



CHICAGO JOURNALS

---

*Women in Class Society* by Heleith I. B. Saffioti

*Women in Class Society* by Heleith I. B. Saffioti

Review by: Barbara Celarent

*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 119, No. 6 (May 2014), pp. 1821-1827

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/677208>

Accessed: 12/09/2014 18:48

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to  
*American Journal of Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

describes the writings he studies as examples of the “deviance memoir genre,” with many a tall tale, much lying and self-vindication along the lines of once I was lost, now I am found and do good works. He takes the key supposed facts in a story and examines how the author rhetorically exculpates him- or herself.

The fact that a distinguished historian like the late Eric Hobsbawm does not deal with the gossip Goode alleges about his private life means his memoir is of little interest and merely confirms his typically Marxist reluctance to face up to the real issues of life, as opposed to fascism, the Holocaust, and the Jewish experience. Casanova’s memoir is of more significance to Goode. The fact that some, at least, of the works Goode analyzes can be seen as commercially profitable, cynical exploitations of the genre of scandal memoirs, with sometimes no obvious interest in any truth, is deemed irrelevant to his task of exposing awareness of the social censures Goode understands as constituting “deviance.” The truth seems to be that, like many in the labeling tradition of the sociology of deviance, he is fascinated by scandal, for otherwise why not examine the Hobsbawm family’s terrifying flight from the fascists’ censure of Jews?

The book rattles on with examples, stories, and comments interspersed with constant reiterations of his view that the concept of deviant behavior is not at all in decline (“*Deviance* is an eternal concept, an ineradicable feature of social life,”) and the usual Goode insults to anyone who thinks differently, for example, to assert that the concept of deviance has lost its vitality is “asinine” (p. 44). Ultimately, he cannot see how rooted in American social history the concept of deviance is. He says nobody could imagine that the individual’s neutralizing of censures (“transgressions” for him) causes crime because, of course, it is actually engaging in crime that leads to “techniques of neutralization” (p. 57). Yet of course it is precisely the ideological erasure of the Jew’s humanity that was a crucial precondition to the Holocaust: behavior does not precede ideology but is intertwined with it.

It seems the zookeepers of deviance continue to groom the peacocks yet do nothing to change the regimes of truth that define them as animals and keep them in cages. The all-too-human irony is that Goode’s book works as a vindication of his own writings in defense of the concept of deviant behavior.

*Women in Class Society.* By Heleith I. B. Saffioti. Translated by Michael Vale. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978. Pp. xxiv+378.

Barbara Celarent\*  
*University of Atlantis*

The 19th century saw the rise of conscious solidarity among women in the metropolitan countries. This solidarity emerged from the new bourgeois

\* Another review from 2052 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

family with its nonworking wife as well as from the working-class household with its “family wage.” Both were products of a historically rapid separation of work and home. Like many reactive solidarities, women’s new consciousness began by inverting the hierarchy implicit in that new separation, claiming for women a finer and more moral nature. Women were separate but more than equal. (*Négritude* was another such example, as we have recently seen. Leopold Sédar Senghor accepted white racial definitions but inverted them to claim for blacks a fully independent and centrally important cultural role.) But even while the separate spheres ideologists claimed the moral superiority of women, other feminists claimed an equality with men more in the style of Enlightenment universalism. For them, separate spheres was a male ideology and women who followed it suffered from what the more radical women would eventually learn—from Karl Marx—to call false consciousness.

By the early 20th century, metropolitan women had begun to acquire the full political rights that in many cases metropolitan men had wrested from the aristocracies only shortly before. And as the European welfare state took shape, its new programs often treated the individual—rather than the family—as the unit of society, thereby laying the axe to the 19th-century family system and broadening the Enlightenment concept of citizenship to include social and economic as well as political rights. After the Second World War, a generation of women sought to define and elaborate these new rights. The transformation of the advanced economies toward service work had drawn legions of women into the labor force, most often with the hope that they would deploy usefully for their new employers the cooperative and facilitative personality that a century of familism had made common among women in advanced economies. Yet there was an obvious contradiction between the new status of worker and the old ideology that underwrote what might be called the separate-spheres personality. The major works of midcentury feminism grew out of this contradiction, which was particularly acute in the historically Protestant countries, with their heritage of militant individualism. But the contradiction emerged also in Catholic countries, where familism’s hold on social structure was both older and stronger, and was further transformed as the ideology of feminism began to spread globally. It was in this context that Heleieth Saffioti wrote *Women in Class Society*.

Heleieth Iara Bongiovanni Saffioti was born in 1934 in Ibirá in the Brazilian state of São Paulo. Her parents—both the children of very large families—were occasional workers: her father in construction and her mother as a home seamstress. When her wealthy godfather offered her father work in the countryside, Heleieth was left behind with grandparents for four years of primary schooling. When she rejoined her family in the outback, there was no schooling beyond the primary years, so she acted as a school monitor for younger children in order to retain what she had learned. She was then shuttled around between various aunts, uncles, and in-laws in various cities, arriving in São Paulo at age 14. Here she did her secondary schooling at night, holding secretarial jobs and teaching Portuguese to foreign families during

the day. Graduating at the top of her class in 1954, she took the entrance exams for the University of São Paulo in social science. Meanwhile, a short courtship led to marriage to physical chemist Waldemar Saffioti, which disrupted her education while they spent a year in the United States.

Saffioti graduated in 1960. Her husband had a new appointment in the inland city of Araraquara, and they moved there in 1962. Once she passed the necessary teaching exams, Araraquara sociologist Luiz Pereira enlisted her to teach courses in pedagogy and, increasingly, sociology. Meanwhile, she did her graduate studies part-time. (Graduate work was at that time not formally organized in the Brazilian university system.) In 1967 she defended her dissertation at a stormy session, overcoming critics concerned about her Marxism, then unacceptable given the recent transition from the liberal regimes of Juscelino Kubitschek and João Goulart to the conservative military dictatorship of Humberto Castelo Branco. The dissertation immediately became the book *A Mulher na sociedade de classes*, whose English translation is reviewed here.

Saffioti's subsequent career was largely uneventful. She became a professor at the Araraquara faculty, which eventually became part of the State University of São Paulo, and she gradually acquired joint affiliations with other institutions as her fame spread. Her intellectual focus remained on women's work, domestic violence, incest, and patriarchy. She was politically active, but never actively affiliated with particular movements, once remarking that "I have my positions, but no affiliation, because I don't want to lose my freedom of thought." But she was often an activist: at one point, she went to law school, hoping to create a law firm dedicated to women's issues. She also taught courses on violence against women to police officers, lawyers, and others. Saffioti died in 2010.

*Women in Class Society* has three main sections. An introductory section on women and capitalism presents the classical Marxist analysis and poses the question of how to position women within that analysis. The somewhat longer second section discusses the position of women in Brazil. The third section returns to the more general level, investigating the Marxian superstructural relations of sex by examining its place in cultural systems like psychoanalysis, anthropology, and kinship. Unusually for a book of this length and substance, *Women* closes with a summary of its argument—a welcome relic from its origins as a doctoral thesis. The English version is, however, considerably shorter than the Portuguese original, and its first and third sections have been considerably reorganized. Subsections have also been designated within the chapters. Perhaps most important, the considerable section on the Roman Catholic Church has been omitted.

Saffioti's youth marks the book decisively. She told an interviewer 40 years later that "the older you get, the more questions there are. When one is young, one has no doubts." And the book is indeed a confident one. Karl Marx and Talcott Parsons, Max Weber and Karen Horney, Gilberto Freyre and Florestan Fernandes: Saffioti mixes all these and dozens more in her first, theoretical section, despite their many disagreements and con-

tradiictory theoretical schemes. On the one hand we have Parsonian equilibrium and functions, ascription and achievement, social system and stability. On the other we have Marxian relations of production, commodity production, and capital accumulation. This mixture never becomes clear; one still wonders whether the bourgeois family form with its separation of home and work was truly necessitated by the triumph of capitalism. But Saffioti's empirical insights are consistently interesting. For example, she notes the power conferred on labor by the withdrawal of women from the labor force (via the induced scarcity of labor power and its consequent bargaining strength). This not-very Marxist argument proves to be one of the main joints between the analysis of sex and that of labor. (Strangely, she spends little time on reproduction itself—the necessity of creating a labor force through family sexuality—even though Gilberto Freyre had long before noted the centrality of this process in colonial Brazil.) In the end, Saffioti cannot reconcile the theory of class conflict she borrows from Marx with the more mainstream view of stratification that undergirds her conception of sexual hierarchy and that permeates her arguments about the oppression of women. Yet the book's first section abounds with insights and, even more important, makes broad intellectual connections that were soon to be forbidden as theory about women formalized and began to subdivide into warring schools.

That Saffioti cannot ultimately synthesize the concepts of class and stratification reflects in part her being ahead of her time. The demographic and mobility histories of families under capitalism were not empirically clarified until the 1960s and 1970s. The increase in the nonreproductive portion of the life course; the consistent relation of fertility and class; the impact of health changes (especially the fall of maternal mortality after the introduction of antibiotics): the ramifications of these things were not fully understood. Yet they would prove central to thinking sensibly about the economic dynamics of households in the modern era.

The book's second section is the heart of Saffioti's contribution. In four core chapters, she outlines the historical experience of women in Brazil: first in general, then in education, in the workforce, and in the feminist movement. Here the footnotes are rich with primary sources, and the analysis is broad and sweeping. The section begins with a discussion of Brazil's position in the international economic system, its dependence on the metropolis as a consumer of its primary products, and the economic relation of that dependence to slavery. (Curiously, Saffioti ignores the shift from sugar to coffee that accompanied and in many ways facilitated abolition of slavery.) She notes throughout this section that the women of historical Brazil were often more conservative than the men, attributing this fact to a false consciousness forced on them by the "larger system." The argument is sometimes anachronistic. Saffioti often judges both the women and the men of earlier Brazil in terms of their resemblance to an abstract ideal, rather than as living in a dynamic present that shaped them as they shaped it. But nonetheless, there are dozens of interesting insights, such as that upper-class women

lost status when the emancipated male slaves were immediately given the vote that elite women did not have, or again that urbanization and industrialization brought more and more Brazilians out of the informal family sector with its fluid sex roles into a more formal and regularized bourgeois family form, with consequent loss of status for many women. Within a few decades, such insights were routine; in 1967, they were pathbreaking.

The chapter on education is excellent. This had been Saffioti's field of specialization, and her own experience of education had been diverse. Indeed the last sections of the chapter describe from the inside the normal school system that had been the setting of Saffioti's climb to the top. Earlier sections present extensive statistics, detailed discussions of major legal changes, and similar archival details. Here too there is occasional anachronism, as if Brazilian politicians of the mid-19th century should be faulted for not having created *ex nihilo* an education system that would have been appropriate to the psychology of a Heleieth Saffioti of the mid-20th. But Saffioti softens this judgment with a wide-ranging analysis of different shades of contemporary opinion, showing herself capable of identifying just action by actors of the past.

The chapter on work is similarly trenchant. We find here labor force statistics showing what Saffioti's theory predicted—the departure of women from some work sectors in the earlier part of the 20th century. The analysis is to some extent questioned by the immense proportions of Brazilians in the subsistence sector (of the population over 10 years of age, only 13% of women and 36% of men are gainfully employed; p. 187) But the figures do show that industrialization facilitated the split of work and home, driving women out of gainful employment. It is striking to those familiar with metropolitan statistics that there is not (as of 1960—the latest figures here) an expansion of women in the services. Indeed the service sector is not even shown in the data. But as is often the case in this book, Saffioti is doing her best with dubious historical statistics, and it is impressive that she managed to find as effective statistical evidence as she did.

Saffioti closes her empirical section with a solid and effective overview of the Brazilian feminist movement. Brazilian feminism has a long lineage, generally thought to start with the 19th-century figure Nísia Floresta, whose status has sometimes been challenged by those who find her brand of feminism problematic. But Saffioti focuses on the 20th century and in particular on Bertha Lutz and her proposals for women's advancement, noting their controversial status both at the time and later. Already visible in the 1930s and 1940s are debates within the feminist movement over class differences and indeed over essentialism. (Is the only real difference between men and women the possibility of maternity, and, if so, is maternity merely biological motherhood or a larger, sexually based ability for child care?) For Saffioti, the crucial problem is earlier feminists' failure to see the danger of legislation specifically protective of women, which must in her view inevitably help push women out of the labor force and hence reduce their economic power. But Saffioti has harsh words for socialist as well as petit

bourgeois feminism, for she feels it has “failed to come up with any completely satisfactory solution to the feminine question” and has simply forced the capitalist system to “refine the processes by which it mystifies women” (p. 228). Yet she herself seems believe in some special status for women, which is difficult to conceive as anything other than biological maternity:

On the other hand, while making work into a genuinely felt need for women goes far beyond any other solution to the problem of female labor that has been proposed or applied so far, woman’s unique position requires that she think about other aspects of her life as well. . . . In woman’s existence there are other factors which make her a worker of a fundamentally different kind. (P. 221)

The processes of mystification are the subject of Saffioti’s third section. She first considers psychoanalysis, then still strong in the social sciences. Saffioti finds Freud often insightful, but feels his theories were too shaped by the sex roles of his time to offer much insight about the broader possibilities for women in other classes, times, and places. She turns rather to neo-Freudians like Karen Horney. Again the account is strongly radical on the one hand (housewives were “deprived henceforth of the opportunity to develop their capacities as human beings” [p. 249]) but at the same time makes extensive use of the functionalist arguments of 1960s sociology (“The feminine mystique serves highly integrating functions in competitive societies” [p. 252]).

Saffioti then turns to Margaret Mead, whose *Sex and Temperament* she lauds as demonstrating the plasticity of sex roles, but whose *Male and Female* she finds intolerably conservative because it accepts as given certain differential personality traits of men and women that, although socially constructed (if we accept Mead’s earlier work), were in Mead’s eyes fixed enough in the short run to be treated as factual, at least for the moment. At the end of the chapter Saffioti remarks, “Obviously I am not trying to deny either women or men the opportunity of realizing any inherent potentials they have by virtue of their sex” (p. 270), but she then concludes with a fairly skeptical argument from which one can only conclude that she does not believe that such potentials could be found. This is perplexing, for Saffioti makes clear both in the content and indeed in the entire subject of the book her belief in woman as a permanently different type of human being from man. That she approved of this difference is shown by her remark, much later in life, that a world without men would be an “infinite bummer.”

Saffioti’s final chapters summarize the main argument, again combining functionalist and Marxist language in a way that reminds us that the two had much more in common than was seen by the radicals of the 1960s: a systematic view, a sense of the tension between equilibrium and conflict, a belief in the inevitability of progress. This marking by the moment is evident also in Saffioti’s lack of a distinction between sex and gender, and her happy disregard for what would later—for a brief time—be called heteronormativity. For her, men are men and women are women. This makes

her book somewhat easier to read than many later works; she does not combine special pleading for a group with theoretical denials that the group exists.

The achievement of this book is at once simple and grand. It imagines a group of people—women—and by that imagining itself helps create the group. That the book studies women systematically is essentially its way of making its claim that women exist as a bona fide social group, not simply *an sich*, but *für sich* as well. In a social science that consists often of debunking, such work is profoundly creative. All social groups must be so made, whether by charismatic leaders, social movements, or even social scientists. Human life does indeed seem to consist of such daring imaginations, whose implications and results are then lived out by others. Yet we seldom see social scientists so clearly in the act of making such a daring leap. That it was political—even that it was rooted in Saffioti's own personal experience—means little beside the work of imagination that brought together so diverse a body of sources in the service of social creation.

For all its revolutionary claims, however, the book does not escape the liberal view of the world rooted in thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, it is a specific instance of the liberal gaze, one of a number of such original texts envisioning women not simply as political citizens, but also as social and economic ones. In it, social life has a direction, and that direction is toward emancipation. History means the removal of oppressive social structures, just as it did for Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith two centuries before. The present is therefore the most privileged moment, for progress inevitably implies that privileged status. Past actors and their actions are thus judged by the standards of the present rather than by the morals of their own time. Nor does such a text invoke some abstract humanistic morality, in which we also will be judged—as we judge others—by our failure to meet our own standards. Still less is the book unitarist, as have been some earlier works we have read—those of Ali Shar'iyati, for example.

Seeing the book as local and particular does not lessen its achievement. We are all local and particular. But few of us dare an intervention like this one.