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PART 3 GENDER

Sallie Westwood—All Day Every Day

3.5.1 Perspective

In her study of female factory workers Sallie Westwood (1984) looks at the way paid employment and family commitments come together to make women's lives. Westwood's empirical study focuses attention on the lives of women on the factory shopfloor. Women are subjected to patriarchal and capitalist oppression, and, for a good many of the women she researched, racial oppression as well. She argues that feminist analysis must take account of both class and race as well as gender.

Women, she argues, are exploited through the capitalist mode of production which, in selling their labour power, gives them their class position. In addition, women are workers in the home where they are also exploited through the gift of their domestic labour to men. Both situations are oppressive, and conceptually it would be possible to distinguish two systems of oppression. However, Westwood suggests that capitalism and patriarchy bear on each other and are not easily divided between home and workplace. Indeed, she went first to the work-place rather than the home in order to 'seek out patriarchy' (Westwood, 1984, p. 3).¹⁶

The inextricable link between patriarchy and capitalism Westwood sees as encompassed in the dual relation of women to class. They are working-class wage-earners but the wages they earn are not equivalent to a living wage and this leads to a tendency to marriage as a means of accessing higher wage income. This results in a second relationship to class through a relationship with a male wage which in itself reinforces the dependence and subordination of women to men.

Westwood argues that both capitalism and patriarchy¹⁷ effect women's subordination. She does not see capitalism or patriarchy as wholly autonomous nor reducible one to the other.¹⁸ For her, patriarchy (which includes material control and exploitation and a legitimating ideology) and mode of production are 'simultaneously one world and two, relatively autonomous parts of a whole which has to be fought on both fronts'. She sees the lives of her subjects as 'encompassed by patriarchal relations, which are part of "patriarchal capitalism"' (Westwood, 1984 pp. 5–6).

Race provides a further dimension. Westwood argues that feminists cannot afford to ignore race nor simply tack it on to analyses of gender oppression. Nor, she argues, is it a good idea to consider race along with class and gender as a triple oppression. It has been hard enough for feminist socialists to bring class and gender together in a way that allows them to hold onto the complexities of both. Instead of a 'triple oppression' model it is more illuminating, if more complicated, to try and see contradictory and complementary

relationships between the areas of class, race and gender as they relate to ongoing struggles. This she attempts to do by grounding her analysis of the politics of race, class and gender in the lives of women in the factory.¹⁹

3.5.2 Approach

Westwood's approach was to see at first hand what was involved in the world of work on a factory shopfloor. Through the auspices of a local contact, Westwood was able to gain access to a hosiery factory, 'Stitch Co.' in 'Needletown' where she spent a year from March 1980 to May 1981 on the shopfloor.

For some reason, the idea of an anthropologist studying the culture of the shopfloor by hanging around the coffee bar, lurking in the lunch canteen and sharing a few 'risqué' jokes, appealed to management who saw my immersion as a baptism of fire. (Westwood, 1984, p. 2)

Her participant observation study involved talking, watching, listening and working, and generally joining in the life of the shop floor. Her account is thus based on her own observation and what she was told by, or overheard from, the women she worked with. Westwood addresses the situation on the shopfloor and then turns to the domestic sphere. As the study progressed Westwood developed friendships and was able to participate more and more in the domestic and social life of the women and this provided insights into the oppression and exploitation experienced by women in the home. This direct observation out of the workplace was augmented by the plentiful accounts of domestic labour and motherhood, which are major topics of conversation on the shopfloor. Throughout she illustrates her analysis with excerpts from discussions and quotes from the participants.

Westwood argues that what she intended was to grasp a specific cultural space and this required immersion in the life of the shopfloor. She is unimpressed by critics of participant observation who argue that the method is unreliable, ungeneralisable, intrusive and subjective. For her, it is the only methodic practice that possibly allows one to inhabit and record a cultural space. Westwood hoped to be able to illuminate the lived experiences of women workers who come together to generate and sustain a culture, a world of symbols and meanings that has to be unravelled. However, she notes:

lived experience, everyday life, the 'real' world, are not simple unambiguous phenomena which can be easily caught and reproduced in the pages of books. Life does not lie around like leaves in autumn waiting to be swept up, ordered and put into boxes. The drama of everyday life is richly textured, multifaceted and dense and we cannot hope to make sense of our world and, more, interpret it, without a coherent theoretical understanding. (Westwood, 1984, p. 3)

On the other hand, Westwood has no intention of fetishising theories but, rather, hopes that her work will contribute to feminist theories and politics because it reveals the complexities of women's subordination through a study rooted in women's lived experiences.

Her focus tends to be on the way that women, through shopfloor culture, resist the pressures of capitalism and patriarchy; features common to all the women. Throughout, she addresses the differences in lived experiences of the white and non-white women in

the factory. She does not assume that their sex determines their gendered roles but acknowledges that these are racially constructed (Parmar, 1982).

3.5.3 Resistance and feminine culture: contradiction and collusion

Westwood provided a description of the company and its paternalistic attitude. She outlined the general patriarchal nature of the factory and gave a detailed description of the organisation of work and the system of remuneration, known as ‘the minutes’,²⁰ in the finishing department in which she worked. Essentially, women were segregated into areas which reflected their perceived domestic role, were closely supervised and poorly paid. Males tended to be in control, for example the all-female finishing department had a male manager who referred to the women as ‘girls’, and the workers relied on male maintenance technicians who were in a position to affect the women’s bonus earnings.

Like Cockburn (section 3.4), Westwood focuses her analysis on the ‘inherent contradictions of women’s lives under conditions set by patriarchal capitalism’. The nature and operation of some of these contradictions are revealed in the detailed examination of female shopfloor culture.²¹ Shopfloor culture is oppositional on the one hand, in that it resisted management control and the union hierarchy, but binds its creativity securely to an oppressive version of womanhood in its reassertion of notions of femininity. For example, feminine culture was affirmed through the domestication of the work situation, notably claiming ‘possession’ of machines and chairs and decorating them with icons of domestic life and family ties (or some form of sentimental surrogate); through the wearing of house slippers at work; and the manufacture of elaborate aprons from oddments which served as a means by which women workers insisted upon their ‘womanhood’ and, thereby, their selfhood’ in an alien and masculine environment (Westwood, 1984, p. 22).

Forms of resistance also reflected this culture of femininity. Although the women very occasionally resisted ‘the minutes’ by refusing to work, resistance, in the main, took less dramatic forms tolerated by the company. For example, it was embodied in a system of ‘informal economics’. The shopfloor was a marketplace for outside goods brought in and for catalogue sales, and a forum for generating ‘selling parties’. The repair and alteration of clothes, the making of clothes for personal use on company machines and sometimes in ‘company time’, rather than lunch breaks, also took place. Small domestic appliances were brought in for mechanics to repair.

The constant reassertion of a culture of femininity led the women to collude with male definitions of a subordinate version of woman tied ‘to domestic labour in the home’. The shopfloor is the site in which patriarchal ideologies and the materiality of patriarchy is reproduced. Female shopfloor culture established a female realm but in terms that represented male constructs of femininity with its consequent exploitative domestic labour and nurturing obligations and its subversion of creativity and sisterhood. The collusive nature of the resistant shopfloor culture was apparent (for both white and non-white workers) in its celebration of marriage, the family and motherhood. Marriage was construed in romantic terms and seen as both liberating and transformative. Marriage transformed ‘girls’ into ‘women’, that is, wives and mothers. The notion of motherhood was central to the contradiction in women’s lives. Shopfloor culture celebrated motherhood as the final stage in the process of becoming a woman and in so doing

colluded with patriarchal ideology. Such a woman is a 'gendered subject' defined in her reproductive not productive role.

While biology makes women reproducers it is patriarchal ideology that institutionalises motherhood and heterosexuality and creates the myth of the maternal instinct with its consequent burden of nurturing. Patriarchal ideology treats motherhood as natural and the majority of women Westwood studied had absorbed this view. A pregnancy was greeted with virtual universal approval and celebrated with gifts. The positive aspects were highlighted and the potential physical dangers, the pain and the psychological upheavals were ignored or glossed over.

Westwood's study, like Willis's (1977) study of how working-class lads get working-class jobs, reveals how women collude in their own oppression through the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies in the expression of their resistance to capitalist exploitation. In exerting some independent economic control over their own lives the women developed a shopfloor culture that, rather than overtly promote solidarity and strength, embraced romance and sexuality and reproduced the myths and stereotypes of male-female relationships.

3.5.4 Method: the 'hen party'

Westwood's participant observation thus focused on the contradictions in the lived experiences of the women. Her approach to participant observation differs fundamentally from the conventional approach²² in two important ways. First, she sees no requirement for a detached, balanced view of the social situation she is investigating. She is concerned with the world in which the women she works with operate. Second, and related to this, she is not concerned so much with the actor's meanings as the way in which the events she describes in detail rehearse and reproduce oppressive mechanisms and ideologies.

It is axiomatic both for Westwood, and for the women themselves, that the world is constructed and controlled by men. Westwood then addresses the way this male domination is played out in everyday structures, be they the disputes over 'the minutes', a wedding celebration on the shopfloor, or a night on the town. Westwood is not bothered about a 'balanced' view in the sense of comparing male and female perceptions, nor is she willing to remain a detached and uninvolved observer. The women are her friends²³ and she is quite prepared to overtly act in a way that engages male ideology and may serve to inform her friends.

The way she differs from the conventional approach and the essentially critical nature of her work can best be revealed by taking an example and analysing how her a critical interpretation is developed. Westwood (1984, pp. 112–126) described in detail the traditional celebration and ritual²⁴ connected to matrimony using as a case study the double marriage of twins (Tessa & Julie). This 'rite of passage' for brides was a taken-for-granted element of shopfloor life. Work was more or less suspended and management were tolerant of the ceremony. The celebration (usually on a Thursday) traditionally involved intending brides dressing in elaborate costume made by the other women on their units. The fancy dress constituted a comment on the bride's sexuality. Both twins were already living with boyfriends and Tessa was pregnant. This meant that both costumes could be suggestive without causing offence. Julie was dressed in a lewd St. Trinian's outfit and Tessa in an outrageous 'oversize Babygro'.

Dressed in these costumes, the twins received visitors and practical gifts (such as Pyrex dishes and tea towels), and supplied 'gooey cakes' for their friends. At lunch the unit went to the nearest pub and the brides were plied with drink. On leaving the pub the twins were, as was traditional, tied, with yards of binding, to the railings near the pedestrian bridge over the dual carriageway next to the factory. It was pouring with rain. Their mother laughed at their plight and photographed them. The twins were left to struggle free. When they reappeared in the department bruised, cut and bedraggled they were greeted with laughter not sympathy. Then they were bundled into a large wheeled basket normally used for moving work or scraps around the factory and pushed at increasing speed around the department. The screaming twins looked terrified and, after the hectic ride eventually came to an end, the exhausted, pale and giddy pair were helped to the canteen and given coffee much to the amusement of the other women.

The twins, unable to do any work, left the factory at 4.30 with their presents. However, the celebration was not at an end; the evening's hen party was to follow. The party of twenty-four women 'pub crawled' round an established circuit attracting the hoots and whistles of passing men. The women were 'high on friendship' and were 'loud, noisy and abusive, shouting at passing cars, the police and anyone in range and enjoying every minute of this freedom' and 'sense of power'. 'The term "girls" was forgotten, left inside the factory; out on the street in force, we were women'.

At a crowded 'fun pub' a host disc-jockey invited brides-to-be on stage. The twins were encouraged to lay on their backs and wave their legs in the air while 'The Stripper' music was playing. Their friends egged them on, wanting them to strip, and the twins became embarrassed. Eventually, the party arrived at a nightclub. Although excited, the sight of two bouncers on the door subdued the group and they made a rather meek entrance. Some of the women danced 'with impassive faces around their handbags' while the men at the bar made sexist comments about the appearance of the women. Tessa, on overhearing one of the men told him to 'fuck off' and then said to Westwood, 'They make me sick, that's all they think about.'

I agreed with Tessa and felt my anger rising to explosion-point as we made our way to and from the bar amid a sea of such comments. We were in a cattle market....

As we were dancing our group was approached by three large drunken men who started to make remarks about legs and 'tits' and who lurched towards us, prompting me, my anger now very visible, to tell them loudly to 'piss off' which was applauded and cheered by my friends who could hear me, it seemed, above the disco and the drunken roar.

At midnight a 'seedy, fat' dinner-jacketed compère called each bride in turn onto the stage (there were others besides the twins) and subjected each of them to a humiliating titillation scene that involved eventually placing a garter on the bride's thigh in return for a bottle of Asti Spumante. The twins who were last on stage were more resistant to being messed about than the other punters. After leaving the stage Julie was angry. 'Did you see that, Sal ? ... I'll punch his face in. I don't like him, dirty ol' man.' The evening ended at three in the morning. The following day at work most of the party-goers had hangovers although all agreed that the night before had been enjoyable.

3.5.5 Analysis: reflexivity and totality

Westwood argues that both the ceremony and the 'hen party'²⁵ are deeply contradictory events. The ritualised celebration involved both ambiguous symbolism and women in a celebration of their own oppression in marriage. The making of elaborate fancy dress emphasised the creative skills and abilities of the women on the unit but the celebration of their skills and ingenuity were, however, manifest in demeaning costumes for the brides. The workplace ritual contained 'powerful sexual imagery' that related to the women becoming sexually active as wives, where their sexuality was mediated by men and this was reflected in the fancy dress.²⁶

Marriage was clearly equated with bondage 'and the binding of a woman to a man'. While the women were bound 'they also sought to struggle free—thereby securing for the bride a new freedom'. The woman's struggle was enacted in public. It was as though the whole exercise was a shaming experience, a 'way of showing women as harlots and witches', which was also symbolised in the costumes worn by the brides. (A typical costume included a long, black, pointed witches' hat.) These images represent the enduring myths that surround women's sexuality. Such myths are not simply benign but are part of the subordination of women that the shopfloor workers collusively re-presented in the ritual (Westwood, 1984, p. 119).

The 'hen party' made 'a statement about solidarity and affection between women'. A night out presented the women with the opportunity to get together, free of the confines of home and work. Westwood argued that the events clearly showed that the women gained strength and support from the occasion and that the solidarity would remain important to the bride despite her marriage. This, Westwood argues, reasserted the sisterhood of women. However, like the other aspects of the bride's ritual, it had 'deeply ambiguous elements'. The sisterhood generated was 'undercut by the sexism of the setting' clearly evident in the male-constructed stereotypical events to which the women were subjected. 'Men were the ever-present, all-pervading context which surrounded the hen party'.

The 'powerful sexist ideologies' invaded an event that gives power to women through their solidarity. While the evening overall clearly emphasised the distance between 'the world of women and the world of men' the women were 'placed in a situation of competition for male attention' and were drawn into a chauvinistic culture that emphasised caricatured sexual relations. Such relations are regarded as 'natural' not socially constructed. The events of the evening reflected the power of men to trivialise and denigrate women.

Westwood's analysis differs from the conventional ethnographic analysis in that it does not just examine the ritual celebration of marriage but addresses the events as contradictory expressions by women of patriarchal oppression. Westwood might have simply described the ceremonial events and then drawn out the meaning of the ritual for the participants. She might have focused on the solidarity of the women as a celebration of women *qua* women. Instead, by concentrating on the contradictions, she was able to show how the manifestations of sisterhood and the celebration of woman was directed in ways that were informed by patriarchal ideology.

The focus on contradictions both enables and draws upon two other aspects of her research, a reflexive attitude and a totalistic perspective.

Although Westwood makes no attempt at a 'value free' research study, this in no way inhibits her reflexivity. The focus on contradictions as a way of making sense of the lived experiences spurs a constant reflexive re-examination of the events: both her own involvement and her taken-for-granted understanding of the meanings of these events for the participants. It also provides her with the framework for engaging ideology, which she regards as rooted in a hegemonic 'common-sense' (Gramsci, 1971).

For example, it would have been easy for her to regard the women's idea of marriage and family as romanticised and myopic. However, she notes that:

I came slowly to appreciate, as they did, that the ideological and material parameters of their lives presented marriage and children not as burdensome and oppressive, but as liberating events—part of the great adventure of life. In taking hold of these moments, young women locked themselves into domesticity and subordination in just the same way that young men, taking hold of manual labour as their moment of liberation from boyhood, locked themselves into dead end jobs with low wages.²⁷ (Westwood, 1984, p. 103)

This was not just an acceptance of the subject's point of view and a representation of the meanings that the subject conferred on marriage. Marriage was emphasised and enshrined in the shopfloor culture of femininity and it would have been easy for Westwood to have simply presented this as group ritual. She went further, however, to analyse the 'good reasons' why the women should embrace both marriage and men, despite its apparent contradictions.²⁸

The reflexive process of analysing contradictions enabled Westwood to make structural connections through digging deeper, which the ostensive celebration of marriage, surrounded by an explicit gloss of romance, only hinted at. For example, engagement was not simple-minded romanticism but was underpinned by economic constraints that necessitated an alliance between men and women if a reasonable standard of living was to be enjoyed. Engagement and marriage, according to the women interviewed by Westwood, was a strategy adopted by women to get away from parental control, to exercise some (localised) power in a male-dominated world, to gain access to the resources controlled by men, to improve their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* men and thus to realise some of the benefits of society.

In short, the reflexive analysis of contradictions requires a totalistic perspective (as was shown in Cynthia Cockburn's (1983) analysis, section 3.4). Westwood adopts a totalistic approach in which the substantive question of why women have a dual relation to class is the focal point. This dual relation to class cannot be answered through the 'crude economism of "cheap labour" arguments', instead it is linked to the 'power of sexist and racist ideologies to affect employers and unions' and thus the way people are 'positioned in the labour markets' (Westwood, 1984, p. 232).

3.5.6 Praxis

Westwood's praxiological analysis is evident in her unambiguous revelation of sexist and racist practices, in her direct intervention within the research context to engage them and in her wider political concerns. Throughout her account she relates incidents of racism and sexism. The latter were evident in her description of the 'hen party', for example, she constantly emphasised the 'seediness' of the nightclub compère and the 'tits and bums'

language of the male punters in order to highlight the direct and oppressive sexist context. Her own interventions were direct responses to situations that affected her and as a sounding board for a growing vocalisation among her friends, again evident in the nightclub scene. Throughout the book Westwood makes explicit political points, which she brings together in her conclusion, that argue for a feminist fight on a number of fronts in order to tackle the impoverishment of women that sexist and racist ideologies applied to the class situation of women workers have resulted in. Attacks have to be made on the ghettoisation of low-paid work, on white male privileges in highly paid skilled work and against low pay for women. Her study revealed that while there was a degree of solidarity and sisterhood among the women, the trade union, informed by sexist and racist ideologies, negotiated enormous wage differentials on the spurious grounds of skilled work. Thus, suggests Westwood, the fight against low pay is bound up with a fight against the ideologies of the unions.

Furthermore, Westwood suggests that feminism must address issues beyond the concerns of middle-class whites. Apart from the obvious neglect of racism, there seems little connection in feminist analysis with the lives of working-class women. For example, calls to develop sisterhood seem strange to working-class women who spend much of their lives in a mutual dependency culture with other women. Similarly, to be told that women are powerless does not fit the experiences of working-class women who feel they have control over their own part of the world, separate from men.

In conclusion, Westwood argues that, in the face of Thatcherism, 'We must support and protect the efforts being made by those working at the local level, in the unions and left Labour councils, who are trying to forge meaningful alternatives' (Westwood, 1984, p. 241).

¹⁶ Westwood reflects Hartmann (1981) and McDonough & Harrison (1978) in directing her study to both home and work. However, Westwood argues that although family, schooling and the media are all responsible in part for the production and reproduction of gender identities, it is the workplace that is central. The workplace operates in two ways. First, women who enter into waged employment 'become workers and therefore classed subjects'. Second, the workplace also 'enshrines the subordination of women' both through the capitalist work process and through the culture that is produced in opposition to it by the women. Women at work 'receive' a concept of woman, elements of which they adopt and link to a 'feminine' destiny. Being at work is 'most crucially about becoming a woman' (Westwood, 1984, p. 6). This mirrors Cockburn's (1983) view of the relationship between work and self-identity of male print workers (see section 3.4). The collusive nature of this is also reflected in Westwood's analysis, below.

¹⁷ Westwood uses Hartmann's (1981) definition of patriarchy:

We can usefully define patriarchy as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women... The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power. Men maintain this control by excluding women from access to some essential productive resources (in capitalist

societies, for example, jobs that pay living wages) and by restricting women's sexuality. Monogamous heterosexual marriage is one relatively recent and efficient form that seems to allow men to control both these areas. (Hartmann, 1981, pp. 14–15 quoted in Westwood, 1984, p. 5)

¹⁸ It is not altogether clear whether Westwood sees capitalism and patriarchy coming together as 'capitalist patriarchy' (a term she uses but not quite in the same way as Eisenstein (1979)) or sees a dual system of oppression. It would appear that in endorsing Cockburn's (1983) view she tends to the dualist approach but she emphasises the interlocking nature of the two forms of oppression.

¹⁹ Westwood undertakes detailed analysis of the impact of race as well as gender on the lives of the working-class women. She shows how Indian women (as those in her study described themselves) are confronted by different forms of domestic oppression and discrimination at work, as well as the burden of racist oppression. Space considerations preclude a review of this material. The example used below concentrates on sexism, the methodology for the analysis of racism is the same.

²⁰ The 'minutes' was slang for the measured day work system in which pay is fixed against a specified level of performance. This requires some form of work measurement and a monitoring process. At StitchCo this involved specifying how many minutes it took to do an operation. Workers were graded and remunerated accordingly with each grade having specific production level, which guaranteed the weekly wage that could be augmented by bonuses if targets were exceeded. Women were assessed monthly to see whether they should be upgraded or downgraded. The decision was based on output (taking into account management's responsibility to provide a constant flow of work), timekeeping and general discipline record. Grading was an important part of control as people doing the same job were rewarded differently on the basis of different production targets. 'Making time' occurred when daily targets (for top grades) measured by the 'minutes' actually exceeded the number of minutes in the working day. To fulfil targets, and exceed them in order to gain bonus payments, the worker had to make time for the company by working above, the 'scientifically' determined time for the job (which was in no way generous in the first place) and upon which the labour value and thus price of an article was calculated. Thus top rate targets were blatantly exploitative and the women were well aware of it.

²¹ The shopfloor culture was organised on the basis of (mainly age and race base) friendship groups that were essential for relieving the monotony, organising resistance, and as mutual support groups in respect of family, boyfriends, and management. Westwood's study thus examines the way resistance is embodied in a feminine culture that enabled the women to re-interpret their exploited situation to 'make anew the world of the shopfloor' (Westwood, 1984, p. 15).

²² See section 1.4.1

²³ In this respect Westwood reflects Oakley's (1981) approach to researching women (see section 3.3).

²⁴ This was not unique to the department but seemed to be common to all departments at StitchCo and, according to people who had worked elsewhere, a ritual enacted in similar vein at other hosiery factories in 'Needletown'.

²⁵ Westwood notes that even its label, 'hen party' tells us a lot about how women are viewed when we compare it with the virile symbol of the stag used for the men's night out.

²⁶ Even the more conservative costumes for less sexually experienced brides clearly emphasised the sexuality of the women and their availability as sexual objects for their husbands. For example, the use of the contraceptive pill as an item of adornment on most costumes indicated the change of status from 'sexually unavailable girl' to 'sexually experienced woman'.

²⁷ Westwood cites Willis (1977) in a footnote. See also section 2.6.

²⁸ Westwood's analysis reflects Oakley's (1974a) analysis of the 'need to be a housewife' (see section 3.3).