

From Marriage to Market: The Transformation of Women's Lives and Work. By Susan Thistle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xiv + 296 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, figures. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN: 0-520-24646-2.

Reviewed by Miriam Cohen

Social historians of women have long known that any understanding of women's labor outside the home is impossible without knowledge of their complex roles within the home. Sociologist Susan Thistle makes use of the scholarship on the history of American women and work, the welfare state, and her own important analysis of contemporary data on women's earnings and household composition, to provide a thought-provoking contribution to the discussion of working women today. In this broad study, Thistle emphasizes how the connections between the changes in family structure, domestic responsibilities, and wage-earning tasks created particular pressures for American mothers by the end of the twentieth century. Marriage, she argues, until very recently provided crucial support for wives and mothers, both black and white. This was true not only for women who devoted their lives to domestic tasks exclusively, but also for mothers who increasingly took on wage labor in the twentieth century. In the past few decades, however, as women assumed greater earning responsibilities and as marriage became a less reliable source of support, the difficulties of combining work and family dramatically increased.

Thistle begins with a historical look at the changes in women's domestic responsibilities and wage work over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In preindustrial America, most white women lived on family farms, and women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities were easily intertwined with work that contributed to family earnings. Enslaved black women were more likely to lose the support of husbands when families were separated, and work tasks truly threatened their ability to ensure survival of their children. As work moved outside the home during industrialization, as more families moved from farm to town and city, the task of combining productive and reproductive roles became far more challenging. Until the

mid-twentieth century, most white mothers solved this problem by avoiding wage earning outside the home. When poverty forced some, mostly immigrant, mothers into the workplace, reformers and unions responded by mobilizing for better male wages, so that women would not be forced into these difficult circumstances. Employers also responded, providing a family wage to male household heads. The American welfare state acted as well by midcentury, providing government payments to bolster male breadwinners and offering some limited help to widowed mothers.

Until the 1960s, few white mothers with small children, unless they were single, worked outside the home. Although the experience of black mothers was different, as a much higher proportion performed wage labor, according to Thistle, until the last few decades of the twentieth century, black mothers could also count on male wage earners for support—both husbands and fathers. By the end of the century, the combination of a household structure that was vastly changed for whites, and even more so for black women, with the enormous increase in wage work on the part of mothers, created enormous, often impossible, challenges. Many women are now trying to combine wage labor and domestic work with neither adequate earnings nor enough family or state supports to assist them. The situation is especially problematic for black women, who enjoy fewer opportunities for adequately paid jobs and have fewer male kin whom they can rely on for support.

While other scholars, such as Valerie Kincaid Oppenheimer, in *The Female Labor Force in the United States: Demographic and Economic Factors Governing Its Growth and Composition* (1970), have focused on the needs of the economy for married women's work to explain the vast upsurge in their paid labor in the twentieth century, Thistle concentrates on the market takeover of traditional women's work in the home. In emphasizing the importance of time-saving technology that has made women's housework less arduous, Thistle takes on those who have argued for the continuity in time spent doing housework from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, in *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (1984), and Joan Vanek, writing in *Scientific America* (1973), argue that along with technological advances came an increase in standards for housekeeping, adding to wives' responsibilities. Thistle argues that whether or not full-

time wives embraced higher standards of domesticity, ultimately the ability for more wives to take on wage work would not have been possible without the new time-saving devices.

While Thistle makes a good point regarding household tasks, she underestimates the importance of rising standards of domesticity, which include standards of childcare, in imposing challenges for working women. The important decline in overall fertility over the last century greatly increased the time available for women to pursue wage labor, because the most time-intensive activity for mothers has always been the care of small children. Yet the ever-rising standards of child rearing that accompanied this decline continues to increase the responsibilities of parents, especially mothers, intensifying the burden of the double day for working women.

Thistle ends with the exhortation that we come to terms with the new workforce and changed family structures by embracing new family support policies. Her provocative and important analysis, however, is marred by a tendency to make exaggerated claims about the pathbreaking nature of her approach. Historians of race, gender, work and the welfare state, for example, will be surprised at her suggestion that, in addressing how industrialization and the growth of the welfare state has had an impact on the lives of both black and white women, she is filling in a neglected area of scholarship (pp. 173, 174). Nevertheless, historians will find this book a useful study of how large-scale historical developments have affected both black and white mothers.

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