



ABSTRACT

Smoke Signals in the Short Twentieth Century: Gender and the Tobacco Industry in a Trans/National Context – Two Case Studies

(draft title)

Frauen, ihr müsst selbstbewusst werden! [Women, you must become confident!]

Marie Tusch (1868–1939), tobacco worker turned MP

Old man [supervisor] K., he was just as mean as he could be. [He would] jump from ‘chine to ‘chine, drunk ‘bout all the time. He was very evil to some of the people. There was five women up there he didn’t like [and] he’d cuss ‘em out [and] scold ‘em. [He] told one she won’t no good for a part of lye soap; told another he was gonna work her ‘til her tongue fall out. And I told my foreman, I said, “If Mr. K. ever come up and talk to me like he talk to the other girls, this is one job he can have. This ain’t no slavery time.”

Annie Foster Jones, as documented in *Working in Tobacco: An Oral History of Durham’s Tobacco Factory Workers* (1988), edited by Beverly Jones und Claudia Egelhoff

The proposed paper aims to unpack female political and public agency within tobacco factories by highlighting and contrasting two twentieth-century case studies, based on the European and North American continents at the intersections of gender, class, and race: The activism of the Klagenfurt-born Marie Tusch, an impoverished tobacco worker who propelled herself to a quite significant level of stardom amongst mostly male politicians, as well as the organizational structures and policies of the National Consumers League [henceforth NCL] with regards to tobacco issues during the first three decades of its foundation. This contribution analyses the diverse and differing working conditions for women employees in the tobacco sector and their socio-economic implications from a national and trans/border perspective, while also discussing ‘genderized’ processes and cultural norms within cigarette and cigar manufacturing plants from approximately 1900 to the Second World War.

Firstly, a biographical approach should help illuminate the complexities of private versus public spheres in conjunction with labor movements by examining Marie Tusch's life story before and after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. Born into abject poverty and derogatorily labelled as a so-called *Tschickmensch* [*Tschick* is Austrian slang for cigarette; loosely translated, this term here designates a tobacco worker, stigmatized for their stained fingers and odor], the Carinthian Tusch was one of about 38.000 predominantly female tobacco laborers in the various Habsburg territories. Her political engagement for more and better workers' and women's rights finally and rather sensationally earned her a parliamentary seat in Vienna after the first Austrian elections with universal suffrage at the dawn of the First Republic, thus becoming a pioneering female representative to achieve such a mandate.

Alongside parameters such as sex and class, the dimension of race, palpably, plays an imperative part in the tobacco production from an overseas and transatlantic angle. For instance, the narrative and symbolism of the Cuban *la mulata* exemplify multi-layered exploitative processes, including advertising and commodity consumption.

The nexus of race, consumerism, and female tobacco labor, again, is investigated for this talk by studying the initial phase of the NCL, established in 1899 by first-wave feminists, with Florence Kelley (1859–1932) serving as its General Secretary for 33 years. Whereas tactics-wise the NCL relied on basket power, mobilizing white middle-class women in their role as homemakers to boycott mainly textile products manufactured by female immigrants in urban sweatshops, tobacco goods did not heavily feature on the NCL agenda. At that time in the US (and elsewhere), smoking – and especially smoking in public – was generally connoted as a masculine habit and hence still a stigma or taboo for female citizens, particularly belonging to the demographic strata that were recruited by the NCL for their strategies to improve working environments and ethics. Additionally, tobacco plants were almost exclusively located in the rural South, far away from the metropolitan centers that, conversely, had sweatshops practically at their doorsteps. Therefore, the plight of the primarily African American and female labor force in the Southern tobacco industry was somewhat eclipsed from the socio-political discourses or controversies of the NCL. Only with the onset of the Great Depression and other markets increasingly outsourcing their infrastructures to the southern states in the US, due to their cheaper labor costs, plus social paradigm shifts related to smoking since the roaring twenties, did the South generally and tobacco specifically start to attract the attention of social reformers and advocates, first and foremost the NCL.