
Writing Women, Work, and Family: The Tilly-Scott Collaboration

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*Between 1973 and 1977, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott wrote two articles and a book on the history of women that became a standard in the history of women, work, and the development of industrial capitalism. The authors occasionally met to work together, and they spoke on the phone, but mostly, the collaboration was based on their exchange of hundreds of letters. Based largely on the letters that Tilly wrote to her, Scott's reminiscence looks at the way that Louise combined her scholarly work with raising a family, and how she advanced the production of knowledge about women's history through her efforts to put more women and women's history on the program of major history conferences. Finally, the author details how their efforts to critique prevailing assumptions that the history of women's work was an expression of advancing individualist values, made possible by the expansion of the industrial city, resulted in the publication of *Women, Work, and Family*.*

Louise Tilly and I wrote two articles and a book together during 1973–77 in what now seems a primitive time. We lived many miles apart, she in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. We occasionally met at one of our houses; we sometimes talked by phone; but mostly—in those preelectronic days—we exchanged letters, hundreds of them. In those letters (many written by hand) we mapped out the contours of the book, pointed each other to readings we had to engage, wondered about the line of argument we wanted to pursue, and struggled to reconcile the history we were writing with the political pressures of the feminist movement that at once inspired and challenged us. The letters also tell a great deal about the material conditions of production of our writing projects, not only as a matter of visits to libraries and archives, orders from interlibrary loan, typewriters, and Xerox machines, but also as an aspect of the lives of its authors—professional historians whose jobs involve not just research and writing but institutional responsibility, and who are, in addition, wives and mothers. In a way, the title of the book is a commentary on its production: two women working together with families ever-present to distract and assist them. When Louise retired from the New School in 1999, I went back to the letters she had sent me and sketched out the reminiscence upon which this essay is based. At the time, my letters were in her possession, I had only a few carbon copies of mine to her so my side of the story is incomplete. Soon both sets of letters, along with the rest of our archives, will be housed in the Feminist Theory Papers collection at Brown University's John Hay Library.

One of the things that struck me early in our correspondence was how much Louise's own family figured in the letters. I tended to stick to business, but soon learned the pleasures of exchanging news about the rest of my life and the contexts in which I thought and worked. Louise's letters display a remarkably realistic integration of the public and the private, one that didn't seem either to trouble or deter her. When she was

tired, dismayed, or angry, juggling what seemed impossible demands, she soldiered on, finding things to be cheerful about, thoughts to take her beyond the moment. So as she drives to work one day, she realizes that in an article we're writing "we need two diagrams, one for w.c women, one for m.c women" [June 4, 1974]. Another day, she continues by hand a letter begun on a typewriter, as she sits in her car, "having had to set out on errands and children chauffeuring (and waiting)." When she can't meet a deadline, she recounts the children's illnesses that have kept her up all night. ("Sarah had a fever yesterday again. She is sick every two weeks" [March 17, 1975]). She is confident, however, that this will soon pass. Schedules are skillfully adjusted when unexpected crises arise. How many letters end with "must go now" to drive one or another of her four children to some lesson or appointment; how many apologies for delay are accompanied by detailed accounts of high fevers and children's visits to a doctor. But the children are also incorporated into her work life, so Kit and Laura are often assigned jobs collating data and sorting files, while Sarah is sent off to the post office to mail a chapter draft or letter to me. Even Nero, the dog, comes into it, having to be walked, contributing his own mischief, sharing Louise's adventures. So she writes from Paris on November 27, 1974:

It's still raining, the strikes continue. Yesterday Nero and I had a small thrill when we went for our 5 pm promenade. The big office of the radio-tv was surrounded by *flics* and the streets were blocked off with their big vans for hauling off prisoners.

The rest of the letter is full of details of what she's been reading, her thoughts about aspects of an article we were writing, responses to critical readings of it, a synopsis of data she's collected, conversations she's had with historians, and comments on parliamentary debates then raging about a French abortion law.

The work Louise and I undertook together came at the moment of a burgeoning feminist movement in the United States; our students and many colleagues were looking to replace his-story with her-story. The pressures to produce a politically relevant history were enormous; we had to negotiate our own commitment to a rigorous social history with those political pressures. The starting point of our collaboration was a shared objection to the idea that work for women was a modern experience, a guarantee of emancipation from "traditional" family pressures to stay at home and raise children. As labor historians we were familiar with the long history of women's employment well before the rise of industrial capitalism and with the kind of exploitation brought by factory work and domestic service. Paid labor and emancipation may have been synonymous for some women in the twentieth century, but not for all—we wanted to write a history to demonstrate that. Feminist activists would benefit, we believed, from a more complex story about women's work.

Louise was adamantly opposed to those who brought excessive revolutionary zeal or polemical feminism to history, but she was also clear about her politics. In more than one of her letters she referred to herself as "a bleeding heart liberal," meaning that she was in favor of progressive reform—she just didn't think it should dictate conclusions about history. In 1975 while doing research in Paris, she attended one of

the early study groups on women organized at the University of Paris VII by Michelle Perrot. She was put off by a demand from some in the group to exclude men and even more enraged by their prescriptions about how to write women's history.

Then on to the next issue, which was that "we mustn't insert women as 'object' into history," mustn't use male sources . . . etc. Well, I hit the ceiling, because these were a bunch of social scientists telling me how to do history, assuming that women's history is just as stultified as some other kinds, that one should limit it to feminist concerns, etc. I got enough French together to make a statement asking what new methods they recommended, and saying that one had to innovate when trying to do this kind of history but the important matter was to find out and know what had happened, and not start by drawing up limits on how to find out. Michelle agreed, and another hour's wrangle ensued. After which, with collective headaches, we all went home. (Actually, they probably didn't have headaches, as they smoked dope, which is supposed to be good for headaches, but I found it curious that they didn't share, even with each other.) [March 17, 1975]

Louise's goal was to produce new, more, and better knowledge about women, both in the research and writing she did and by expanding professional opportunities for us. Her letters are full of plots and plans to get women and women's history onto the program of the meetings of the American Historical Association, the Society for French Historical Studies, and the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. At Michigan State she got a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. "Now if I can only keep it along the lines I'd like to see instead of the polemic feminism that is the style of the other folks and use it to involve more scholars working on women from the university . . ." [July 2, 1975 or 6?]. Louise approached these things with extraordinary energy and courage and usually assumed she'd get what she asked for. Writing of a plan to get more women and women's history on the program at the next meetings of French Historical Studies, she listed a number of options and then said "I think we might concert our efforts in this direction and come up with a fait accompli." She had also written to Natalie Davis to bring her into the operation. On a hot sticky summer night she wrote to me about a plan she and Natalie had cooked up in a long Berkeley to Ann Arbor phone call. Natalie, Louise commented, "probably has the most staggering phone bill in North America."

She [Natalie] also thought a session on women and work (with you as chairperson) . . . would be very good, and she would want to take part, if she could. Since she had already been approached to be in a session on new methods for the history of popular culture, she was going to write . . . that she already was reading a paper on that at the AHA, and would prefer to take part in one on women, perhaps Olwen Hufton speaking, with several people to comment on her work. . . . So I then wrote to Forster [Robert Forster who was presumably planning the program] and said that you, Natalie and I would like to see a session on something like "sex roles and work: countryside and city," and also suggested Olwen Hufton as a speaker.

At a minimum, a seminar on Women in the labor force in traditional and modern France. [June 11, 1973]

From this followed a concerted effort, organized by Louise, to raise the money for Olwen's airfare. Rereading the correspondence, one gets the sense of a veritable "old girls' network" being formed with Louise as one of its pivots.

The history of *Women, Work, and Family* began at a 1973 meeting of French Historical Studies in North Carolina with a heated discussion about an article by Edward Shorter we had both read. (I had met Louise before then when I visited her husband, Charles [Chuck], who was the supervisor of my graduate student research training fellowship from the Social Science Research Council.) Shorter's claim that high rates of illegitimacy among young urban working women in nineteenth-century industrial cities were a sign of their emancipation infuriated both of us, and we cited all kinds of evidence we knew to the contrary. (Louise: "I just can't see how he can imagine that it is in the rational interest of a working class female to rush around being a sexual libertine for pleasure—who gets stuck with the illegitimate children anyway? And, he has to prove not assert that the value of seeking sexual pleasure was the value of w.c. and peasants from 1750 on . . . I doubt it can be demonstrated for any time or place. These are just the points that make me mad, the rest of my disagreement with him is more intellectual and probably more effective." May 17, 1973) At the end of the conversation, which continued over the days of the conference, Louise suggested we write a paper together based on a talk she'd given called "'Cultural Values' and Women's Work in Nineteenth Century Europe." Conceptually, she had already set out the agenda for our work together:

General works on women and the family, when they . . . take a look into the past, tend to assume that the history of women's employment, like the history of women's achievement of legal and political rights, can be understood as a gradual evolution. Furthermore, both these movements, the legal-political and the economic are described as linked to gradual changes in cultural values. Thus William Goode, whose *World Revolution and Family Patterns* makes temporal and geographical comparisons of family patterns, remarks on what he calls the "statistically unusual status of western women today, that is, their high participation in work outside the home." He claims that previous civilizations had not made use of female labor extensively because of constricting cultural definitions. "I believe," Goode writes, "that the crucial crystallizing variable—i.e. the necessary but not sufficient cause of the betterment of the western woman's position—was ideological: the gradual logical philosophical extension to women of originally Protestant notions about the rights and responsibilities of the individual undermined the traditional idea of 'women's proper place.'" Now, this is obviously a historical statement and its validity can only lie in confirmation by historical data, which Goode makes no systematic effort to look at. If notions about individualism transformed cultural values and led to the extension of rights to women, and if women's tendency to work grew out of the same sources, we should be able to trace a gradual increase in the number of women working. . . . Looking at three

European countries in the nineteenth century, I would like to test the fit between political evolution and labor force participation.

After I read the paper, I sent Louise a long set of comments. I thought the idea of comparison of three countries was important, I added a number of substantive examples of continuity between rural and urban jobs women performed, and I suggested some reformulations of the argument, but I worried about a collaboration:

My problem . . . is that I have never written a paper with anyone before—I have no idea how to proceed with the incorporation of my thoughts and yours. I thought at first I might try to write a draft using your organization and materials and adding mine, but that didn't work, partly because some of what I'd add would alter the way in which the paper is argued. Well—here are the thoughts. Then we can figure out what to do with them. [May 7, 1973]

Louise replied:

I have also never written a paper with anyone else so I can only tell you what Chuck does, which is to have one person write a draft, the other critique, then #1 (I think) write a second draft and #2 write a third, if necessary. My problem being lack of time I was hoping you could write second draft, even if it meant taking my argument apart and putting it together again in a way more acceptable to you and consonant with your thinking and documentation that you might want to add.

We followed this process more or less faithfully, though the constraints of time on one or the other of us meant that sometimes #2 wrote the second draft and even the third. We developed a system in which long letters prepared the conceptualization, often based on information one or the other of us had gathered. As we sent each other our reading notes as well as our drafts, the thinking and the writing began to blend imperceptibly, so that it is now impossible for me to tell which drafts of which chapters or parts of chapters I wrote. We were tough on each other. Here is Louise commenting on my draft of a paper we were writing together:

The problem with the present conceptualization in the framework of the anti “work will make you free” argument, is that the paper never comes back and answers that question. The part about power, consciousness, autonomy is rhetorical and never gets answered either. We may want to save that for the book or we may want to axe it, but I'm for tossing it out here. Also, before we use it more, we need to define consciousness better or use another word.

Geographical distance and the time that elapsed between sending, receiving, and replying to letters made it easier for us to deal with the hurt one of us might feel when reading the other's critical comments. What ego investment we had as individual writers became subsumed to the common project as we struggled to address questions

of work, emancipation, power, class, and whether “strategy” was a useful way to analyze behavior.

The theme of work’s emancipatory effects was a critique of Goode and Shorter, but that also allowed us, indirectly perhaps, to challenge similar feminist arguments. Tied to that was the issue of power: How to measure it? Did married women lose it when production was no longer located in the household, with men and women sharing tasks? Did the spatial segregation of labor in early industrialization change the male/female power dynamic within families? What were the measures of that: Control of finances? A wife dispensing an allowance to her husband for tobacco and alcohol? A husband providing a portion of his wages to his wife? What was the relationship between this kind of family division of labor and political economy’s definition of men as breadwinners? At one point, Louise writes

First of all, it seems that all questions of power and status should define a social “arena” to which they refer. This means separating the family or household from the public arena and considering matters separately in each, before trying to combine the two into one picture. In fact, it may be impossible to combine the two into one single hierarchical scale of status and power because people’s lives are bifurcated into one scale within the family, one scale in public life—work, politics, etc. . . .

She goes on to say that in the public arena, control over resources and persons and the ability to “get your way against others” is denied not only to women, but to “the peasantry, the urban poor, social groups . . . that participate in the labor force. . . . The men in these groups are in the same position as women in this sense. . . . [They] have no political leverage, even though over the course of the 19th c men within these groups got political rights as citizens.”

Turning to the family arena, it seems that seeking out status and power through cataloging control over resources would be the way to understand these matters. . . . Is there a hierarchy of activities, some of which confer greater power . . . and greater status too? And is the hierarchy of activities unchanging no matter which sex is performing them? (Here comes the problem of much of the history of women, that as women move into activities, they seem to lose status, be devalued, etc. I’m not sure if this is the appropriate interpretation of what happens, but it is an approximate understanding, anyway, which has led to the vague concept of sexism as an explanation.) [April 14, 1975]

We agreed that the category of “women” was too homogeneous, that class mattered in some way in the patterns of household structure, but how? Here is one of Louise’s suggestions, calling into question a sharp distinction I had made:

After some mulling and hemming and hawing, I decided that I would come down on the side that there was not a basic difference between middle class and working class ideas of the family but that the different ways that they worked out

in the nineteenth century was a matter of strategies of survival keyed to material conditions in which they lived. And that is why the working class family becomes more like, but never exactly like the middle class family, as there is an extension of prosperity to w.c. and change in its material standards and opportunities at the end of the 19th, early 20th c. . . . The families are defined differently, understood differently by the interpreters and observers of the time, but if you get down to the basic principles, you find them the same and the differences an overlay which are different strategies in response to different opportunities rising out of material conditions.

Of course, differences among women depended not only on class, but on the age and marital status of women. We wrestled a good deal with the question of married women's labor force participation and attributed it both to market demands for women workers and family strategies. Here's a portion of a long letter Louise sent in which she worked with what became one of our key arguments:

it starts with a theory and the theory starts with the argument that married women's work is both constrained by women's other role as reproducer and that it is perceived as inferior by employers—married women [they think] are less dependable, not as likely to stay after training, might have to leave if family moves, etc. . . . This is in the industrial mode of production where work and residence are separated. Thus married women are last to be hired (preference of employers for men, single women, children . . .) and first to be fired, and they get the worst jobs. It doesn't matter if all the disadvantages of married women as workers are true or not, employers are acting as if they were. So our argument on supply and demand still is good, but not good enough. . . . We need a theory about household strategies for allocation of wage labor within household and labor market which can predict variations [by country, city, and over time].

Married women in propertyless households, we concluded, have a cyclical pattern of work, depending on their own skills, the ages of their children, and the husband's wage. "She will work when there are too many mouths to feed, she will quit when the children take over, she probably will have to work later again, but by then the kind of work she will do is ever more restricted than in early work period, because of age typing of jobs, decline of eyesight, nimble fingers, etc." In this letter, Louise kept rephrasing the connections—"another statement of the same thing (keep trying to get it right)"—until she had integrated evidence and argument into an historical portrait that spelled out the implications of the move from household economies to nuclear family strategies.

I have only touched on some aspects of this rich trove of letters, but I hope I have given enough of a sense of the thought that went into producing the book. It was an amazing and difficult process as we tried to distill some overarching pattern from the comparisons of three industrial cities in three countries. In the end, as I described the book in my dossier for promotion at the University of North Carolina: "It is not meant to be a comprehensive and complete treatment of the problem of the impact of

industrialization on women's work and family roles. Instead, we have tried to suggest an interpretation, to raise questions, and to analyze materials from a new vantage point. We hope to set some of the terms for future discussion and research in an area that has lacked conceptual rigor. And we hope to provide some guidelines for college teachers of women's history" [October 1976].

In March 1976, we sent the manuscript off to the publisher. There were still some pages missing, some bibliographic notes to add. Louise and I divvied the costs of drawing the graphs, photocopying, and mailing the "monster" as she described it. "Well, it's a relief to have this over," Louise wrote, "and I'm very proud of what we've produced. It's an important contribution to family history too." A few months later, copyediting finished, she wrote of the many projects ahead of her. "What pieces are you picking up?" she asked me. And then, her final thoughts, modest and prescient, "Despite all its shortcomings, I'm happy to have this out of my system, and I feel that . . . it's original and it's going to be the standard work on women's work."

Indeed, it became that. And though my own trajectory began to depart from the social scientific approach we took, I have never regretted either the collaboration or the book it produced. To say that my experience working with Louise was formative is right, but it doesn't capture the richness and the intellectual intimacy of the process that the letters so wonderfully document, letters that now await a future historian of women, work, and family.