There are people who say a woman’s place is in the home. No one can say where anyone’s place is. I say a woman’s place is everywhere. No longer is she content to be told she is a second class citizen.

—Caroline Davis, United Automobile Workers

In this meticulously documented and richly characterized book, Dorothy Sue Cobble chronicles the oft-forgotten history and influence of “labor feminists.” These female labor pioneers were feminists, Cobble explains, because they sought to eradicate sex-based disadvantages; but, they are more appropriately referred to as labor feminists because they advocated on behalf of working-class women and viewed the labor movement as the primary means through which the lives of the majority of women—working-class women—could be improved.

Cobble begins by providing the post-war historical context from which labor feminism sprung and the corresponding evolution in women’s attitudes toward their work outside the home. She lays the groundwork for the discussion of the labor feminist movement through narratives of the lives of key players such as Esther Peterson, who began her labor career as a garment union organizer and later became the executive vice-chair of President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women. Cobble documents how female union organizers were able to achieve some modicum of success in the 1940s and 1950s because of their willingness to forge relationships with other unions and with sympathetic organizations outside the labor movement.

Cobble deftly articulates the ongoing tension between labor feminists and equal rights feminists throughout several chapters. Labor feminists’ primary goal during this period was achieving “first-class economic citizenship” or “full industrial citizenship.” Fundamental to this claim, and a central theme throughout, is the labor feminists’ assertion that full economic citizenship required “special” accommodations for women’s maternal

2 Id. at 3.
3 Id. at 56.
responsibilities. This basic understanding of the ways in which policies and laws should advance the economic position of women workers put the labor feminists at odds with the equal rights feminists of this period, whose banner cause was passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). For the equal rights feminists, such special accommodations only undermined their argument that women could achieve full gender parity with men only by claiming equal treatment for both sexes; they viewed any difference in treatment, or special accommodations for women, as an invitation for attack from their detractors. Cobble describes other clashes between labor feminists and equal rights feminists, including their contrasting approaches to the repeal of statutes considered to discriminate against women. Labor feminists believed that some differential treatment of women in the law, as in sex-based labor laws or custody laws, were beneficial to women. This position put them at odds with equal rights feminists, who argued for the uniform repeal of laws that embraced any differences between the sexes. In addition, given that sex-based laws could sometimes benefit women, labor feminists were concerned that removal of all such legislation with no accompanying guarantee of comparable replacement protections unnecessarily jeopardized the status of working-class women. Instead, they proposed reviewing legislation on a case-by-case basis, whereby sex-based laws benefiting women would be retained or amended to include men while those disadvantaging women would be removed. The tension between the two feminist camps subsided somewhat, at least with respect to the contentious ERA, when labor feminists embraced it in the early 1970s on the condition that it include a “labor rider” that would extend beneficial labor laws to cover men.

Cobble notes that labor feminists primarily sought legal reform for their constituency by elevating traditionally female occupations as opposed to expanding women’s access to traditionally male-dominated jobs. As a result, labor feminists rarely challenged the default gender division of labor. During this initial phase of the labor feminist movement (1940s–1950s), Cobble notes that most women did not believe that the division of work by gender translated into a necessarily inferior position for women. This approach, however, changed dramatically in the 1960s, with the emergence of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and its position that state laws prohibiting opportunities for women conflicted with Title VII, a position further substantiated by subsequent federal court decisions.

In her discussion of labor feminists’ approach to wage reform, Cobble again highlights the differences between the views of labor feminists and the conventional and more widely known feminist approach to wage reform. In particular, labor feminists attempted also to ensure that a breadwinner wage for women accounted for their need to support dependents, the reality for many women workers. A similar theme emerges in the section

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4 Id. at 193.
on labor feminists’ attack on the women wage-earner’s “double day,” where labor feminists argued both for higher family wages and shorter hours in an effort to shape government and employer policies to help women combine work outside the home with their family responsibilities. These concerns, along with other labor feminist priorities and recommendations, were reflected in the first President’s Commission on the Status of Women report, *American Women*. Its publication in 1963 was regarded as the first governmental recognition of responsibility to working women and a tangible measure of the movement’s gains toward full economic citizenship for women.

In conclusion, Cobble calls for a more class-conscious labor feminist movement, one that recognizes that the “decline of organized labor . . . [is] a feminist issue,” because most women, lacking individual power to engender changes in employer policies, must turn to the strength of unionization.5

*The Other Women’s Movement* provides a detailed and lively account of the individual lives and collective women’s efforts that gave life to the aspirations of an often-overlooked movement within what is commonly considered a monolithic American feminist movement. Cobble deals skillfully with a wide range of issues confronting labor feminists, including the availability of child care, the valuation of work performed inside the home, and the growth of the movement among minority women as a whole. Certain subjects, such as the particular challenges facing older female workers or the complexities of minority female workers’ involvement in the movement, are not as thoroughly explored as they could be. However, Cobble’s choices appear consistent with her focus on the intersection between mainstream feminism and the labor movement.

—Audrey Lee

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5 *Id.* at 228.