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Series editor: Tim May

Gender and Work in Capitalist Economies

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WORK

● Pamela Odih



Gender and Work in Capitalist Economies





Issues in Society

Series editor: Tim May





Gender and Work in Capitalist Economies



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This book is dedicated to my father William Odih, with love.



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Preface



Writing a book about gender and work in capitalist economies might appear to be an ambitious endeavour. The innumerable topic areas relating to gender and work would dissuade even the most fastidious scholar. While writing this Preface, my attention has been drawn to a multitude of Equal Opportunities Commission reports, detailing gender dimensions in the patterns of contemporary work. It is approximated that between 2004 and 2014 the number of paid employees in the UK will increase by 1.3 million (quoted in Walby 2007: 7). It is also generally recognized that the world of work, in the West, is dramatically changing. The ‘traditional’ model of the adult working life cycle is based on an archetype of full-time permanent employment, extending from the completion of full-time education into the commencement of full-time retirement, i.e., ‘48 hours for 48 weeks for 48 years’. But this is rapidly changing.

Innovations in the organization of work, coupled with an avalanche of new technologies, are shifting the culture of work based on ‘old-fashioned jobs’ to one founded on a contingent ‘just-in-time’ workforce. Women feature predominantly among the ranks of flexible workers. In 2005, 12 per cent of women employees worked flexitime and 42 per cent worked part-time. This compares with 9 per cent of males working flexitime and 9 per cent of males working part-time (EOC 2006: 12). Equally dramatic trends are occurring in global labour markets. In developing countries, women constitute the majority of part-time and impermanent workers (Chen *et al.* 2005: 9). With few exceptions, women in the developing world achieve a lower rate of pay than their male counterparts. And their labour market participation is, invariably, shaped by the interminable demands of care responsibilities and unpaid household work. Similarities clearly link these global patterns of female labour market participation with local trends. But how might one explore these gender dynamics?

This book argues that capitalism's political economy of time, shapes gendered patterns of work. The concept of political economy is inspired by a dedicated reading of Karl Marx's *Capital*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3. This is not to assume an adherence to some trans-historical determinant of gender inequality. Indeed, the conception of power and subjectivity that guides my analysis is more indebted to Foucauldian genealogy than Marxist dialectical materialism. Nevertheless, the concepts of political economy and time reverberate throughout the development of Western capitalism, and efficaciously highlight the irascible complexity of gender in capitalist economies. Ultimately, this book is about time. Each chapter is linked in narrative sequence in order to describe, and critically evaluate, the history and present of Western capitalism's political economy of time.



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Additional acknowledgements are extended to Palgrave for granting me permission to reprint D. Knights and P. Odih (2002) 'Big Brother is watching you!': call centre surveillance and the time disciplined subject, in G. Crow and S. Heath (eds) *Social Conceptions of Time: Structure and Process in Work and Everyday Life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. I would also like to thank Sage Publications for providing permission to reprint P. Odih, (2003) 'Gender, Work and Organization in the Time/Space Economy of Just-in-Time Labour'; *Time and Society* 12(2/3): 293–314 and P. Odih, (1999a) 'Gendered Time in the Age of Deconstruction', *Time and Society*, 8(1): 9–38.



Series editor's preface



The social sciences contribute to a greater understanding of the workings of societies and dynamics of social life. They are often, however, not given due credit for this role and much writing has been devoted to why this should be the case. At the same time we are living in an age in which the role of science in society is being re-evaluated. This has led to both a defence of science as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and an attack on science as nothing more than an institutionalized assertion of faith with no greater claim to validity than mythology and folklore. These debates tend to generate more heat than light.

In the meantime the social sciences, in order to remain vibrant and relevant, will reflect the changing nature of these public debates. In so doing they provide mirrors upon which we gaze in order to understand not only what we have been and what we are now, but to inform ideas about what we might become. This is not simply about understanding the reasons people give for their actions in terms of the contexts in which they act, as well as analyzing the relations of cause and effect in the social, political and economic spheres, but about the hopes, wishes and aspirations that people, in their different cultural ways, hold.

In any society that claims to have democratic aspirations, these hopes and wishes are not for the social scientist to prescribe. For this to happen it would mean that the social sciences were able to predict human behaviour with certainty. This would require one theory and one method applicable to all times and places. The physical sciences do not live up to such stringent criteria, whilst the conditions in societies which provided for this outcome would be intolerable. Why? Because a necessary condition of human freedom is the ability to have acted otherwise and to imagine and practice different ways of organizing societies and living together.

It does not follow from the above that social scientists do not have a

valued role to play, as is often assumed in ideological attacks upon their place and role within society. After all, in focusing upon what we have been and what we are now, what we might become is inevitably illuminated. Therefore, whilst it may not be the province of the social scientist to predict our futures, they are, given not only their understandings, but equal positions as citizens, entitled to engage in public debates concerning future prospects.

This international series was devised with this general ethos in mind. It seeks to offer students of the social sciences, at all levels, a forum in which ideas are interrogated in terms of their importance for understanding key social issues. This is achieved through a connection between style, structure and content that is found to be both illuminating and challenging in terms of its evaluation of topical social issues, as well as representing an original contribution to the subject under discussion.

Given this underlying philosophy, the series contains books on topics which are driven by substantive interests. This is not simply a reactive endeavour in terms of reflecting dominant social and political pre-occupations, it is also pro-active in terms of an examination of issues which relate to and inform the dynamics of social life and the structures of society that are often not part of public discourse. What is distinctive about the series is an interrogation of the assumed characteristics of our current epoch in relation to its consequences for the organization of society and social life, as well as its appropriate mode of study.

Each contribution contains, for the purposes of general orientation, as opposed to rigid structure, three parts. First, an interrogation of the topic which is conducted in a manner that renders explicit core assumptions surrounding the issues and/or an examination of the consequences of historical trends for contemporary social practices. Second, a section which aims to 'bring alive' ideas and practices by considering the ways in which they directly inform the dynamics of social relations. A third section then moves on to make an original contribution to the topic. These encompass possible future forms and content, likely directions for the study of the phenomena in question, or an original analysis of the topic itself. Of course, it might be a combination of all three.

In this spirit Pam Odih's book takes capitalism, work and gender and submits them to detailed consideration not only in terms of how they have changed in the unfolding of history, but their impacts upon everyday life. Work extends away from communal life into a disciplinary matrix in which time and effort become subject to routine calculation with effects upon all those who are its subjects. It is the clock, not the steam engine that becomes the motor of capitalist development. Time is money. Yet upon what is capitalism dependent? It is the reservoir of workers who themselves are a product of a system which is not production, but reproduction in the domestic sphere.

A special issue of the *New Yorker* in 1997 hailed Karl Marx as the person who has taught us most about the dynamics of capitalism and global

markets and as long as capitalism persists, his books will remain relevant. Pam Odih thus devotes a section of her study to the labour theory of value. She then moves on to note its deficits in terms of understanding domestic labour and this provides her with a central basis upon which the book unfolds: that is, to see capitalism as both dependent upon the strata of domestic labour, whilst also systematically seeking to undermine that area in its drive for accumulation.

Taking the history of the British textile industry in relation to the dynamics of gender, capitalism and time bears witness to a restriction of the working hours of women by male dominated trade unions, thereby enabling the factory system to exploit domestic divisions of labour in the process of accumulation. Accompanying this was the mechanization of production with the consequence that de-skilling was manifest in the minding of machines. As craft and control were associated with facets of masculinity, this opened up possibilities for women in the factory system. However, they were paid less than men and this tended to cement, rather than challenge, domestic divisions of labour. Those who relied upon home working to supplement family incomes then found themselves subject to the economies of scale associated with manufacturing and so unable to continue in the face of the reach of capitalism into the private sphere. The issue is then raised concerning the extent to which capital is not the only determinant of gender identity, but also the interest which men have in the subordination of women in the domestic sphere.

Dispositions that inform our identities vary. A core argument of this book is that the difference between men's and women's experience of time is in terms of its relationality: time is shared rather than personal and routinely experienced through the presence and expectations constituted in interpersonal relations. Gendered time is thus investigated through a series of insightful interviews concerning the relations between work and the domestic sphere. Hence we have the phrase 'a woman's work is never done' and the experience, encapsulated in chapter five, that there is 'no time for oneself'. The attempts to constitute a domestic space in the face of pressures of time and work driven by a system that is indifferent to context are clear in the accounts of the women in this study.

As capitalism has reached out in the process of accumulation, so its effects on everyday life are ever greater. Whereas we had the textile factories, we now have call centres and global assembly lines. Two highly insightful chapters examine these issues. The first, looking at call centres, takes the issues of audit and emotional labour and finds a tension in their actual performance between the demands for output expressed in the numbers of calls taken and those of quality in terms of customer experience. Some want to evaluate their performance against others, but also clearly recognize the inherent tensions in the explicit aims of a company that seeks quality through customer satisfaction. As a result there is resistance to seeing time and performance according to quantitative indicators of throughput via the mobilization of the rhetoric of the employing

organization. Time is inherently conflictual in such settings and the subject of continual negotiations, as well as practices through which employees identify themselves.

The narratives through which we convey and construct a sense of who we are vary in accordance with our experience of time. In just-in-time labour processes there is immediacy: production as instantaneity. Being subject to such processes means we experience time as different things all at once. Continuity, discontinuity and context all lead to expressions of the desire for more flexibility in order to have greater control over our lives. As this occurs, so forms of control in the process of accumulation see others, separated by thousands of miles, subjected to a 24 hour economy in which assembly lines in Asia are seen to benefit from the dexterity' associated with younger women who are paid low wages.

The indifference associated with capitalist accumulation marches on in the form of globalization. Race, class and gender inequalities are not a preoccupation for which there is an assumed responsibility, but a consequence and precondition of what is called 'success'. Free trade is not fair trade and the export-based businesses in developing world countries are forged by the disadvantage of particular groups. The clash between an increasing feminization of the workforce and domestic divisions of labour then repeats itself. Ultimately, large corporations are dependent upon both the formal and informal elements of women's labour. For this reason these dynamics need taking more seriously than they have before. The economy is dependent upon the domestic sphere and this book demonstrates, in a highly insightful manner, why this has to be taken more seriously and is a core issue in all of our futures.



Illustration Credits



Part I An industrial weaving machine. Sir Edward Baines, London 1835. Reproduced by permission of the British Library, Record Number: c7291-03 Shelfmark: 1044.g.23.

Figure 1.1 Spinning and carding wool. Illustrator: George Walker; Havell, R and D, London 1814, Reproduced by permission of the British Library, Shelfmark 143.g.1.

Figure 2.1 Power loom and cotton manufacture Swainson Birley cotton mill near Preston, Lancashire 1834. Reproduced with permission of the Science Museum/Science and Society Picture Library. Record Number: 10243006.

Part II Image Generations of scientific management in clerical work 1948. Photo by Topical Press Agency/Getty Images. Reproduced by permission of Getty Images, Record Number: HA5881.

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Table acknowledgements

Table 2.1 Average weekly wages of flax mill workers in Scotland, in 1833. Changes in the employment of women and girls in industrial centres. Part 1 – Flax and Jute Centres. Labour Department, Board of Trade. Parliamentary Papers 1898, C-8794, p. 17.

Table 2.2 Average weekly wages of flax mill workers in Leeds, in 1833. Changes in the employment of women and girls in industrial centres. Part 1 – Flax and Jute Centres. Labour Department, Board of Trade. Parliamentary Papers 1898, C-8794, p. 62.



Introduction

Gender, capitalist accumulation and the political economy of time



But in the Work we freely bear a Part,
And what we can, perform with all our Heart.
To get a Living we so willing are,
Our tender Babes into the Field we bear,
And wrap them in our Cloaths to keep them warm,
While round about we gather up the Corn;
And often unto them our Course do bend,
To keep them safe, that nothing them offend:
Our Children that are able, bear a Share
In gleaning Corn, such is our frugal Care.
When Night comes on, unto our Home we go,
Our Corn we carry, and our Infant too;

...

We must make haste, for when we Home are come,
Alas! we find our Work but just begun;
So many Things for our Attendance call,
Had we ten Hands, we could employ them all.
Our Children put to Bed, with greatest Care
We all Things for your coming home prepare:
You sup, and go to Bed without delay,
And rest yourselves till the ensuing Day;

...

In ev'ry Work to take our proper Share;
And from the Time that harvest doth begin,
Until the Corn be cut and carry'd in,
Our Toil and Labour's daily so extreme,
That we have hardly ever Time to dream.

(Mary Collier ([1739] 1985: 10–11) *The Woman's Labour*)