and facial toners in factories, airports, beauty parlors, laboratories, and sometimes from a park bench. Russian women have swept aside cultural inhibitions to embrace the latest capitalist, profit notions sweeping the Russian economy—direct sales marketing. Avon Products, and its main rival Mary Kay Cosmetics, have invaded the Russian market in the last two years and recruited an all-female army to sell tens of millions of dollars worth of beauty products each year. And Russia with its swelling of
unemployed or underemployed professionals is a recruiter's dream. Thousands of women trained as engineers, physicists, and teachers are grabbing an entrepreneurial opportunity that even five years ago was both illegal and socially taboo. “The professional qualifications of these women are unbelievable,” declared Susan Croft, president for new and emerging markets at Avon. “When the first Russian coordinator I met told me she was a surgeon I fell out of my chair.” As a result of their new found wealth and independence the lives of many of these newly minted entrepreneurs have undergone a more radical makeover than had taken place during the collapse of the Soviet Union five years ago. “When I started my husband was furious,” said Svetlana Morosova, an area manager for Avon. She sat at a table in the Avon sales office in Moscow with dozens of other managers and sales coordinators. All of them were elegantly turned out in muted pastel suits and all of them nodded knowingly. And the fury of her husband was that she was making twice as much money as he was and he felt that his manhood was under assault.3

One of the things being described here is a segregated consumer market sales force that is an aspect of capitalist modernity. One effect of this particular market is that it creates sexual difference in a way that hadn’t been the case before. Certainly there were differences between men and women; there was a gender system in the Soviet Union. But what’s happening now is that differences are being highlighted and turned into something that can be marketed. In the Soviet era, women did different things from men, within a labor market that was segregated by sex, although far less so than in more advanced capitalist countries. Women certainly carried a double burden doing both wage and domestic labor. But the Avon story has to do with the visible appearance of sexual difference and the way in which notions of a different kind of femininity and of differences in the society are being appealed to and produced by aiming consumerism at women, and by training women to be capitalist entrepreneurs. There’s something going on there that needs thinking about in terms of how sexual difference is affirmed and produced through the creation and the service of consumer demand.

I would want to tie these developments to political developments in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern and Central Europe. With the emergence of capitalist markets, the insistence on various levels of difference has increased. The disempowering of women politically in

all of those countries—the tremendous drop in the representation in parliaments of women and the masculinization of the sphere of public political activity—is facilitated by the marketing of femininity and the training of women to be specialized sales people. Making a connection between marketing and politics might raise questions for business history—not only about the ways in which segmented markets are an aspect of modernization (along the lines suggested by Philip Scranton’s analysis of proprietary capitalism), but also about the interconnections between capitalism, democracy, and gender hierarchies.

Another question I would want to raise from the Russian example and from Peiss’s paper is: What is the relationship between the development of standardized products for mass markets and the emphasis on difference and multiplicity that this kind of wedge in the market represents? If the marketing of cosmetics to women is only one example of the diverse and multiple aspects of things produced and sold for specialized markets, then what is the relationship between the story of standardization, homogenization, and mass distribution on the one hand, and the persistent evidence of multiplicity on the other?

Finally, and this gets back to the point about femininity, we have an example of the way in which femininity is produced and reproduced—not as a fixed and stable identity, but as a set of contradictions. There is an appeal to femininity, to making women beautiful on the one hand, and on the other, a transformation of standard expectations for women: a Russian woman says that her husband is going out of his mind because she is earning more money than he is. This highlights the tension between the ideological expectations for women and the practices possible in the market—tension that, I would argue, is always inherent in gender. Gender is not a fixed division of labor or a fixed ideological division between men and women; it is always being worked on and always being produced. Business is not reflecting or appealing to stable beliefs in gender, or to a set of fixed social relationships; rather it is producing these beliefs and relationships in contradictory and unstable ways.

Peiss’s paper allows us to think about the question of segmented and segregated markets of production, distribution, and consumption in two ways. First, as a way of reconsidering the story of business history as standardization, homogenization, and mass production. And second, as a way of considering the relationship between business organization and the articulation and implementation of social differences, among them sexual difference.
Wendy Gamber's paper opens up the question of the murky zone of petty-entrepreneurship. Where does it really belong in the story of capitalist development? And what is signified by its lack of apparent fit in any obvious category? Gamber talks about petty-entrepreneurship as marked by a number of uncertainties: Are these entrepreneurs more often women than men? Are they workers or are they capitalists? Are they self-employed artisans or business people?

What came to my mind here was a study I did of the use of statistical categories by French politicians after the June Days of the Revolution of 1848. I argued that the uncertainty of the category of petty-entrepreneurship allowed political economists to rewrite the story that socialists wanted to tell about the structure of industry in Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century. The socialists defined petty entrepreneurs as proletarianized artisans who could barely earn enough to support their families. They wanted to expose the ways in which competitive standards of capitalist enterprise were ruining the lives of artisans.4

In contrast, the authors of a statistical study of Paris defined all those who worked at home as self-employed entrepreneurs. This meant that piece-workers were designated as heads of enterprises, even though they had no capital other than their own labor and, sometimes, that of members of their families. All individuals making goods to order for a bourgeois clientele (and this would include Gamber's dressmakers and milliners) and all individuals making goods to order and working for several different manufacturers, were listed as self-employed entrepreneurs who sold a finished product. Exploited piece-workers (in the socialist analysis) became petty-entrepreneurs in the hands of government political economists. This French example suggests that categories of (in this case) entrepreneurial activity are inherently political, carrying with them an analysis and a set of conclusions about the workings of the economy.

In the light of my study, I wondered what was at stake in Gamber's insistence that "her" milliners and dressmakers were very small businesses, not just small, but very small. And I wondered what the consequences were of pushing these women into business history—after all, those French political economists in 1848 counted even prostitutes as petty entrepreneurs. Even if the aim is to demonstrate something about women's empowerment through work, defining them as entrepreneurs obscures the workings of capital. The categorization of activ-

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ity substitutes for the analysis of economic structures of power (an analysis that informed a lot of the early women's labor history).

Another question I have relates to the difference between petty-entrepreneurship marked by instability and boundary crossings, and secondary labor markets. As I understand it, secondary labor markets are unstable and irregular, but they have enabled working people either to supplement their earnings or to support themselves entirely. Maybe it would be more interesting to dwell on the question of instability—whether in entrepreneurial or secondary labor markets—and the functions it served. Why does this kind of instability get so little attention in the annals of business history?

Here again I turn to Philip Scranton's book on proprietary capitalism. His point is that small firms and artisanal production coexisted with large enterprises and enabled their flexibility and growth. His story undercuts the master narrative of small to large, traditional to modern. If following his lead, we identified a large sector of petty-entrepreneurship that did not quite fit existing categories and yet generated income, we could ask why the study of this activity has been largely excluded from the history of business? To the extent that business history was devoted to a narrative about progressive development (small to large, inefficient to efficient, etc.) it ignored the existence of these persistent messy arrangements, whether or not the entrepreneurs were women. Of course, focusing on women exposes the insufficiency of that story by calling attention to the structural organization of the market and its historical representation. Both steps are required: documenting women's activities and linking them to an analysis of market structures and their histories.

Sometimes these papers emphasize women's experience and neglect market structures. In this way they reify gender and reproduce the terms of the exclusion of women from business history. Gamber says that women's businesses were very small—a different kind of activity—and that business history needs to be expanded to take them in. But in what form? The implication is that there is a separate object: women's activity in the sphere of business. This may well perpetuate the exclusion of women by establishing a separate women's business history.

Sometimes the papers take gender as a fixed reality which is reflected in business practices and consumer appeals. Peiss talks at the beginning of her paper about gender as a representation which reflects

a given reality of sexual difference, a clear and persistent distinction between women and men. This, too, can lead to a separate women's business history. Instead, I'd argue that business practices actually produce sexual hierarchies that are unstable and fraught with contradiction. The task is to study how this happens in specific historical circumstances.

The goal of including women in business history requires more than the documentation of their exclusion, resistance, and agency. It's not enough to say that economic practices have been discriminatory—though that has surely been the case, and it deserves to be said. Beyond that, attention has to be paid to the ways in which these practices define the structure and organization of the business world, and how they articulate power relations that don't always involve gender, even as they build on beliefs in the natural division of labor between the sexes. By asking questions about the gendered organization of the business world, we learn about the specific activities of men and women, and also about such issues as the construction of segmented labor/consumer markets and the marginality of small entrepreneurship in the history of business.