

INDIVIDUALIST EXPLANATIONS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF WOMEN

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Sociologists and researchers in related fields fundamentally agree that women are treated in employment differently to men. Rosemary Crompton and Stuart Reid for example argue that, generally:

“Women provide a cheap, flexible (about one-third of women work part-time) and readily available source of labour from which employers staff the lowest paid, most routine jobs.”¹

Again, Catherine Hakim has asserted:

“Altogether, almost two million women work in occupations where over 90% of all employees are women: typists, secretaries, maids, nurses, canteen assistants, sewing machinists.”²

THE NEO-CLASSICAL SCHOOL

Neo-classical theoreticians such as Becker, Arrow and Mincer draw upon an worldview directly descending from British nineteenth-century economic liberalism, methodologically concentrating on the ‘individual’ as the basic unit of analysis.³ Neo-classical theorists do not ascribe women’s lower earnings and flatter earnings profile, over the life cycle, to any social injustice. But instead these factors to women’s voluntarily smaller investments in ‘human capital’.⁴

Productivity is said to differ between men and women of the same age and level of education for two reasons. Firstly, women on average spend pro-

portionately fewer years in the labour force than men. They interrupt their market work to bear and rear children. Secondly, when women are working, the jobs they choose provide them with fewer opportunities to enhance their skills. Therefore they acquire less experience and on-the job training than men and their earnings merely reflect this.

According to authors like Lambrechts however, these ‘individualistically oriented’ theorists, by concentrating on male-female pay differentials, and ignoring sex labour segregation, end up blaming the ‘victims’ of occupational segregation and structural inequality. By simply referring to the personal and task-oriented characteristics of workers, neo-classical theorists are said to present a personalised, under-socialised model of human action. Moreover, they present a theory which is implicitly teleological in format - inadequately explaining *why* these socialisation patterns arise in the first place.⁵

THE INSTITUTIONALIST SCHOOL

Another school of thought comes under the heading of ‘institutionalism’. These theorists concentrate not only on such institutions as the family, and especially the union between husband and wife, but perhaps most characteristically on the specific question of occupational segregation by sex. Indeed it is in this context that institutionalists are often labeled Segmented Labour Market (SLM) theorists.

Reich, Edwards and Gordon argue that the labour market is segmented according to a historical process whereby political- economic forces encourage the division of the labour market into separate sub-markets, or ‘segments’.⁶ The primary and secondary segments of the labour market are differentiated mainly by ‘stability characteristics’. So for example, primary jobs (that is jobs in the primary labour market) require and develop stable working habits: skills are often acquired on the job, wages are relatively high, and job ladders exist. Secondary jobs however, do not require, and often discourage, stable working habits: hence wages are low, turnover is high, and job ladders are few. Not surprisingly secondary jobs are mainly (though not exclu-

Sociological Notes No. 9

ISSN 0267-7113 ISBN 1 870614 89 5



An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

sively) filled by minority workers, young adults and, of course, women.

Claus Offe and Karl Hinrichs argue that it is not only in the:

“interest of capitalist corporations to have at their disposition a ‘manoeuvrable mass’ of workers with little power of resistance, easily exploited and blackmailed, quickly replaced”,⁷

but more importantly, resistance is low in such groups as women, the young and the handicapped, because they generally have “alternative roles” of subsistence outside the labour market.

Contrary to what you might expect at first glance, at the centre of their argument is the idea that this ‘secondary mass’ can alas always rely on other forms of readily available subsistence. For example, women can typically rely, back in the home, on husbands, fathers or the State for material support. Again, ethnic minorities, young people and the handicapped are, so Offe and Hinrichs complain, all too often socialised to rely upon their entitlement to state benefits.

Again, Offe and Hinrichs make the point that trade unions and shop stewards are all too often guided by the image of the ‘normal’ (ideal-type) male full-time worker. Hence, as Kreckel has argued, these ‘problem group’ members do not simply lack individual bargaining strength in the face of a lack of qualifications, but also are often denied representation of their collective interests.

The problem with this paradigm, however, is that while it acknowledges (rather like Weber’s social closure thesis⁹) that women are - to some extent - constrained by ‘external’ factors (Indeed, Kreckel, paralleling much of Parkin’s work,¹⁰ defines women as “existing within an ‘unequal opportunity structure’ ”), it falls into the trap of presenting a fixed, deterministic and oversocialised model of human action. By concentrating upon “societal factors”, the “unequal opportunity structure” and other explanations grounded in holism and determinism, we simply end up perpetuating the fallacious view that external processes inevitably shape and reproduce both human ideas and human actions.

MARXIAN AND SOCIALIST FEMINIST VOICES

Sheila Rowbotham criticises much sociology for not having adequately paid attention to the impact on female socialisation of such ‘structural factors’. She argues that too much sociology portrays women as being simply ‘naturally’ suited to boring, monotonous and routine jobs.

For example, the following comment by Cosgrove:

“The increase in working wives is, in fact, perfectly consistent with the growth in home-centredness. Such women put their families first and are not interested in promotion”,¹²

is cited by Rowbotham as indicating that sociologists often fail to stress the implicit lack of choice and opportunity which necessitates resignation, by many women, to their fate - and which in turn renders ‘an attachment to the home’ an understandable response.

For Rowbotham, in too much sociology, there has been a blatant failure to examine systematically those factors which influence women’s attitudes towards their jobs; and all too often the belief has prevailed that women attach little importance to promotion or to interesting work.

McNally¹³ contends that sociological analyses should not assume that female orientations to work are fixed solely by their upbringing, education and later by their domestic obligations. Instead, the extent and the way, that these orientations are sustained, modified or frustrated by work itself should be of central analytical importance.

Similarly Daniel argues¹⁴ that because workers exhibit different sets of priorities at different times, such as job choice, job satisfaction and job leaving, they must not be thought to be necessarily influenced by a uniformity of factors. Hence the key question is not: what do people want from work? but instead: at what point are they interested in particular rewards?

Brown asserts that researchers must: “pay considerable attention to the context of choice and action since this may well lead to the modification of a person’s priorities.”¹⁵ On this point, Hakim points out that ‘job satisfaction data’ collected in the General Household Survey (GHS) since 1947 consistently shows a marked sex differential in satisfaction with pay, with women reporting higher levels of satisfaction than men, even though the earnings distribution for women is a good deal lower than men’s. However, one explanation of this is that because women are socialised to have lower expectations than men, they will be satisfied with less. And because women probably compare their pay to that of other women in general they thus express high levels of satisfaction with pay.¹⁶

The key characteristic of Marxian theorists is that they reject reductionist, individualistically oriented explanations. Instead, they concentrate on the struggle between different economic classes in the wider process of production. In this paradigm,

women's inferior position is said to spring from the manner in which reproduction (birth and child-rearing) are socially organised. For Marxists, like Pollett and Aldred,¹⁷ women's oppression is seen as arising from their gradual exclusion from social production and public life, a process during which reproduction became hemmed into the narrow, isolated sphere of the private family. Today women's position is expressed in their sexual oppression and their economic dependence in marriage - which is reinforced both ideologically and by the State. For example, adapting Marx's 'dominant ideology thesis' Kreckel asserts:

"In advanced capitalist societies quite a variety of sexist, or racist or alternative-role- ideologies may be operating. They are functionally equivalent in that they stigmatise certain sections of the labour force and hence maintain 'problem groups' in the market place."¹⁸

In an attempt to "further develop and refine" the 'de-skilling thesis' work of the Marxian researcher Braverman, Crompton and Reid have extensively discussed the 'feminisation' (or sexual downgrading) of clerical workers. While pointing out that the proportion of female clerks rose from 21 percent in 1911 to almost 70 percent by 1966,¹⁹ they assert that one of the attractions of women workers to employers is that (after the equal pay legislation of the 1970s), concentrated in the lowest grades, they (and in particular working women after extra 'pin-money') can be effectively isolated from the mainstream organisational career structure. For Crompton and Reid the process of polarisation of the office work force has been greatly facilitated by the use of Electronic Data Processing technology. As Crompton et al. assert:

"The polarisation of class positions through clerical deskilling, which Braverman described also depends on a polarization of functions within the administrative work force facilitated by new computer technology and reinforced by a sexual division of labour."²⁰

Against the assertions of authors like Evans,²¹ regarding flexible work and its benefits to women, these authors argue that the feminisation of clerical work, has:

"had the advantage, for management, of creating a routine clerical work force largely cut off from access to positions of responsibility."²²

THE BI-MODAL PROBLEM

Both Aldred²³ and Hakim argue that legislation on equal pay for women can only have a small effect

on the situation of total occupational segregation. As Hakim asserts:

"[one] reason for doubting [whether] occupational segregation would have changed to any degree over the century relates to the education and training received by younger women."²⁴

Even though the primary institutions of socialisation are dominated by mothers and female teachers, the state education system is broadly geared towards providing a period of - ideal-type 'male' - full-time education in preparation for continuous employment. This means it is not geared towards those who will have a two-phase - or 'bi-modal' - working life which accounts for child-rearing.

According to Mackie and Patullo²⁵ many women looking ahead to their first marriage may see no point in acquiring training or qualifications, and do not appear to receive any appropriate long term guidance. To Sullerot, this situation amounts to a 'self-fulfilling-prophecy syndrome' because, the bi-modal work profile provides an automatically collectivised form of prejudice against women generally:

"The young female worker is considered undependable, a poor investment in training, as she is expected to drop work when she marries or has children."²⁶

For all these reasons women are regarded as more 'immediately dispensible' than men. From *Rosie The Riveter* to Jackie West's *Work, Women and the Labour Market* this has been the case.²⁷ Consequently while in early 1976 women made up 22 percent of the registered unemployed, by 1980 this figure had risen to 31 percent.²⁸ To make the point: in a radio interview in 1979, at the beginning of the recession, the then Secretary of State for social services, Patrick Jenkin stated that:

"given high unemployment, the balance between the national need for women's work in the economy and the need for them to look after their family [is] shifting."²⁹

THE LIBERTARIAN RIPOSTE

The sociology of women is dominated by the, sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant premise that women are conspired against by men in positions of power. Indeed the vast majority of these works embody the view that a powerful ideology, "sexism", is the interactive product of 'society'. So for example, women are in comparatively poorly paid, powerless positions because institutions like the (welfare) state, the (capitalist) economy and the (private) family have made it so.

But which men and which institutions actually conspire against women? While the Marxian theorists Offe and Hinrichs point out that (a) trade unions and (b) welfare handouts actually perpetuate sexist institutions and ideology, is their critical view not fundamentally compatible with Libertarian criticisms of both welfarist and labourist views?

While many sociological commentators begin their studies by assuming that the free-market is opposed to the liberation of women, their evidence is never actually directed against what libertarians would identify as free-market 'Capitalism'. The research so far complains about the failures of trade unions, equal opportunity legislation, the adverse effects of welfare socialisation and the failure of state education. Where you might ask is the free-market?

The answer is that the segmented labour market theory is a critique of something which in reality it cannot find. While SLM theorists say that they oppose the divisive, sexist, logic of Capitalism they are in fact studying limited - politicised - markets within mixed economies.

Most sociologists choose not to debate the effects of private education, the legalisation of prostitution, the provision of private nurseries, the abandonment of taxation, the private provision of health care, the disestablishment of the church, etc; i.e. the relationship between women and a real market society. Instead, these theorists resort to an imaginary version of what they as Marxists, Socialists and non-libertarian feminists, wish call capitalism.

In short sociologists should start to analyse the adverse effects on women of what the great German sociologist Franz Oppenheimer called the adverse effects of the 'political means' of ordering society - as opposed to the individually based 'economic means'.³¹

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