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PART 3 GENDER

3.4 Cynthia Cockburn—*Brothers*

3.4.1. Introduction

Cynthia Cockburn's *Brothers* is a feminist study of the impact of new technology on the work situation of highly paid skilled print compositors. The compositor,¹¹ who throughout the history of printing in Britain has almost exclusively been male, enjoys a patriarchal craft culture with a strong trade-union identification. The tenacity by which compositors have held onto their craft identity marks them out as unique. However, Cockburn argues that despite the lack of typicality they offer an excellent illustration of the processes of change that lead to the dissolution of a craft and the effects of that dissolution. Examining the changing world of the compositor raises the questions: 'What alternatives are open to such men? What sense do they make of what is happening to them? What will influence their political decisions and trade-union strategies?' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 4).

Cockburn sees her subjects not just as skilled craft workers but as men too. She is as concerned with the gender relations at work and at home as she is with the conventional class relations. The experience of class, Cockburn argues, cannot be understood without reference to sex and gender (Rubin, 1975). She thus combines a Marxist analysis of class with a socialist-feminist analysis of sex/gender. It is not satisfactory to see sex/gender divisions as a by-product of class processes (Seccombe, 1974; Zaretsky, 1976). To argue that capital exploits women as cheap labour that is resisted by male workers overlooks the 'social and political benefits accruing to men of all classes of women's long subordination' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 6).

Cockburn is clear from the outset that she adopts an explicit Marxist historical materialist method. She is equally clear that this should be applied to a sex/gender as well as a class dimension. She thus proposes a dual class and gender analysis.

Using a historical and materialist *method* that does not differ from marxist method, we can none the less model the world in an alternative way. Marxist historical materialism speaks of a mode of production. Feminist historical materialism proposes that there exists as well, as in all societies, a *sex/gender system* which determines the social categories that people of different sexes fill. (Cockburn, 1983, p. 6)

She takes the view that biological sex differences are socially constructed into gender differences. The study of the print compositors reflects the 'constitutive process' (Williams, 1961) in the historical evolution of classes (in capitalism) and genders (in patriarchy). The capital-labour struggle over the control of technology, skill and trade

unionism is both about the forging of class character and the process by which men and women define each other as genders. Capital holds the initiative over workers and, by securing privileged access to money, men hold the initiative over women.

Within the male bastions of the craft unions there evolves a 'masculine' self-image with its attendant desire to 'keep' a wife who ministers to his needs at home in a strictly gender defined division of labour. This, Cockburn argues, cannot be explained by class theory but requires reference to a sex/gender system. Cockburn, thus, operates with an explicit dualist system (Hartmann, 1979) of class and of sex/gender rather than a single social system, capitalist patriarchy (Eisenstein, 1979), that combines both mode of production and sex/gender system. Cockburn argues further, that neither class nor gender analysis makes any sense without the other.¹²

Cockburn is aware that attempting a dual analysis is difficult because 'thinking in terms of two systems at once is not easy', especially to 'marxists who have such a well developed sense of the class system'. A century of experience of distinguishing a 'mode of production' has led us to 'expect to find an economic base, a set of practices that produce wealth and distribute goods'; political institutions 'for controlling class conflict'; 'physical forces mobilised in class struggle'; and the material expressions of a class manifest ideologically (Cockburn, 1983, pp. 194–5).

Thus when a feminist and Marxist analysis are attempted simultaneously the former is often subordinated to the latter (Hartmann, 1979a) and consequently men's contribution to exploitation and oppression is ignored. This is partly due to a lack of confidence in defining the location of a sex/gender analysis. It appears that all the practices and institutions (even the bastion of feminism, the family) are already integrated into the class analysis that raises questions about the arena for the operation of patriarchy. Cockburn's resolution questions the notion of autonomous oppressive realms. She argues that it is as mistaken to see patriarchal oppression only in relation to the family or sexual relations as it is to suppose that capitalist power is exercised only in the factory. The sex/gender system operates in all the same structures as does class relations.

We don't live two lives, one as a member of a class, the other as a man or a woman. Everything we do takes its meaning from our membership of both systems.... Feminism, like marxism, is a world view and its subject is the world itself: a totality. The two systems are, at bottom, conceptual models, each explaining different phenomena. We need them both. (Cockburn, 1983, p. 195)

In her analysis of the particular workplace occupied by male composers, events, she argues, can only be understood if read from both a class and a gender perspective.

3.4.2 Technology, control and working practices

Cockburn (1983, p. 86) develops a totalistic approach in that she sees the struggle over the control of the work process as an integral feature of the recurrent crises endemic to the capitalist process. Capitalist development is characterised by cycles of boom and depression.¹³ To prevent a deterioration in profit ratios capital has to assert control over the labour process, to override the human priorities of the workers by the imperative of productivity. Thus technology plays a key role in the struggle between capital and labour and, consequently, in capitalist development. Photocomposition and computer technology in the print industry cannot be seen as standing alone. They are an integral part of the

politics of control that is intrinsic to the continual crises of capitalism. The cyclical nature of capitalism, rooted in its inherent contradictions, is an economic presupposition that informs Cockburn's analysis. It is in this context that the struggle for the control of the work situation is enacted. This struggle for control is not, however, just one that operates on a class dimension but is also manifest on a sex/gender dimension.

Technological innovation is not a new weapon of capitalism; it has always been the tool used by capital to strike at the heart of craft power and nowhere more so than in the print industry. Cockburn describes the historical context of her ethnographic study in order to reveal the continued process of struggle over technology and the consequent effect on the constant reappraisal of the job. She focuses on working class practices in relation to new technology as this both grounds the analysis empirically and allows an examination of the divisive forces acting within the working class itself.

For example, in the 1890s with the patent of the linotype machine, capitalist employers attempted to divide labour by deskilling, and thereby usurping craft control. The technical know-how needed to operate a linotype machine however enabled the craft unions to retain control of the labour process and undermine the potential increased 'productivity' offered by the 'hot metal' process. This control was abetted by the lack of female labour (due to a number of factors including male hostility, the perceived 'heaviness' of the work, and legislation that restricted female night-work) and the continued success in denying the access of unskilled labour to the compositors' closed craft shop.¹⁴

The history of printing shows a conscious activism and a fundamental presupposition that there exists a state of conflict between printers and employers (Sykes, 1967). Capitalist owners continually attempted to undermine the exclusivity, and hence power, of the skilled print workers, hoping to cheapen the value of labour power. Any incursions were met with considerable vigour by the chapels. Cockburn outlines a class-based analysis of the emerging crisis faced by print workers, drawing on notions of labour aristocracy (Hobsbawm, 1964; Foster, 1974; Stedman-Jones, 1975; Lenin, 1977), dequalification and deskilling (Braverman, 1974; Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Elger, 1979). However, despite the sophistication of the class analysis it is not, Cockburn argues, adequate alone as it ignores the sex/gender dimension.

The skilled workers saw women as a distinct problem; as almost an underclass 'below' the unskilled. Women have quite openly been excluded and seen as rivals for jobs. The aggressiveness shown by craftsmen and their unions towards women is projected as an inevitable by-product of the men's class struggle with the employers (who wanted to use women as a source of cheap labour). This, Cockburn argues, is illusory as men used different arguments against women than against other male rivals for jobs and they 'expressed the interests of men in the social and sexual subordination of women' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 151). Drawing on specific historical events which pitted men against women in the print trade and resulted in the virtual exclusion of the latter, Cockburn shows that the three-cornered struggle between employers, male and female workers only makes sense if a sex/gender analysis is combined with class. For example, capitalists were not interested in having women enter the trade other than as a cheap source of labour. When a national conference of print compositors hypocritically passed a motion in 1886 agreeing to accept women into the trade but only on equal pay rates with men (although simultaneously denying the suitability of women for the work) they were

creating a situation in which employers would never take on women. The apparent egalitarianism of the motion belies its clear intention to retain an all-male bastion.

That women have been employed in printing in fewer numbers than men, earned lower wages for 'equivalent work', and been ghettoised in lower status occupations, is not entirely the fault of the capitalist. Working men have had a hand in it. At root, the exclusion of women reflects a patriarchal ideology that hides behind class interests. Cockburn adopts a hegemonic view of ideology (Gramsci, 1971), arguing that, although ideologies are grounded in material practices and that in the last resort the material world provides the limits of ideological change, ideology is not determined by material forms. Material forces are 'riven by contradictions' and it is in the engagement with these contradictions that people are able, collectively, to develop their ideology.

Male hegemony holds women in compliance by making alternatives unthinkable and is thus as effective as bourgeois hegemony in its control of the working class. The patriarchal ideology of the compositor is encapsulated in the idea of essential gender attributes, the complementarity of males and females, and a dualist view of women as people to be protected or to be used. Essentialism and complementarity are functional ideologies, with which women collude, which deny inequality and prefer the inevitability of the gender *status quo*.

Cockburn analyses her material to try and draw out the meanings that the men are constructing about their changed situation and the ideology they are constructing and deploying to stave off their loss. The printing industry in general is having to fight against do-it-yourself printing, electronic media, and so on. Unemployment is high and the position of labour weakened. Computerisation offers productivity gains that far outstrip the gains that could have been made from mechanical typesetting. Women cannot be excluded on spurious grounds (strength, concentration, lacking basic skills). The structure of patriarchal rights has been undermined by legislation and state policy and this is reflected in a growing female self-consciousness.

3.4.3 Contradiction

Cockburn's study, which was carried out between mid-1979 and late 1981, draws principally on fifty, lengthy, semi-structured interviews with compositors in four newspaper companies, two on Fleet Street (Mirror Group and the Times) and two London regionals (King & Hutchins Ltd. and Croydon Advertiser Ltd.). Her questions focussed on eleven key areas:

apprenticeship, the old technology, the new technology, the firm, women as competitors and colleagues, union policies, relations with less skilled men, feelings about class, homelife and domestic relationships, the newspaper as product, and the future of work for compositors. (Cockburn, 1983, p. 9)

The interviews were structured around '72 basic questions', which she asked in any order that fitted the conversational approach of the interview, which began with the general questions of how and why the subject came to be in the trade.

Cockburn also interviewed management, shop-floor union representatives, some women members of the NGA as well as men and women members of the less-skilled union NATSOPA. All the subjects have in common experience of the 'hot metal' process of type preparation for letterpress printing and experience or anticipation of a transfer to

'cold' computerised photocomposition. The interviews allowed her to construct specific case studies of the incorporation of new technology in the four newspaper groups. She noted the circumstances, reasons, key decisions, style of introduction, and degree of resistance that accompanied the installation of new technology.

What Cockburn seeks from the tape-recorded and carefully transcribed interviews is not a catalogue of percentages summarising her basic questions but the revelation of contradictory actions and attitudes evident in the work process. The compositors in her study are faced by contradictions that are both a result of material working practices and of ideology. For example, the work environment in which the men operate the new technology is cleaner, quieter and more comfortable and the work itself is lighter and less onerous. The result is higher productivity for less effort and yet, contradictorily, it is regarded as less satisfying. This reflects a historically established contradiction. On the one hand compositors have high regard for the idea of craft excellence and hard work, while on the other, they realise that it is a work ideology that accentuates self-exploitation. Cockburn argues that it is the very mechanism of contradiction that prompts a redirection or ideological change.

The identification of contradictions reflects Oakley's (1974a) analysis but Cockburn makes them a much more central concern. To conceptualise contradiction, she argues, involves a dialectical way of thinking that emphasises process. 'Events and interconnections not linear causality unfold and one form replaces another, denying it and yet developing out of it' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 11). This synthetic view of contradiction involves a view of dialectics that presupposes that all phenomena contain their opposites (Mao, 1971; Hegel, 1974; Engels, 1975). The inherent contradiction can lead to a rupture given changing external circumstances. The nature and timing of any break, however, is not determined by external pressure but is contingent upon the form of the contradiction itself. There is no end to this process as the resulting synthesis contains its own negation. Thus dialectical analysis is not about establishing causal links but proposes a 'theory of the relation between knowledge and the world and between phenomena and the sense we make of them' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 11).

Cockburn aims to reveal the contradictions operating in the world of the print compositor, not just in abstract but through the direct experiences and reflections of her subject group. Her account of the compositors' world and the contradictions that operate in it is thus generously laced with direct quotes from the interviews that reveal contradictions in the men's ideas, opinions and actions. For Cockburn, contradictions were not problems to be resolved; they became the goal of the research.

The increased participation of women in printing upsets the gender separation and accompanying image men have of women. The image that women are either 'pure' and family oriented or 'loose' and available on demand (by men) is upset by having women work alongside men in what used to be a male bastion in which these simple stereotypes were common currency for idle conversation. The arrival of women in the workplace means that the male image is contrasted by the woman's own definition of her sexuality. 'As a competitor for jobs she must be taken seriously and cannot be seen as a sexual pawn which he can protect and cherish' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 187). This fundamental contradiction that has arisen as a result of males being unable to sustain an exclusive bastion in the face of new technological innovations has far reaching consequences. Compositors are faced with more than an economic threat to their jobs; they face a threat

to the sexual structuration of their whole world. Thus Cockburn is led, by the impact of new technology, into 'a study of the making and remaking of men' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 3).

3.4.4 Deskilling

The remaking is enacted at one level in the acquisition of new skills; of prime importance is the skill to touch-type on an electronic QWERTY keyboard. This they learnt, in the main, from women instructors. Such skills the compositors regarded as deskilling. The new technology was intangible, if anything went wrong with a keyboard or terminal the men were unable to repair it or carry out routine maintenance. Except for their aesthetic appreciation, their old hard-won skills were irrelevant. Their new skills are by no means exclusive or indicative of a trade. The men feel they are craft frauds. This reskilling has the direct effect of emasculation, the male compositor feels that the new technology has turned the craft into a 'woman's job' and with it the mystique of the craftsman has gone (Cockburn, 1983, p. 104).

The issue of skill and deskilling is of central significance in the particular case of the impact of computerised technology on the print compositors craft, but it also has much wider consequences. At one level deskilling is about attempts by capital to undermine the power of craft unions. Deskilling according to the standard Marxist theorists is about control manifested in the standardisation of routines, disassociating the labour process from the skills of the worker, managerial organisation, and efficient division of tasks into unskilled components.¹⁵ However, Cockburn argues, this analysis rather oversimplifies the situation relating to the British print compositor. To understand it better it is necessary to carefully analyse the concept of skill.

The concept of skill is of central importance in understanding the internal divisions in the working class. Skill operates in a complex way in respect of both class and gender divisions. Skill as an abstract category needs to be examined in relation to work practices; in short skill, as an empty abstraction, has to be filled by reference to empirical work practices. At one level, skill is the individual's accumulated experience that adds up to the total experience of the worker. Second, skill refers to that which is necessary to perform a given job. This may or may not match the worker's skill. Third, skill has a political dimension, being that which a group of organised workers can defend against challenges from employers and other groups of workers. Initially, in printing, the three aspects of skill were in harmony but with the advent of computerised photocomposition the three aspects are no longer synchronous. The new technology has seen a sharp distinction arise between 'skill in the man' and 'skill in the job' with the union struggling hard to hang on to 'skill as a class political concept'.

Skill has a fourth dimension. It is also a sex/gender weapon. The skill attributed to a job (and hence the status of the job) has much more to do with the sex of the person doing it than the real demands of the work (Rubery and Wilkinson, 1979; Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Coyle, 1982). Compositors are faced with accepting that their new job is deskilled or acknowledging that many women are as skilled as men. This dilemma is reflected in bitterness voiced by the men.

A fifth dimension of skill is its social status. Skilled craftwork sets the worker above other manual workers. The acknowledged loss of skill goes hand in hand with a loss of self-esteem and status amongst other male workers. The perceived social decline is

accentuated because women are equally able to do the job, and, this time, have access to it. In making the old skills redundant the new technology has left the compositor confused about the standing of their work. They see the new office environment as upgrading the job but as downgraded by the change in skill required. Where this leaves them as far as their social status is concerned is a problem they find difficult to resolve.

So the question of skill is as much about gender as it is about class. Cockburn was able to draw out this dual impact in her interviews as she focussed on the issues of union amalgamation and the impact of new technology on skill differentials.

3.4.5 Conclusion

Cockburn shows, through situating the empirical data, in a wider social context that men have created an economic, political, social and physical position of advantage for themselves over women. This is encapsulated and perpetrated in patriarchal institutions varying from general political structures, through the nuclear family, to the specific exclusivity of male clubs and, in the case of the study group, print chapels. In short working-class women are doubly trapped.^{15A}

Cockburn's study engages prevailing studies of male work by addressing it from a gender perspective as well as a class perspective. Work for Cockburn, is integral to the self-identity of the workers. She thus addresses the changes to the long-established skilled occupation brought about by new technology as it affects the remaking of self-image. At the heart of this remaking is the concept of skill. Cockburn deconstructs the abstract notion of skill to reveal its multi-faceted nature, which incorporates economic and political dimensions as well as that of performance. The analysis of skill makes sense only as part of a holistic appreciation of the compositor's job. Cockburn's holistic analysis is both structural and historical, tracing the development of the print trade as it relates to their evolution of capitalist and patriarchal forms. The way she is able to reveal the tension between material practices and ideological forms is through the examination of contradictions that emerge from her ethnographic interviews. These contradictions become the focus of the study and provide a means of linking the particular ethnographic material to the wider socio-economic and political structures that impinge on the world of work and the gender relationships that it supports.

¹¹ The compositor's work consists of typesetting and composition along with a number of lesser tasks. Typesetting is usually via a linotype machine which is a skilled job in as much as the operator has to be able to operate the keyboard of ninety keys (which is nothing like a QWERTY typewriter keyboard), make decisions about spacing and hyphenation, carry out routine maintenance of the machine. The machine operates as follows. At each keystroke a small brass matrix is released from the overhead magazine, slides down a chute, and collects in an assembler where they may be read as a line. The collected matrices, each representing a letter of the alphabet, have molten lead forced into the characters resulting in a solid slug or 'line o' type' which is ejected into a waiting tray (galley). Composition, in its narrow sense, refers to the process of collecting the set type and assembling it to form a printing surface. The compositor's tasks make demands on physical strength (the assembled type is heavy), numeracy, literacy and aesthetic sense in

composing the page. In its broadest sense, compositor refers to an all-round craft worker who undertakes both these and the lesser-related tasks.

¹² Indeed, the book is as much about showing the relevance of a sex/gender dimension as it is about the examination of the impact of new technology.

¹³ Periods of profitable growth produce full employment and so strengthen the working class. Workers have a choice of jobs, unions can demand high wages and exert a confident sway over the actual process of work. The competition for profits, however, leads to heavier capitalisation by individual firms, or nations, in order to increase their competitiveness. Advanced technology 'saves' on labour and increases a firm's capacity, enabling it to profit by expanding markets. But as more and more capital is drawn into use, production tends to outstrip consumption and the boom to be broken by crisis. The weakest firms go bankrupt. The economy contracts, workers are laid off, unemployment rises and the weakened working class is unable to resist the depression of wages and the intensification of the authority of capital. The units of capital that survive do so by investing in new areas where labour is cheaper, such as the Third World or by developing new technology that cuts the reliance on costly workers. While capitalism needs wealthy consumers, each firm or nation, to remain competitive, needs poorly paid workers.

¹⁴ Elements of current and recent practices are located in the long-established printers' apprenticeship system, the key strategy of which was control of entry of labour to the craft and the job. The strategy was successful in ensuring a shortage of labour in the trade until the 1960s. The strategy was made possible by the pre-capitalist 'chapel' system that, guided by the 'oldest freeman' or 'father of the chapel', operated a system of democratic and collectively binding decision-making. The system became encapsulated in the print unions with the advent of capitalism. The local sections of the National Graphic Association (NGA) are still referred to as 'chapels' with the local shop floor union representatives retaining the title of 'father of the chapel' (FOC). The chapels were exclusive groups of skilled working men. Unskilled male workers were excluded. The entry of women to composition was even more determinedly resisted through both the development of ordinances and by custom and practice, which created a hostile setting that it was difficult for women to penetrate.

¹⁵ Thus labour can be recruited, trained and replaced cheaply and can be easily diverted from one task to another. In short, capitalist control of the labour process leads to ever-increasing division of labour and 'degradation' of work (Braverman, 1974). Although deskilling is about job control it also reflects a shift in the interests of capital. The disinterest in craft was accompanied by a similar lack of concern with standards. Instead, the focus of attention was on specialisation, increased productivity and selling.

^{15A} 'Socio-political power organised within a trade union such as the compositors' societies wins the 'right' to certain physical competences and so secures greater earning power. Higher earnings make men more politically and socially powerful in domestic life. Physical and technical competence produces economic advantage for men but also enables them to control women physically. The circle is complete - and vicious indeed. What is more, this circle interlocks with another, with the exploitation of one class by its counterpart, in such a way that working-class women are doubly trapped.' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 205).