Summary Article: VAN KLEECK, MARY (1883–1972)
From Encyclopedia of Social Welfare History in North America

Mary van Kleeck was a prominent social scientist, reformer, feminist, and social worker. From her base as a social science researcher with the Russell Sage Foundation from 1909 to 1948, van Kleeck was an important national and international figure in efforts to address issues regarding women in industry, the relationship between capital and labor, child labor, social work, organized labor, New Deal policy, economic business cycles, scientific management, and technology in the workplace. Frustrated with the slow rate of improvement in working conditions and standards of living, van Kleeck made the transition from liberal-technocratic-progressive to New Deal–era radical. She advanced the notion of a scientifically managed society and economy characterized by social-economic planning that integrated Marxist economic policy with American democratic principles. Van Kleeck possessed a sharp wit, a powerful speaking voice, strong leadership skills, and a tenacious reform spirit. She lived most of her adult life in New York City and Amsterdam with friend and Dutch social reformer Mary Fledderus.

Mary Abby van Kleeck was born in 1883 in Glenham, New York, the daughter of wealthy descendants of Dutch settlers. Her father, the Reverend Robert Boyd van Kleeck, was an Episcopal priest. Her mother, Eliza Mayer van Kleeck, was the daughter of a founder of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Mary van Kleeck received an AB from Smith College in 1904 and, with the aid of a fellowship in 1905, became a resident in New York's College Settlement, where she was trained in the technique of social investigation by Florence Kelley, a noted researcher, settlement house resident, and women's and children's advocate. Van Kleeck made a name for herself in New York City by conducting studies of the conditions of working women and children in New York factories and tenements. Her work at the College Settlement led to the establishment of the Alliance Employment Bureau (AEB) in 1907. She continued to investigate the industrial trades for women and women's lodging. By 1910, the AEB and its staff became a formal unit of the expanding Russell Sage Foundation. In 1917, the foundation established a Department of Industrial Studies, with van Kleeck as its director. Influenced by the works of economists Thorstein Veblen and Simon Patton, and business consultant Frederick Taylor, van Kleeck's investigations convinced her that the difficult working and living conditions of women and children demonstrated the need for more and stronger government-sponsored factory regulations and the inclusion of Taylor's scientific management techniques as a means to improve economic efficiency. In 1918, van Kleeck took a leave of absence from Russell Sage to accept a position as director of the women's branch of the industrial service section of the federal government’s Ordinance Department. During her tenure, van Kleeck convinced the War Labor Policies Board to adopt her proposed standards for the employment of women in defense industries. In 1921, she was selected to sit on Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover's Committee on Unemployment and Business Cycles, which struggled to identify policies to reduce unemployment and destructive business cycles that were acceptable to both capital and labor. In the mid 1920s, van Kleeck turned her attention to the International Industrial Relations Institute (IIRI), an independent, Left-wing academic research institute that examined issues of social and economic planning. Van Kleeck met friend and colleague Mary Fledderus through the IIRI. She served as its associate director and was an active participant in the organization through the late 1940s.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, van Kleeck was an outspoken critic of capitalism and of
New Deal policy. After accepting an invitation from her friend, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, to serve on the Federal Advisory Council of the United States Employment Service in 1933, she resigned after one day of service upon hearing President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s decision to eliminate a clause that protected organized labor’s right to strike in industries covered by National Recovery Administration (NRA) codes. Van Kleeck was a coauthor of the Frazie-Lundeen Bill, a more generous and inclusive countermeasure to the administration-backed Social Security Act. She joined the left-wing American Labor party in 1936. She supported the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, denounced efforts by Congress to institute an oath of allegiance in the United States, criticized government efforts to deport the British writer John Strachey for allegedly belonging to the Communist party, advanced the cause of the Fair Standards and Labor Act of 1938, advocated for a liberalization of benefits and eligibility requirements for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and traveled to Russia and published in Russian journals. In her book, *Miners and Management* (1934), she advanced the notion that industry would have to be socialized if poverty was to be reduced and the standard of living improved for all Americans. In *Creative America* (1936), she outlined plans for a new social system termed social-economic planning that featured a collective economy built on the principles of scientific management and political democracy.

At the National Conference of Social Work in Kansas City in 1934, van Kleeck energized the rank and file movement (RFM), a burgeoning left-wing movement in social work, when she criticized capitalism and New Deal policy and encouraged social workers to align themselves with labor. Van Kleeck became a leader of the RFM and served as an editor and contributor to its journal of social criticism and social work, *Social Work Today*, during its publication years, 1934 to 1942. She supported the unionization of social workers, and urged social workers to infuse social and political analyses in their work.

In 1939, van Kleeck supported the Nazi-Soviet Pact based on her belief that Russia had no genuine interest in fascism and was acting only to defend its political interests within a complex international arena. She lost support within much of social work and the American Left for her decision and found herself increasingly on the margins of political power. Regardless, van Kleeck continued to write and do research. She published *Technology and Livelihood* (1944) with Mary Fledderus and in 1948 she ran unsuccessfully for the New York state legislature on the American Labor party ticket. In 1953, she received a subpoena from the United States Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy, which aimed, unsuccessfully, to prove she had been a member of the Communist party. Mary Abby van Kleeck died of a heart attack in Kingston, New York, on June 8, 1972.

See also

Labor Movement and Social Welfare (United States); The New Deal (United States); Rank and File Movement (United States); War and Social Welfare (United States)

Primary Sources

- Mary van Kleeck Papers in the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA, and at Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

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