REVIEWS

Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain

Miriam Glucksmann

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Given the current interest in the processes of restructuring and the feminization of the labour force, Miriam Glucksmann's book is a timely reminder that these processes are not without their historical counterparts where women have been at the centre of innovations in production relations. *Women Assemble* is a splendid book packed with empirical material on the processes of restructuring in the inter-war period set alongside the direct experiences of women who were involved in the new industries. It is a book which asks the most difficult questions about the origins of the sexual division of labour in production and how this relates to consumption and reproduction.

The book opens with a discussion of the changing patterns of women's employment, including the growth in the actual numbers of women in employment, from 5.6

million in 1931 to 6.3 million in 1951. This growth was partly accounted for by developments in the service sector but also in the welfare state and in the new industries of electrical engineering, chemicals, the motor industry, food processing, glass and paper. There was massive capital growth in these industries during the inter-war period and, with this, changes to assembly-line production and the introduction of new technologies. Women as workers were crucial to these changes and to the drive for profits within these industries, an often ignored aspect of the inter-war restructuring, hidden in the stereotyping of the assembly-line worker as a male, white worker. Miriam Glucksmann's book makes these changes come alive in the chapters that follow by detailing working practices and organization in a series of case studies and through the reminiscences of women workers in these industries. The relationship between gender and the division of labour is scrutinized through an account of the ideological and material factors which both contribute to, and reproduce the specific position of women in the production processes.

Miriam Glucksmann's account then moves to the domestic scene

and the changes in consumption in the inter-war period, emphasizing the ideological construction of the 'ideal' home and the ways in which class relations intervened, both in relation to consumer power and in the ways in which the 'ideal' home was appropriated by working-class and middle-class women. This had a bearing also upon the fate of domestic service which increased as an employment area for women in the early thirties and then began a decline which was hastened, in part, by the resistance of working-class women to enter this type of employment when factory work offered better wages, more time off and more 'mates'.

Feminists have long debated the causes of women's subordination in production relations but, as Miriam

Glucksmann's work makes clear, the reasons for this subordination are complex and cannot be simply read off from a general notion of 'patriarchal relations' or simply re-described via notions of the dual labour market. Equally, Marxist analysis, while providing a basis for understanding changes in capitalist accumulation and industrial production, cannot, of itself, provide answers to the specificities of the role of gendered labour power in these processes. Instead, what is required, to further our understanding of how we arrived at the position we are in now, is precisely the fine, carefully researched and analytically astute work demonstrated in the volume *Women Assemble*.

Sallie Westwood

Men's Work, Women's Work

Harriet Bradley

Polity Press: Cambridge 1989
ISBN 0 7456 01626 Pbk £10.95
ISBN 0 7456 01618 Hbk £39.50

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Rosemary Pringle

Verso: London 1989,
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Rosemary Crompton and Kay Sanderson

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Darlene Clark Hine

Indiana University Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis 1989
ISBN 0 253 20529 8 Pbk \$12.95
ISBN 0 253 32773 3 Hbk \$35.00

Feminist research has now produced many accounts of women's paid work. Whilst coming from diverse theoretical perspectives, there is a common portrayal of the conditions and terms of women's employment. The majority of working women are to be found working in low-paid, low-status jobs which are generally constructed as being 'women's jobs'. Even professional women, who enjoy some relative privilege, can be seen to be marginalized and excluded from organizational decision-making and power. Gender is clearly one, very much alive, dynamic social process within the organization of work which structures women as a subordinate workforce. As we reflect, often bruised and beleaguered, on several years of workplace Equal