

Kathy Peiss

“Vital Industry” and Women’s Ventures: Conceptualizing Gender in Twentieth Century Business History

In 1935 *Fortune* magazine published a series of articles on “Women in Business” whose true subject was the *absence* of women in business. Published anonymously but written by Archibald MacLeish, the articles distinguished between the relatively few women in “general business” or “business proper” and the greater number “engaged in the business exploitation of femininity.” MacLeish asserted that this was “not merely an arbitrary” distinction, for businesses dominated by men were “vital industries.” *Vital* is a significant adjective from a man known to choose his words carefully, with its connotations of fundamental, indispensable, robust, animate, and, not least, virile. Unlike men’s efforts in business, said MacLeish, “feminine success in the exploitation of women proves nothing but the fact that women are by nature feminine.” That is, women’s ventures in cosmetology, fashion and styling, department store buying, advertising to women, and the women’s press resulted from a state of being, not a will to action. As MacLeish put it, “Elizabeth Arden is not a potential Henry Ford. She is Elizabeth Arden. It is a career in itself but it is not a career in industry.”¹

Until recently, business history left undisturbed such assertions about the nature of business and the nature of women. Historical analyses of the corporation, mass-production industry, technological innovation, and business strategy typically examined the actions of men without rendering masculinity a problematic category. To the extent women were seen as a presence in these developments, scholars nodded to the legions of low-level female office workers, the inherited capital of wealthy widows, and the consumer-housewife at the end of the

KATHY PEISS is currently Graduate Program Director and professor of history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

¹ “Women in Business: III,” *Fortune* 12 (July-Dec. 1935): 81. My thanks to Kevin Reilly for identifying Archibald MacLeish as the author.

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chain of distribution. Business history's traditional subject, the firm, has been largely construed as a self-contained, indisputably masculine enterprise.

Now, some years after other areas of historical scholarship, business historians have begun to ponder gender analysis and explore its explanatory power. Both business history and women's history, ironically, developed at a distance from what has been seen as the "mainstream" of historiography, although their degrees of separation reflect distinctly different origins, institutional bases, and intellectual concerns. New tendencies within these fields have, however, awakened the possibilities of a conversation between them.

Business historians have recently called for studies that integrate the development of economic enterprises into the larger narratives of American history, narratives that have themselves begun to be transformed by histories that recover and highlight social differences, including those of gender. Within the field itself, they have added to their focus on big business and heavy industry a newer interest in small companies, service firms, distribution and retail, and the continuing diversity of production processes in the twentieth century. Interrogating the development of a postindustrial global economy has fostered growing attention to the history of markets—their formation, segmentation, and control—that requires a turn outward, toward an analysis of the social groups and consumer practices contained within them. These fresh emphases on business heterogeneity, markets, and culture all provide an opening for studying gender in business history.²

If business history has begun to express a nascent demand for gender analysis, the suppliers come with their gender toolkits from outside the field. Women's historians and other feminist scholars have already revealed much about gender in the economy, especially the labor market and labor relations. Early important historical studies of the sexual division of labor, employment discrimination, management decision-making, and shopfloor conflict have given us much insight into the gendered distribution of power, resources, and money. Until recently, however, most of this work was done in relation to labor history: it focused on women as workers, not as entrepreneurs, inventors, independent contractors, or owners. Explicit or embedded in this work was a political question, about the possibilities of women's collective action, and a utopian impulse, a dream of women united.³ The attenuation of

² Louis Galambos, "What Makes Us Think We Can Put Business Back into American History?" *Business and Economic History* 2d ser., 20 (1991): 1-11.

³ Especially relevant to twentieth-century American history are such works as Dolores

this question and impulse seems in part a product of our times politically—the decline of collective movements, the triumph of “free market” ideology, the deepening of social divisions.

At the same time, these assumptions have been closely questioned *within* feminist scholarship. The examination of racial, ethnic, and other social differences has made the category “women” a problematic one and spurred historians to consider the various social locations and differential power of women in society and the economy. Gender analysis changes the subject of historical inquiry from the activities and contributions of women to the cultural construction and politics of difference. All these developments have, ironically, intensified the likelihood of a dialogue with business history. Criticizing the equation of gender and women has led to efforts to historicize and complicate the meaning of masculinity, rather than leave it an unexamined norm. Further, if gender represents and constitutes differences in power, including but not limited to those between women and men, then such arenas as “formal” politics, foreign policy, and business are properly the subject of gender analysis.⁴ It is thus now possible not only to ask how gender has operated in the development of American business, but also to consider the ways business has intervened in and molded the construction of gender in American history.

The framework for gender analysis pioneered by Joan Scott and applied in such anthologies as Ava Baron’s *Work Engendered* and Sonya Rose and Laura Frader’s *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* offers one significant direction for business historians. These scholars have shown how gender works as a cultural process through which men and women have understood economic affairs, made decisions, and allocated resources. They have examined how economic power is often represented through gendered images and produced through gendered practices. They make no *a priori* assumptions about the

Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia, 1985); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, Ill., 1987); Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982).

⁴ Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 251-74; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, 1990). On gender and business history, see Wendy Gamber, “Gendered Concerns: Thoughts on the History of Business and the History of Women,” *Business and Economic History* 23 (Fall 1994): 129-40; Alice Kessler-Harris, “Ideologies and Innovations: Gender Dimensions of Business History,” *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 45-51.

dominance of men and subordination of women. Rather, they explore the positions and interactions of men and women, managers, owners, and workers, and how those positions have been contested, renegotiated, and reconstituted in gendered terms.⁵

This approach is especially powerful in the analysis of one of the dominant economic institutions of the twentieth century: the corporation. How did gender inform and mediate changing managerial strategies, business ideologies, and organizational structures with the rise of big business? Many historians have noted the so-called “crisis” of masculinity at the turn of the twentieth century, although, as Gail Bederman suggests, we would do better to consider masculinity an always problematic category, an ongoing “historical, ideological process” whose contradictions are cloaked by the perception that gender is a collection of natural, fixed traits.⁶ The heightened perception that manhood was in crisis occurred as business organizations shifted from individual proprietorships and simple partnerships to corporations, in the process creating a male professional and managerial class and a female clerical class.

New research has shown how a set of gender-coded perceptions and protocols structured the emergent corporation in the early twentieth century. Family metaphors retained their salience even as family businesses gave way to rationalized bureaucracies. Changing middle-class gender norms and the evolving standards of office work were mutually constitutive. The nineteenth-century notion of self-reliant manhood transmuted into an ideal of individual initiative bounded by corporate teamwork and goals; the sexualized yet proper “office wife” reconciled tensions over women in public even as she modelled modern femininity. As Angel Kwolek-Folland shows, these gender identities were constituted not only in prescriptive literature but through the physical layout of the corporation, the sociability of the office, and not least, the attire of workers. Walter Licht and Ileen DeVault explain the vocational education and tracking of individuals into gendered white, blue, and pink collar work. Andrea Tone examines the gendered meanings of industrial welfare and personnel work as a means of mediating shopfloor conflict. She shows how professional women gained managerial positions through work inflected with the feminine; per-

⁵ Scott, *ibid.*; Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991); Sonya Rose and Laura Frader, eds., *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996).

⁶ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995).

sonnel officers, often with training in social work, were originally, and tellingly, called “social secretaries.”⁷

Gender has also offered a language for management practices, workers’ responses, and conflict resolution that may have little to do with embodied women and men *per se*. That is, class issues have often been articulated through gendered representations, whether old-fashioned paternalism, turn-of-the-century scientific management, or the interwar supervisory ideology of human relations. At Thompson Products (the forerunner of aerospace giant TRW), for instance, managers responded to a UAW organizing campaign in the 1930s by instituting more psychologically-oriented, “humanized” supervision. As Kevin Reilly shows, this outlook feminized workers as irrational and emotional while requiring managers to exhibit emotional control. As one foreman explained after firing an employee, he had done his job all right, but was “morose” and “clammy”—“a clammy sort of chap, not sociable; he didn’t seem to be the type of lad that talked and talked free.” An appropriate gender-coded “emotional style,” not only job performance, became a requirement of employment.⁸

Much of the current research on gender and twentieth-century business history remains focused on the occupational structure and industrial relations of corporations, especially the divide between male managers and female office workers. This project historicizes what MacLeish naturalized, but does not challenge gendered assumptions about “vital industry” as masculine enterprise. What of the feminine ventures MacLeish dismissed as the inevitable expression of women’s being? Historians have only begun to unearth and recover the activities of women who were business owners, managers, staff professionals, inventors, entrepreneurs, and dealers. Admittedly, these businesswomen were small in number when compared to the armies of low-paid female wage-earners. As feminist scholars have long argued, however, a close examination of phenomena in our peripheral vision may lead us to reassess what we perceive as “vital.”⁹ Before the emergence

⁷ Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore, 1994); Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Welfare Work in America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997). See also Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago, 1990).

⁸ Kevin Reilly, “The Industrial Roots of Organization Man: Psychology, Gender and Corporate Culture, 1930-1960” (unpublished paper, 1996, in author’s possession).

⁹ See Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* (Boston, 1987).

of post-1960 feminism, women gained not just a foothold but a genuine presence in several locations within the modern economy. Seemingly marginal, outside the bounds of vital industry, these women's activities nevertheless may usefully inform our understanding of the history of American business, gender, and culture.

Fortune identified the "business exploitation of femininity" as women's natural and circumscribed domain, but femininity, like masculinity, is multivalent, expansive and contested, its meanings and effects changing over time and in different contexts. In the twentieth century, the feminine has been a sign not only of fashion, beauty, and domesticity, as *Fortune* sought to anchor it, but a touchstone for notions of service, the brokerage of certain kinds of information (often disparaged as women's "gossip"), and temperaments or emotional qualities such as caring and orientation to community. These are social and ideological constructions usually seen as constraining women's economic opportunities, and indeed, as numerous historians have shown, they have. At the same time, "the feminine" offered women—and men—a cultural resource for business strategies that, over the course of the twentieth century, became increasingly significant to the economy.¹⁰ This process is not unique to gender difference, of course: circumstances of segregation or discrimination ironically open opportunities for some of those who are subjected to these circumstances, as the history of the African-American insurance industry attests.¹¹ A look at three areas where women gained both a presence and a degree of power—consumer advertising and marketing, the beauty industry, and local small business—suggests how an analysis of gender might complicate some of the governing narratives in business history.

Consumer Advertising and Marketing

Historians of twentieth-century corporations have evinced a growing interest in the emergent infrastructure of consumer-goods merchandising, advertising, and marketing that mediated between production and consumption. Until quite recently, however, historians did not

¹⁰ See Wendy Gamber's excellent study, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1997); Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven, Conn., 1993); Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints and the Business of Women's Medicine* (New York, 1979). See also Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York, 1998).

¹¹ Robert E. Weems, *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925-1985* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996).

perceive women’s activities in this field. Women formed a small minority of professionals working in advertising, magazines, and newspapers in the early twentieth century, and they rarely controlled these enterprises or held executive positions within them. In advertising agencies, the number of career women rose substantially after 1910 but still comprised only about 3 percent of advertising professionals in the largest firms in 1930. Women were generally excluded from positions that required face-to-face interaction with manufacturers’ representatives, considered “contact” or “outside” jobs. A few became account executives, space buyers, and department heads, but most labored as copywriters, deemed women’s “proper sphere” and “entering wedge” in advertising. Similarly, publishers and retailers were predominantly male, although there were a handful of women who edited the top women’s magazines or owned department stores or large specialty shops—Gertrude Lane of the *Woman’s Home Companion* and Dorothy Shaver of Lord and Taylor, for instance.¹² Indeed, the growth and systemization of marketing and advertising—part of the corporate drive toward rationality, efficiency, and control—has been described as a masculinist project. Jackson Lears, for instance, shows how the chaotic, “carnavalesque” promotional world of the nineteenth century gave way to the corporate ad agency of twentieth, with its professionalized staff of college-educated, white-collar men.¹³

Women’s limited representation overall masks their presence in specific sectors of mass-consumer goods industries, for there was another dynamic at work in the infrastructure of marketing and merchandising. Its address was not only the businessman or ad agent but the consumer—a consumer constituted as a woman. Although women had long purchased or bartered goods for use in the household, a newer, self-conscious notion of the woman consumer appeared by the turn of the century, promoted by retailers and women’s magazines, elevated by educators, and seized upon by such reform groups as the National Consumers’ League. The axiom that women were the household’s “chief purchasing agents” could be heard throughout industry, which now needed to understand “the habits of women, their methods of reasoning, and their prejudices.” Advertisers and women’s magazines in particular urged a new language of persuasion: “if you are sell-

¹² Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 25-51; Mary Ellen Waller [Zuckerman], “Popular Women’s Magazines, 1890-1917” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1987); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993).

¹³ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1995).

ing to women, nothing succeeds like a woman's viewpoint." Educators and reformers advanced an uplifted version of the female citizen-consumer, rational and oriented toward social goals. Advertisers and manufacturers at times nodded to this representation, but older assumptions about female sensibilities more often gained the upper hand. They saw the consumer as emotional and impulsive, driven by "inarticulate longings," oriented toward status and fashion goods, an individual whose rationality lay mainly in a certain narrow shrewdness: the ability to sniff out bargains. The strategy of appealing to the "woman's viewpoint" appeared most often in promotions for products long associated with women, such as food and beauty preparations. It also surfaced when companies repositioned consumer goods initially associated with men in order to expand the market: automobiles were sold to women in the language of fashion, cigarettes through an appeal to slender body image.¹⁴

Many businesswomen created job opportunities by widening the apparent gap between male manufacturer and female consumer, promoting the "woman's viewpoint" to advance their own professional standing. "If the last word and the most important word is always going to be a man's word, I think on a woman's account that could be damaging," observed a woman copywriter. Women "have a tradition and specialized association from which men are completely cut off," agreed another. Yet this was a complex mediation of femininity: often discomfited by an argument that secured their position by invoking nature, not training and experience, women advertisers simultaneously approached and distanced themselves from consumers, for example, by emphasizing the importance of research and investigation.¹⁵

Historians have begun to study these businesswomen, the advertising agents, magazine editors, public relations specialists, and home economists who became information brokers, interlocutors, and tastemakers in the mass market. In advertising, although relatively few in

¹⁴ On retailers' and advertisers' gendered construction of the consumer, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, and Lears, *ibid.*; Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* (New York, 1989). On reformers' alternative formulation, see Jacqueline Dirks, "Righteous Goods: Women's Production, Reform Publicity, and the National Consumers' League, 1891-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1996). See also Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996).

¹⁵ Nancy F. Stephenson, Personnel Information, in Sidney Bernstein Papers, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Company Archives, Duke University; Aminta Casseres, "Agencies Prefer Men!" *Printer's Ink*, Aug. 1927, 84. On women in advertising, see Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1995); Jacqueline Dirks, "Advertising as Service: Professional Advertising Women and 'The Woman's Viewpoint,'" paper presented at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 1993.

number in the largest companies, women were disproportionately assigned the so-called “women’s accounts,” such as beauty products, soap, fashion, food, and housewares. A larger number of women worked in local advertising agencies, mail order firms, and the advertising staffs of small businesses—a history still unwritten.

In department store merchandising, over 40 percent of buyers were women by 1924; known for their independence, fashionability, and world travel, they identified style trends and determined how to translate them for popular taste. Women editors of the “service departments” of women’s magazines and home journals also played an active role in forging a consumer-goods market. They joined manufacturers and advertisers in conducting market research and determining style trends; extended editorial cooperation to them (for example, designing page layouts that placed advice columns next to complementary advertising); and participated in “tie-in” campaigns that linked national media with local retailers.¹⁶

Home economists, imbued with an ideology of science, professionalism, and efficiency, played a similar role in “mediating consumption,” as Carolyn Goldstein’s excellent study shows, by linking purchasing and consumption with domestic practices. As researchers and educators, home economists worked for manufacturers to promote standardized goods, sanitary packaging, and brand-names, even as they promoted themselves as gatekeepers of normative domestic practices. Their work in nutrition, health, and household efficiency connected women consumers to manufacturers, retailers, teachers, and government agencies. If economic theories were from the late nineteenth century increasingly cognizant of consumers as economic actors, home economists of the 1920s and 1930s joined household economy and political economy in practice.¹⁷

These women, working in large firms and corporations as mid-level managers, executives, or salaried staff, illustrate that gender involves an active process of negotiating and reworking socially-defined differences, through which businesswomen carved out “female” sectors and specialties within mass production industries overwhelmingly dominated by men. Fashion, beauty, and domesticity were not static concepts linked to the feminine. Rather, these women

¹⁶ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 95-99, 311-17; Waller, “Popular Women’s Magazines”; Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*.

¹⁷ Carolyn Goldstein, “Mediating Consumption: Home Economics and American Consumers, 1900-1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1994). On economic theory and consumer culture, see James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

defined, manipulated, and projected them for consumers, in part by developing and utilizing networks of women within mass-market businesses and media.

Many women organized associations in advertising, merchandising, and the fashion trade. Some of these originated defensively; women began advertising clubs in response to their exclusion from men's organizations. Others perceived a niche and actively cultivated it, for example, style marketing specifically for women. In a period when garment manufacturers, fashion consultants, department store merchandisers, and women's magazines were increasingly coordinating their efforts, women created the Fashion Group in 1931 to report on trends in art, design, and popular culture. Women's business relations, construed as "woman to woman," often concealed the commercial nexus within which they were situated. Advertising agent Helen Woodward, for example, secured free publicity in women's magazines in the 1920s, by going directly to the woman editor, taking her to lunch, and sending her free goods. This usually guaranteed a favorable notice. "We always dealt directly with her and spoke as though we weren't advertisers at all," Woodward noted. "It would have been terribly rude of us to hand the stuff to her through the advertising manager."¹⁸

Employment patterns of women in mass-market firms and media jobs also reinforced the occupational niches women had carved out. They traveled back and forth among posts in magazine publishing, advertising, radio script writing, and free-lance work, a circulation that fostered the personal and professional relations of women and served their work as information brokers, promoters, and tastemakers. Women often found positions through a process of chain recruitment. After World War I, most women who secured advertising jobs at the J. Walter Thompson Company had graduated from women's colleges or universities and gained commercial experience as publicists, department store merchandisers, product testers, or market researchers for manufacturers. Because one of the company's leaders, Helen Resor, was a feminist, women's politics also provided a route for many into the company. Ruth Waldo, for instance, worked for the Russell Sage Foundation and New York Charity Organization Society before joining the firm in 1915. As one of her co-workers recalled, "When Waldo

¹⁸ Helen Woodward, *Through Many Windows* (1926; reprint, New York, 1986), 230. On women's advertising clubs, see materials on Advertising Women of New York, Dorothy Dignam Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College; on the Fashion Group, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 311-12.

went back to tell the Social Work people, they were scandalized. You see, they thought it was fine to be helping people, but not to work to make money. ... Miss Waldo felt a bit that way herself.”¹⁹

Publicists, journalists, and organizers in the suffrage campaign and women’s reform activism of the 1910s brought their skills—and sometimes their politics—into the formation of the new mass market. While historians have examined some of the political consequences of business and professional women’s activism—in the National Women’s Party and its advocacy of the Equal Rights Amendment, for instance—the implications for business and cultural history remain to be studied. How did women and men in advertising contest gender as they gave meaning to standardized goods and consumer markets? Even with a background in feminism and reform, many women found themselves actively reifying conventional notions of sexual difference.²⁰

Concepts of production, distribution, and consumption—articulated continually in gendered terms—defined a chasm between manufacturers and consumers, men and women. Simultaneously apprehending and producing sexual difference, consumer-goods manufacturers and service industries perceived a need to bridge that chasm in order to reach women consumers. Toward this end, they engaged in an extraordinary amount of gender impersonation and ventriloquism. The number of women hired or created by mass consumer businesses to represent themselves as company owners, experts, and brand-name identities extended far beyond the familiar face of Betty Crocker. Many businesses selling beauty products, housewares, and other consumer goods perceived female authority and woman-to-woman advice as a crucial sales strategy. Often it is quite difficult for the historian to identify sham companies supposedly established and run by women or to detect other forms of female impersonation. “No Man Bosses Me,” states the letterhead of Marjorie Hamilton, a woman entrepreneur selling weight reduction courses through the mail; that feminist assertion seems a sign of her authenticity, but Marjorie Hamilton was in fact one of many frauds concocted by a male scam artist.²¹ Historians will

¹⁹“Ruth Waldo—Business Biography and some personal description,” in box 4, Sidney Bernstein Papers. Chain recruitment and job networks are apparent in the personnel records at the J. Walter Thompson Company Archives; see also Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*. We might theorize for women something akin to the ethnic “takeovers” of specific occupations or occupational segments; see Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Post-Industrial New York* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

²⁰For an example of this, see the Pond’s testimonial campaign of 1925, documented in Inactive Accounts Files, Pond’s Account History, J. Walter Thompson Archives.

²¹Marjorie Hamilton letterhead in Cosmetics, Warshaw Collection of Business

need to examine the range of representations created by entrepreneurs, public relations specialists, and advertisers who elaborated a gendered marketplace of businesses and consumers.

The Beauty Industry

Among the new consumer-goods industries of the twentieth century, the beauty trade exemplifies the “business exploitation of femininity.” In *Fortune*’s eyes, Elizabeth Arden stood as proof of gender difference in business; indeed, cosmetics and personal care are still not considered a vital industry. However, by most measures—the scale of enterprise, sales, and profit—the beauty business should be recognized as an important force in the twentieth century economy. This commercial field grew from a small and scattered trade in 1900 to the tenth largest industry in the United States in 1930, according to one estimate. And it was an industry in which women turned the cultural basis of their exclusion from the general pursuit of business—their femininity—into a resource for entrepreneurship, ownership, and profit.²²

Within this trade, businesswomen confronted problems similar to those they faced elsewhere: limited capital, poor access to credit, legal disabilities, lack of professional credentials and training. In the late nineteenth century, women were typically barred from receiving education in pharmacy, the background needed to operate drugstores and the path most men took into manufacturing toiletries. Perfumery was a skilled craft and perfumers saw themselves as a “brotherhood.” Hiring practices and social customs, imbued with notions of appropriate male and female behavior and public and private space, militated against women travelling alone as sales agents, or entering into the male camaraderie of the general store as equals. The wholesale-retail system operated within the ambit of male social and, in some sense, political relations, self-consciously articulated as masculine. Strikingly, the toiletries press and business associations, which urged a stereotypically feminine sales language on women consumers, spoke like “he-men” when addressing the trade, as if they were selling machine tools or sporting goods. One manufacturer’s leaflet, for instance, instructed

Americana, Archival Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; cf. Records of Medical Quackery and Frauds, American Medical Association Archives, Chicago.

²²The discussion that follows is derived from my book, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998).

druggists not to be “yellow bellies” when pushing face powder. Manufacturers and retailers in the 1920s, who together had embraced modern display, packaging, and advertising strategies to entice women consumers, continued to invoke with nostalgia a nineteenth century male world, where salesmen and store owners sat around the cracker barrel, talking politics and chewing the fat.²³

Despite the self-conscious propagation of a masculine business world, women found alternative paths into the marketplace. In some cases they adapted methods already used by large businesses. The old system of peddling gave way in the latter part of the nineteenth century to door-to-door sales, with companies engaging corps of agents to sell products on commission or as resellers. The scale of door-to-door operations led to a greater degree of rationalization and systemization, including the division of sales territories into smaller units, by county, town, or even neighborhood. Manufacturers’ “drummers” and representatives, who ranged long distances and sold to wholesalers and retailers, remained men for the most part, but door-to-door agents who sold direct to consumers were frequently women. This distinction held at least into the 1930s; the Willson Monarch Company, a Wisconsin operation whose product line ranged from animal liniments to cosmetics, assumed that men in buggies or cars would sell to far-flung rural customers, while women on foot would sell in towns house to house.²⁴

The company most known for this sales strategy in the cosmetic field is Avon, one of the largest U.S. cosmetics companies today. Originally called the California Perfume Company, it was started in 1886 by book salesman David Hall McConnell, who supposedly discovered that the sample bottles of perfume he gave away were more popular than the books he sold. The daily operations of the firm were handled by a Vermont woman, Mrs. P. F. E. Albee, who developed a plan to recruit women to sell perfumes and toiletries in their neighborhoods. Many women cosmetics entrepreneurs successfully imitated this sales strategy, and their “help wanted” ads, seeking working women in need of income but desiring genteel work, appeared in mag-

²³ For examples of this male world, see the correspondence and trade publications of Carl Weeks, owner of Armand, a cosmetics firm, Carl Weeks Papers, Manuscripts Collection, University of Iowa. On the social relations of retailers and the marketplace, see Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989); David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1930* (Toronto, 1996).

²⁴ See Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.’s classic *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), especially ch. 7; Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1995). Willson Monarch Company’s records are held at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

azines and circulars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In most of these companies, sales agents were usually required to purchase the goods rather than take them on consignment or on a salary basis, and thus they acted as resellers; the system permitted women entrepreneurs with little capital to gain cash flow and expand manufacturing operations.²⁵

Women in the beauty business also pioneered or redefined several commercial techniques that would later become commonplace in the business world. "System" was a turn-of-the-century business ideal often discussed *vis-à-vis* production methods or corporate organization, but women turned "system" into a tool of marketing. Beauty systems were signature skin and hair treatment programs around which entrepreneurs opened cosmetology schools and ran correspondence courses. They often became the basis for franchising operations, in which women purchased the right to use the beauty method, sell trademarked products, operate salons under the entrepreneur's name, and capitalize upon the good will and aura she had built up. Martha Matilda Harper, a Rochester, N.Y., hairdresser and cosmetologist, was an early leader in franchising, selling her "Harper Method" to a number of beauty salons in the 1890s. By the early twentieth century, many white and African-American women entrepreneurs offered franchises to beauticians across the country.²⁶

Franchising, according to business historian Thomas Dicke, underwent a change in definition by the 1930s, from purchasing the right to sell and promote specific products, to the purchase of an entire brand-name corporate identity, production system, and marketing technique. The great expansion of this concept of modern franchising, he argues, occurred in the decades after World War II, but women make no appearance in his study.²⁷ It is clear, however, that women in the beauty trade had worked to develop this modern form of business organization, gaining the franchise, as it were, even before they had the right to vote.

Another common business practice among women in the early twentieth century beauty trade was the direct sales methods known

²⁵ George Gaspar, "The California Perfume Company," *Collector's Showcase* 6 (July/Aug. 1987): 62-67.

²⁶ On beauty culture, see Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York, 1983), 212-225; American Hairdresser, "A Century of Service": *A Hundred Year History of the Beauty Profession* (n.p., 1978). Most beauty entrepreneurs published books detailing their systems; see, e.g., *Madam C. J. Walker Beauty Manual* (Indianapolis, 1928).

²⁷ Thomas S. Dicke, *Franchising in America: The Development of a Business Method* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992).

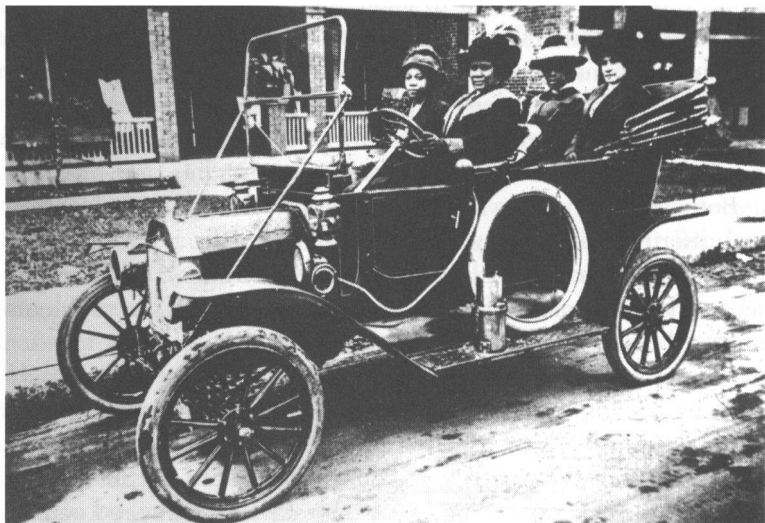
today as multilevel marketing or “pyramid” organization. Operator-agents not only sold beauty services and products, but recruited women into their organizations and trained them in their systems. Among the most successful to capitalize upon multilevel marketing were black women selling hair care systems, many of whom gained local and even national markets among African Americans. Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C. J. Walker achieved unusual success in manufacturing and marketing hair-care products for black women, but they also exemplify trends much more widespread.

Both women grew up in a world of poverty, hard manual labor, and racial discrimination, living lives little different from the majority of black women after the Civil War. In the 1890s Malone began to experiment with hair treatments and preparations to solve the problems of hair loss, breakage, and manageability black women often faced. By 1900 she was manufacturing a hair grower and selling it door to door. Urged by friends to expand her business, she moved in 1902 to St. Louis, became well established, then spent nine months in 1904 traveling throughout the South to expand her market. At this point she adopted a sales strategy using agent-operators, training and certifying them in the method; they earned money on hair treatments and a percentage of product sales, and in turn trained other agents, widening distribution regionally and eventually across the nation. Her business became so successful that Malone soon found herself fending off imitators and applied for trademark protection in 1906, naming her line of preparations *Poro*, a Mende (West African) term for a devotional society.²⁸

Walker, after years of laboring as a domestic worker and laundress, followed a similar path, going into the beauty business in the early 1900s, and indeed working briefly as a *Poro* agent in St. Louis. By 1905 she too had developed a hair grower, moved to Denver, and began “house-to-house canvasses among people of my race,” as she later recalled. Assisted by her husband, a newspaperman, Walker advertised her products and started a mail order business (see Figure 1), along with the house-to-house trade. She compounded the hair preparations herself, then immediately sold the goods on a cash with order basis, reinvesting her earnings in manufacturing. Like Malone, Walker traveled in the South and Midwest, giving speeches in halls and churches, demonstrating her products, and training agents. “Very lit-

²⁸ For a brief biography of Malone, see Bettye Collier-Thomas, “Annie Turnbo Malone,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit, 1992), 724-27.

Figure 1
Madame C. J. Walker



A Million Eyes Turned Upon it Daily

AGENTS EVERYWHERE SUPREME IN REPUTATION

**MADAM C.J. WALKERS
WONDERFUL
HAIR
GROWER**

MADAM C.J. WALKERS' SALVE

SOLD EVERYWHERE IN U.S.A.

WE BEAT THE GLOBE

A Preparation that will do exactly as recommended
ONCE A USER ALWAYS A USER
Name **C.J. Walker**
640 North West st.
Indianapolis, Indiana.
Great opportunity for Agents Write for terms

Top: Madame C. J. Walker with friends in an open touring car. Photograph courtesy of Indiana Historical Society Library (M399/C225). Bottom: Advertisement for Madame C. J. Walker preparations. *The Crisis*, March 1919.

the capital has ever been necessary for its operation,” stated an Internal Revenue agent, nonplussed by the extraordinary sales and profits the company had achieved.²⁹

These companies are early examples of what Nicole Biggart calls “charismatic capitalism.”³⁰ Led by compelling, larger-than-life personalities, they combined the profit motive with the qualities of a social or religious movement. Production and consumption were interwoven with ideologies of economic nationalism, racial advancement, and female emancipation. In their advertising and speeches to African-American women, Walker and Malone powerfully linked improved appearance to economic opportunities and self-respect, to be achieved not only by purchasing beauty products, but by training in the beautician’s occupation. Like many pyramid organizations today, Malone rewarded sales agents not only with cash but with other incentives, giving diamond rings, low-cost mortgages, and public recognition for recruiting new agents, becoming top-sellers, showing evidence of thrift with a savings account, or demonstrating charity.

They built commercial networks through already existing social relations and noneconomic institutions, capitalizing upon female friendships and working through women’s clubs, churches, and schools to promote sales. Enlisting and training recruits or “making an agent,” as it was called, was also a matter of pride; often the recruiter would order the graduate’s diploma and stake her to her first sales “outfit.” These businesswomen blurred the lines between business, philanthropy, community-building, and politics. Malone, for instance, built an immense complex called Poro College, which housed not only the manufacturing plant, sales operations, and school for training agent-operators, but also a gymnasium, chapel, and hall for theater, music, and lectures; it served as a community center for black residents of St. Louis. Many of the beauty “systems” organized agent-operator clubs that offered protection to companies from imitators and frauds, but also served the function of a working-class benevolent society, providing mutual aid, insurance and death benefits, and offering opportunities for leisure and charitable work. Some embraced political activism.

²⁹ “Wealthiest Negro Woman’s Suburban Mansion,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 Nov. 1917; G.S.O. memo, 19 Apr. 1921 and Walker Manufacturing Company to Commission of Internal Revenue, 2 Jan. 1923, in Madam C. J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana. For biographical information on Walker, see A’Lelia Perry Bundles, *Madam C. J. Walker, Entrepreneur* (New York, 1991); Charles Latham, Jr., “Madam C. J. Walker & Company,” *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 1 (Summer 1989): 28–36.

³⁰ Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago, 1989).

Walker's agents, for instance, condemned lynching and racism during their first national convention, and beauty salons have been for decades centers for information-sharing and neighborhood organizing within African-American communities, especially important during the civil rights movement.

These kinds of businesses, built around a charismatic figure, opening opportunity through pyramid organization, and fostering a culture that joined economic and noneconomic motives, have continued to be important for women. Although few have made a commitment to community and politics comparable to the early African-American women entrepreneurs, many have articulated a version of economic feminism. With her signature pink Cadillac, Mary Kay Ash has certainly been an easy target for feminist critics. But even as she affirms women's "natural femininity" in the firm's organization and in product promotion, Mary Kay has explicitly linked this affirmation to advancing women's economic mobility and independence, especially for working mothers and displaced homemakers. In terms of job creation, managerial opportunities, and income earning for women, Mary Kay likely surpasses the record of many large corporations owned and managed by men, whose "glass ceilings" and "mommy tracks" have limited women's advancement.³¹

These women's enterprises suggest that there were alternative paths in the creation of mass-consumer goods and service industries, paths we know little about because business history has largely, although not exclusively, focused its attention on the triumph of continuous-flow industrial production, rationalized systems of distribution, national media-based advertising, and the rise of the mass market. Important challenges to and modifications of this narrative are now being made within the field. Philip Scranton's pathbreaking work has established that custom work and batch production remained important processes in the era of mass production; recognizing the diversity and flexibility in production leads to new perspectives on mass marketing and mass consumption as well.³²

Attention to gender and other social differences, including race, ethnicity, and region, furthers this project and expands it in new directions. It requires us to look more closely at the early historical devel-

³¹ See Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay* (New York, 1981).

³² Philip Scranton, *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925* (Princeton, N.J., 1997); Philip Scranton, "Manufacturing Diversity: Production Systems, Markets, and an American Consumer Society, 1870-1930," *Technology and Culture* 35 (July 1994): 476-506.

opment of service-oriented businesses, which became increasingly important over the course of the twentieth century, so much so that now we speak of a service economy. The case of the beauty business suggests that some of the innovations historians have located in goods production and in other periods—franchising is a good example—may have originated or taken shape in women’s businesses, especially those that combined services with product sales. These women-owned companies also complicate our understanding of business’s construction and deployment of gender. If many consumer-goods industries, corporations and advertising firms reinforced dominant gender ideology, some businesses, especially those run by African-American women, produced alternative and even oppositional conceptions of gender.

Small Businesses

Business historians have focused on the large-scale processes of standardization, nationalization, and globalization in modern industries. Yet at the level of retailing and service provision, as well as production, many businesses remained small, local, and family affairs throughout the twentieth century. Even as Susan Strasser shows how the mass market redefined the social relations of commerce, she also documents that the success of chain stores and mass merchandisers was slower and more uneven than they proclaimed. Although large numbers of consumers purchased from mail order companies, they bought a relatively small percentage of goods from them. As late as 1945, chain stores did about 20 percent of all retail business. Historians have focused upon the rapid growth of these national companies but failed to wonder about the 80 percent of business left to independent retailers. Histories of twentieth-century groceries, florists, stationery stores, booksellers, tearooms, real estate agencies, and travel agencies need to be written, yet scattered evidence indicates the ongoing presence and importance of women in these local enterprises. How have women’s local ownership and management mattered economically, politically, and culturally? Family businesses, so important a part of business history in the nineteenth century, too often seem to drop from the historian’s view in the twentieth. As late as 1972, however, most women capitalized their businesses with money from personal or joint savings; although 31 percent received bank loans, these were overwhelmingly in small amounts and supplemental. Nor were all “mom and pop” stores swallowed up by national retailers and discounters; Israel and

Julia Waldbaum began with a butter-and-egg store in Brooklyn and built a small chain of stores by 1945; when he died, she took over and expanded the company into a regional chain of supermarkets.³³

Like the beauty industry and consumer marketing to women, women's activities in local and family businesses invite attention to the significance of gender in business history. In particular, these ventures challenge the definitional boundaries placed around "business" and "economic activity" in the twentieth century. Certainly one of the great achievements of feminist scholarship has been to contest such gendered dichotomies as public and private, work and home, production and consumption. It has shown how these divisions are produced ideologically, and how women and men continually cross, contest, accommodate, and renegotiate them. Women's historians have shown, for instance, how women in the past articulated social definitions of femininity to justify their political activities—from Republican motherhood in the Revolutionary War to Women's Strike for Peace in the 1960s. As discussed above, many women effectively used this strategy in business.

Other women employed a strategy of cultural displacement, moving politics and business onto seemingly nonpolitical and noneconomic fields. Historian Sylvie Murray, for example, shows how in the 1950s, supposedly the "doldrums" of feminist activism, suburban women agitated for daycare centers, improved schools, and racial justice under the rubric of "civic duty," through PTAs, voter's leagues, and neighborhood organizations that explicitly denied their "political" intent.³⁴ This process was at work in the economic sphere as well, often as a tactical response to employment discrimination, educational restrictions, and social customs dictating women's place. The effacement of commerce was simultaneously a commercial strategy and a social practice employed by many women in business, from nineteenth century novelists in the literary marketplace, to such religious leaders—and successful businesswomen—as Mary Baker Eddy and Aimee Semple McPherson.³⁵

³³ Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*; Mansel G. Blackford, *A History of Small Business in America* (New York, 1991), 88-89, 117-120; Task Force on Women Business Owners, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Report on Women Business Owners* (Washington, D.C., 1978); Lawrence Van Gelder, "Julia Waldbaum, 99, Owner of a Chain of Supermarkets" (obituary), *New York Times*, 3 Oct. 1996.

³⁴ Sylvie Murray, "Suburban Citizens: Domesticity and Community Politics in Queens, New York" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1994).

³⁵ Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990); Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson* (San Diego, Calif., 1994).

Using a discourse of community, domesticity, neighborliness, and service, women successfully gained a major place in the brokerage of residential real estate, although significantly not in the sale of commercial real estate. The gendered associations of women, family and home combined with women's local knowledge of home prices, improvements, and potential sellers and buyers. Women capitalized upon their work as information brokers in civic associations and in the casual interactions of daily life, turning "gossip" into commerce. At the turn of the century, established real estate boards had barred women; women in turn bypassed these boards by negotiating at the homes for sale and thus became known as "curbstone brokers" and "kitchen operators." Women who went into brokerage were often widows or daughters of male real estate agents, part of a husband-and-wife team, or secretaries and rental agents who advanced to brokerage. Many sold real estate part-time, had only state licenses, or did not have formal training in real estate appraisal and sales. In the entire state of Ohio in the mid-1940s, for example, there were twenty-four women realtors with national accreditation, but over four hundred had state licenses to practice in Cuyahoga County alone. From a handful of women in 1900, their numbers rose from over nine thousand in 1920 to thirty thousand by 1952; in 1977, women were 44 percent of real estate brokers.³⁶

We know little about these women, their impact on the business of real estate in a period of expanding home ownership, or their views of class, race, gender, and community. Nor do we know much about the politics of their business activities. But a tantalizing bit of evidence cries out for more research: Realtors opposed the public housing and rent-control provisions of the Omnibus Housing Act of 1949, the federal response to the housing crisis during and after the Second World War. According to one source, women realtors tried to mobilize opposition through PTAs and by going to neighborhood homes, even as women's clubs and church groups supported the legislation.³⁷

Women's historians recognize national equal opportunity legislation in the 1960s and early 1970s as a watershed for women entering into male-dominated businesses and professions. We need to be just as attentive to the women in women-owned and family companies, local firms, and "boutique businesses." In 1972, less than 5 percent of all firms were owned by women; today women start over 40 percent of

³⁶ Pearl Janet Davies, *Women in Real Estate: A History of the Women's Council*, (Chicago, 1963); U.S. Department of Commerce, *Report on Women Business Owners*.

³⁷ Davies, *Women in Real Estate*.

all new small businesses.³⁸ What was women's role in authorizing the increasingly influential ideology of small business since 1980? What was the relationship of female small business owners to feminist politics? How has this business development affected national debates over tax policy (especially anti-tax movements), government intervention in the economy, affirmative action in federal contracts, parental leave and other workplace legislation? Working women's embrace of small-business entrepreneurship remains an open and important issue for historians seeking to explain the changing economy, politics, and culture of recent decades.

Conclusion

Located in specific sectors and occupations, the businesswomen discussed here invite us to look again at how categories, periodization, and significance are defined within business history. They challenge us to complicate the narrative of industrial production and big business in the twentieth century, to make sense of the diversity in production, distribution, promotion, and sales of goods and services.

However marginal women in business seemed to *Fortune* in 1935, their work—in services, style goods, information brokering, and other female-coded arenas—has become, sixty years later, central to our economy and culture. Their activities expose to view a larger process engaged in by large corporations and small firms alike, the deployment of gender and other social differences to control the terms by which business has been conducted, and particularly to construct markets. In turn, these increasingly segmented markets have further produced and circulated gender difference, not only in the United States, but in societies throughout the world. This process often underwrote popular perceptions about gender difference and ordination—the woman consumer as irrational and manipulable, for instance. However fixed and natural they appeared, such meanings came out of historical encounters and conflicts. As we have seen, some businesswomen destabilized conventional constructions of gender to build their markets and address consumers.

Thinking about gender in business history reinforces the view that business is hardly a “separate sphere,” but an arena saturated with beliefs and practices formed and contested outside as well as inside the

³⁸ Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Women-Owned Businesses 1972* (Washington, D.C., 1976).

company. Gendered patterns of sociability, cultural beliefs, and politics have historically intertwined with the pursuit of business goals. This seems an obvious claim, but contending with it remains a difficult task. Fortunately, recent feminist approaches to gender offer valuable tools. What is at stake is not only a greater understanding of the effects of gender on business, but a more complex view of the commerce in ideas, goods, and practices that constitute gender in modern American life.