

EVELYN NAKANO GLENN

UNEQUAL FREEDOM

How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor



Unequal Freedom

*How Race and Gender
Shaped American Citizenship
and Labor*

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Evelyn Nakano Glenn

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For my family
Gary, Sara, Antonia, and Patrick

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Introduction

AFTER MORE THAN two centuries of struggle to realize its professed principles of universal equality, the United States still faces continuing racial, gender, and class inequality. Inequality remains a source of great anguish and acrimony over its causes and deep conflict over what can and should be done to change it. In a society that proclaims freedom, individualism, and unlimited mobility, the persistence of rampant inequality along ascriptive lines of race and gender seems to be a contradiction. But is it?

In this book I examine two major structures through which unequal race and gender relations have been shaped and contested in the United States. *Citizenship* has been used to draw boundaries between those who are included as members of the community and entitled to respect, protection, and rights and those who are excluded and thus not entitled to recognition and rights. *Labor* places people in the economic order, affecting access to goods and services, level of autonomy, standard of living, and quality of life. Both have been constituted in ways that privilege white men and give them power over racialized minorities and women. Simultaneously, citizenship and labor have been arenas in which groups have contested their exclusion, oppression, and exploitation.

Citizenship and labor have been closely linked throughout American history. The founders of the nation set up a government based on prin-

ciples of control by independent (white male) producers who would participate in governance and enjoy freedom. Citizenship status (recognition as a full adult citizen) was tied to labor status (position as a free independent producer). Conversely, the lack of citizenship rights limited the ability of some groups to form unions, compete for jobs, and attain education and training for higher-level positions. Rhetorically, the concepts of liberal citizenship and free labor developed and evolved in tandem and in response to political, economic, and social transformations over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two were brought together in the widely held ideal of the “worker citizen,” which carried the twin attributes of whiteness and masculinity. Notions of which groups had the intellectual and emotional capacities to do conceptual work were similar to notions of which groups had the rational, self-governing capacity required for citizenship. Therefore, labor and citizenship are intertwined institutional arenas in which race and gender relations, meanings, and identities have been both constituted and contested.

To bring labor and citizenship into the same frame, one must look at practices at the local level. Labor markets are necessarily localized within a geographically limited area, roughly the distance a person can travel to work on a daily basis. Treating citizenship as localized is a departure from the way it usually has been viewed. We normally think of citizenship as being determined by the U.S. Constitution, federal and state statutes, and court rulings. However, even if these formal documents and rulings define boundaries and rights, they are often interpreted and enforced (or not enforced) by individual actors operating at the local level. In some cases the actors are state, county, or municipal officials, for example a welfare department social worker ruling on the eligibility of a black single mother for benefits. In other cases they are “private citizens,” for example a movie theater owner deciding whether or not to allow Mexican Americans to sit on the main floor. It is these kinds of localized, often face-to-face practices that determine whether people have or don’t have substantive as opposed to purely formal rights of citizens. When I say that individual actors interpret and enforce boundaries, I don’t mean that they do so on the basis of their own idiosyncratic ideas; usually they are working within rules and social practices that are widely shared within the local community or region.¹

The uncovering of these local rules and practices with respect to citizenship and labor is one of the aims of this book.

The period from Reconstruction through the Progressive Era, roughly 1870–1930, was one of considerable ferment in meanings of citizenship and labor and in race, gender, and class relations owing to the abolition of slavery, industrialization, urbanization, massive immigration from southern and eastern Europe, and imperialist expansion into Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Philippines. These upheavals led to social boundaries of all sorts being challenged and renegotiated. Ideologies and conceptions of race and sex difference also changed, as biological classification and evolutionary theory were harnessed to explain human variation and to rank groups hierarchically. Humankind was categorized into inferior and superior races, inferior and superior genders. Gender and race differences were interpreted similarly, so that skull size, physiognomy, hormones, and other physical attributes were seen as markers of distinct psychological and characterological traits of women and people of color. According to Nancy Stepan, through analogous thinking in science, “lower races represented the ‘female’ types of the human species and females the ‘lower race’ of gender.”²

Within this historical period, I examine relations between dominant and subordinate groups in three regions: the South, the Southwest, and Hawaii. Each of these areas contained a substantial nonwhite population group: African Americans in the South, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Asian Americans in Hawaii. This regional approach enables me to make certain comparative statements about how U.S. citizenship and labor systems affected these three groups and how the groups struggled against exclusion and oppression. The three regions are also comparable in the roles they played in building the national economy. They supplied agricultural products and raw materials to more industrialized regions of the country, and these basic industries employed large masses of immigrant and racialized labor. All three regions developed coercive labor systems that relied on racialized structures of control, and in all three, struggles over labor and citizenship rights were dominant issues that shaped relations among white and nonwhite groups.

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a significant

body of literature based on meticulous primary research that documents the experiences of blacks in various cities and states in the South during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, and of Mexicans in the Southwest and Japanese in Hawaii during approximately the same period. Much of this research has focused on women or gender, and many scholars have sought to uncover activism, community building, and other forms of agency on the part of people of color. Now that the literature has reached a critical mass, the time is ripe for synthesis that allows us to draw a larger picture than is possible with localized studies, to capture variability as well as overall trends, and to refine our theories of race and gender inequality.

The issue of gender is integral to all aspects of my approach. Although many recent regional histories of race relations, labor histories, and studies of citizenship have “included gender,” they have usually done so by having a separate chapter on women. Many other books discuss groups in global terms, for example whites and blacks, without specifying that “whites” really refers to white men and “blacks” really refers to black men, or that “women” really refers to “white women.” In this book, because I have had to rely on sources such as government agency reports and secondary accounts in which gender is not specified, it has not always been possible to avoid this distortion. Nonetheless, I have tried to be as specific as possible in talking about, for example, Anglo men, Anglo women, Mexican men, and Mexican women.

This book is organized as follows: The first three chapters set out a historical and conceptual framework for each of the major nodes of this study, race and gender, citizenship, and labor. In Chapter 1 I offer a conceptual approach that brings race and gender into a common analytic frame so they can be studied together. In Chapter 2 I examine the roots of American citizenship as a white masculine domain that excluded women and racialized “others.” In Chapter 3 I trace the rise of industrial capitalism and the shift from small farming and independent artisanry to concentrated property and a wage labor system over the course of the nineteenth century, a history that was closely intertwined with that of citizenship. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the three regional case studies. Although each region has unique aspects that are brought out in detail, the chapters are organized around certain common topics so as to facilitate comparisons across the regions. In the final chapter I draw connections between national policies and local practices and

compare practices among the three regions. I also identify points of slippage between national and local and within the local that create opportunities for maneuvering and negotiation, and thus for significant agency on the part of both dominant and subordinate groups.

OF ALL WEALTHY countries in the world, the United States is the only one to have substantially relied, for its economic development, on the labor of peoples from all three nonwhite areas of the globe: Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Thus a central feature of the U.S. economy has been its reliance on racialized and gendered systems of control, including coercion. Racialization in the labor market has been buttressed by a system of citizenship designed to reinforce the control of employers and to constrain the mobility of workers. Although I do not, for the most part, explicitly draw parallels between the historical development of race and gender inequality and present-day conditions, I believe that many of the deep tensions within our contemporary society can be traced directly to the period covered in this book. I hope that my comparative analysis of the three regions—and the three major racialized groups—will shed light on the historical development of the inequality that is so evident in twenty-first-century America.

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Integrating Race and Gender

TO EXAMINE HOW labor and citizenship constitute—and are constituted by—race and gender, we must conceptualize race and gender as interacting, interlocking structures and then consider how they are incorporated into and shaped by various social institutions.¹ Thus the first challenge is to bring race and gender within the same analytic plane.

In the past, gender and race have constituted separate fields of scholarly inquiry. By studying each in isolation, however, these fields have marginalized major segments of the communities they claimed to represent. In studies of “race,” men of color stood as the universal racial subject, while in studies of “gender,” white women were positioned as the universal gendered subject. Women of color were left out of both narratives, rendered invisible both as racial and as gendered subjects.²

In the 1980s women of color began to address their omission through detailed historical and ethnographic studies of African American, Latina, and Asian American women in relation to work, family, and community.³ These scholars not only uncovered overlooked dimensions of experience, they also exposed the flaws in theorizing from a narrow social base. For example, explanations of gender inequality based on middle-class white women’s experience focused on women’s encapsulation in the domestic sphere and economic dependence on men. These concepts by and large did not apply to black women, who historically had to work outside the home.

Initial attempts to bring race into the same frame as gender treated the two as independent axes. The bracketing of gender was in some sense deliberate because one concern of early feminism was to uncover commonalities that could unite women politically. However, if we begin with gender separated out, we have to “add” race in order to account for the situation of women of color. This leads to an additive model in which women of color are described as suffering from “double” jeopardy (or “triple” oppression if class is included). Women scholars of color expressed dissatisfaction with this model. African American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women, they said, did not experience race and gender as separate or additive, but as simultaneous and linked. They offered concepts such as “intersectionality,” “multiple consciousness,” “interlocking systems of oppression,” and “racialized gender” to express this simultaneity.⁴ Yet, despite increased recognition of the interconnectedness of gender and race, race remained undertheorized. In the absence of a “theory” of race comparable to a “theory” of gender, a comprehensive theory of both has proven elusive. Especially needed is a theory that neither subordinates race and gender to some broader (presumably more primary) set of relations such as class nor substantially flattens the complexity of these concepts.⁵ Building on the valuable work of such scholars as Tessie Liu, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Amy Kaminsky, and Ann Stoler, I argue that a synthesis of social constructionist streams within critical race and feminist studies offers a framework for integrated analysis.⁶ Social constructionism provides a common vocabulary and set of concepts with which to look at how gender and race are mutually constituted—that is, at the ways in which gender is racialized and race is gendered.

Gender

Social constructionist theory has had somewhat different trajectories with respect to gender and to race. In both fields social constructionism arose as an alternative to biological and essentialist conceptions that rendered gender and race static and ahistorical, but it achieved centrality earlier and has been elaborated in greater detail in feminist scholarship on women and gender than in race studies. This is so even though—or perhaps because—gender seems to be rooted more firmly than race in biology: in bodies, reproduction, and sexuality. Indeed,

feminist scholars adopted the term “gender” precisely to free our thinking from the constrictions of naturalness and biological inevitability attached to the concept of sex. In the mid-1970s Gayle Rubin proposed the term “sex-gender system” to capture the idea of societal arrangements by which biological sexuality was transformed into socially significant gender.⁷

Since then, gender has emerged as the closest thing we have to a unifying concept in feminist studies, cutting across the various disciplines and theoretical schools that make up the field. Many feminist historians and sociologists use gender as an analytic concept to refer to socially created meanings, relationships, and identities organized around reproductive differences.⁸ Others focus on gender as a social status and organizing principle of social institutions detached from and going far beyond reproductive differences,⁹ and still others focus on gender as a product of everyday social practice.¹⁰ The concept of gender thus provides an overarching framework from which to view historical, cultural, and situational variability in definitions of womanhood and manhood, in meanings of masculinity and femininity, in relationships between men and women, and in their relative power and political status. If one accepts gender as variable, then one must acknowledge that it is never fixed but is continually constituted and reconstituted.

By loosening the connection to the body, the notion of socially constructed gender freed us from thinking of sex/gender as solely, or even primarily, a characteristic of individuals. By examining gender as a constitutive feature and organizing principle of collectivities, social institutions, historical processes, and social practices, feminist scholars have shown that major areas of life, including sexuality, family, education, economy, and state, are shot through with conflicting interests and hierarchies of power and privilege along gender lines. As an organizing principle, gender involves both cultural meanings and material relations. That is, gender is constituted simultaneously through deployment of gendered rhetoric, symbols, and images and through allocation of resources along gender lines. Thus an adequate account of any particular phenomenon from the perspective of gender requires looking at both representation and material arrangements. For example, understanding the persistent gender gap in wages involves analyzing cultural evaluations of gendered work, such as caring, and gendered meanings of concepts, such as “skill,” as well as divisions of labor in

the home, occupational segregation, and labor market stratification. Recent theoretical work is moving toward imploding the distinction between sex and gender. The distinction assumes the prior existence of “something real” out of which social relationships and cultural meanings are elaborated. Poststructuralist feminist critics have problematized the distinction by pointing out that sex and sexual meanings are themselves culturally constructed. The sociologist Judith Lorber carefully unpacks three concepts and shows that they are all socially constructed: biological sex, which refers to either genetic or morphological characteristics; sexuality, which refers to desire and orientation; and gender, which refers to social status and identity. One result of this kind of work is to undermine categoricism, the idea that there are “really” two sexes or two genders or two sexual orientations. At present, the conceptual distinctions among sex, sexuality, and gender are still being debated, and new work on the body is revealing the intertwining and complexity of these concepts.¹¹

Race

Scholars have been slower to abandon the idea of race as rooted in biological markers, even though they recognize that social attitudes and arrangements, not biology, maintain white dominance. As Barbara Fields points out, historians were reluctant to accept the conclusion, reached by biologists by early in the twentieth century, that race did not correspond to any biological referent and that racial categories were so arbitrary as to be meaningless. Race was exposed as a social creation—a fiction that divided and categorized individuals by phenotypic markers, such as skin color, which supposedly signified underlying differences. Nonetheless, as Peggy Pascoe notes, historians continued well into the 1980s to study “races” as immutable categories, to speak of race as a force in history, and to view racism as a psychological product rather than as a product of social history. Pascoe suggests that the lack of a separate term, like “gender,” to refer to “socially significant race” may have retarded full recognition of race as a social construct. In sociology, liberal scholarship took the form of studying “race relations”—that is, examining relations among groups that were already constituted as distinct entities. Quantitative researchers treated race as a preexisting “fact” of social life, an independent variable to be