Women's Spheres

Women United, Women Divided. Comparative Studies of Ten Contemporary Cultures. PATRICIA CAPLAN and JANET M. BUJRA, Eds. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979. 288 pp. $15.

Groups of women social scientists meeting in London during the 1970's, like their American counterparts of the same decade, have brought a new, feminist awareness to bear on the collection of data and the theoretical interpretation of social forms. This interesting and scholarly group of essays exemplifies how continuing discussion among people who are grappling with problems that are at once intellectual and practical can open up new perspectives. The approach of this group of authors departs from earlier feminist concerns with women's status and role; it also departs from the untested assumption that women everywhere have a common interest in, and a universally valid basis for, united action. The focus is rather upon empirical cases of women's solidarity and collective endeavors that take different forms and on the implications of these differences for theory and practice.

Ten cases are examined in the volume, which includes a detailed index. Janet Bujra's introductory essay groups the contributions according to patterns of solidarity. Two—the *zaar bori* spirit possession cult among women in an urban setting of the northern Sudan and Maasai women in a pastoral enclave of Kenya—emphasize solidarity based on women's management of their own sexual and reproductive activities and physical and mental health. In both, such management underwrites access to religious and ritual power, which in turn makes it possible not only to influence the behavior of individual men, at least in their role as husbands, but in some ways to encroach on male-dominated political and economic spheres. A contrasting pair of cases concerns solidarity among women as producers, their reproductive function playing quite a secondary role. One deals with single women who brew beer for a living in a squatter settlement of Nairobi, called Mathare, the other with women in contemporary China. Although the Kenyan political system promotes capitalist penetration and the Chinese revolution reversed it, both cases provide examples of how cooperation among women, supplemented by a growing range of public institutions for child care (and in China for laundry and cooking as well), facilitates production for the public sector, even within the home.

Four of the ten cases illuminate female solidarity not on behalf of women's rights but rather to promote the class position of families; it is solidarity of which men approve and for which they willingly supply their wives with cars and servants or household appliances. One chapter in this group describes upper-middle-class women's associations in Madras whose members are dedicated to philanthropy for orphans and wayward girls but feel no bond of sisterhood with their lower-class clients. Another draws comparisons between middle-class women in a London suburb and their class counterparts in Freetown, Sierra Leone, finding both groups committed to raising ambitious and achieving children and to furthering this goal through active participation in school, church, and neighborhood women's groups. The fourth study in this cluster is less about women's solidarity than about how individual mothers provide financial aid to children once they are grown, helping them with hospital bills and mortgage payments as well as tuitions and weddings. The mothers in this study increasingly work to meet expenses related to maintaining the family's standard of living, and the author, Maila Stivens, has interesting things to say about women as a sector of the reserve labor force under capitalism.

A final pair of studies deals with situations in which there is no solidarity among women, one in Désirade, an island of the French Caribbean, the other in a Himalayan village of Himachal Pradesh, India. Apart from the absence of something, these two cases have little in common. Désirade, a neocolonial society of small property holders and welfare dependents, is socially fragmented and competitive for men as well as women, whereas in the Himalayan village isolation and mutual distrust are distinctly female problems, traceable to a rule of village exogamy that makes young women strangers to each other and the servile helpers of senior wives in extended-family households.

What are we to make of these widely varied patterns? Bujra's introductory essay argues that although biology embeds women in domestic labor, defined as a system of reproduction within the domestic unit, there is little to be gained in viewing their role in terms that are universal or that oppose it to the role of men. Hierarchical relations among women based on age or servitude, and the many ways in which domestic labor articulates with more directly productive work, contradict the polarity that some feminists suppose has long characterized class societies: a polarity between domestic and public spheres. According to Bujra, the alternative to understanding domestic labor as one pole of a nearly universal dichotomy is to ask how it, as the basis for social reproduction, interacts with different productive modes and with the different class conditions of these modes. "Domestic labour, in some form or other, is universal, but it takes on differing significance in contrasting modes of production" (p. 22).

Many readers will appreciate this book's refreshing challenge to interpretations of women's low or problematic status in sun-and-moon dichotomous terms and its insistence that status is not the static manifestation of a determinate role but may be altered by ideas, communication, and action. Yet I think the collection falls short of convincing us that contrasting modes of production, their respective class relations included, alone account for variation in the significance of domestic labor. Bujra herself refrains from developing this suggestive model beyond "a few basic points relevant to the cases discussed" (p. 22), and the cases themselves are presented to highlight solidarity patterns, not economic contrasts. Significantly, three of the four chapter groupings suggest that similar patterns of women's solidarity can characterize different productive systems: the Mathare beer-brewers and revolutionary China, the Maasai and Sudanese city-dwellers, Désirade and Himachal Pradesh.

Taken by itself, the concept of mode of production easily loses the historical dimension with which it was originally endowed and becomes, instead, another basis for constructing typologies. Productive modes then emerge as bounded and self-contained units of analysis. Real life, however, unfolds through such continuous interactions as trade, war, economic competition, dominance, subordination, and revolt, which go on between,

as well as within, coexisting social formations—those which are at similar levels of complexity and technological advance, for example feudalism and Asiatic modes, and those whose energy-mobilizing capacities are vastly different, as with capitalism and its peasant peripheries. Among other things, such interactions further the diffusion of powerful forces that affect domestic labor but that ignore all boundaries—for example rates of disease and infant mortality, innovations in birth control and infant nutrition—and economic shifts that affect the cost of living, the cost of raising children, and the demand for labor. I do not mean to imply that these variables are independent. They too take their shape from the dynamics of a world political economy. But they seem to cut across economic systems, and sometimes across class lines, raising the possibility that domestic labor mediates not only particular modes of production but transnational economic and demographic trends as well.

There is another reason why this book does not convince us that contrasting modes of production by themselves explain variations in domestic labor: its chapters give disproportionate emphasis to women under capitalism, and a socially limited range of women at that. Different reviewers might identify different contexts in which they would like to see the relations between production and reproduction more fully developed. For me, comparative analysis could benefit from additional case studies of women's activities in agrarian societies where extreme sexual segregation, with accompanying notions of seclusion and shame, is common. It is above all here that a dualistic framework of analysis is tempting, so much so that Bujra and other contributors, in their references to such societies, appear to adopt it despite their strictures to the contrary. Bujra, for example, writes that women are "withdrawn from productive labour and restricted to purely domestic activities . . . [becoming] an appendage of a structure of property relations in the productive sphere" (p. 32).

It is true that under precapitalist yet class-stratified conditions landed property and the means of agricultural production are often monopolized by men, and women are persecuted when they initiate religious, political, or economic movements. But it is also true that such women are, like the examples Ursula Sharma offers from her village in the Himalayas, self-confident and self-respecting—anything but powerless and feeble. Sharma concludes that the high status formerly accorded secluded females accounts for this contradiction, but I suspect this is only a partial explanation. In keeping with Bujra's assertion that in agrarian societies productive labor is the labor of men, it underestimates what used to go on in the domestic sphere. Both authors, and also Croll in her description of China before the revolution, imply that work done at home, if not oriented toward providing goods or services for an external arena as in petty commodity production, is merely an extension of biological and social reproduction.

Bujra, in discussing agrarian societies, identifies them as "intermediate economic forms" between "simple subsistence economies" and "developed capitalist society" (p. 32). This is, of course, an evolutionary rather than a mode-of-production classification, and its ahistoricism perhaps accounts for the tendency to overlook how extensively industrial commodities have undermined domestic *production* in all parts of the world, reducing the home front to cooking, laundry, child care, and sweeping up. A comparative account of economic systems, even if its focus is contemporary, should call our attention to the recent past when mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces, were the chief manufacturers and sole managers of family heirlooms and treasures, status goods and gifts, and functional and ornamental coverings for the house and its many residents. Such goods were frequently stores of negotiable wealth that enhanced the security and social networks of entire kinship groups and undoubtedly provided a foundation for women's leverage vis-à-vis men, if not always for their solidarity. One wants to learn more about how they were made, transmitted at marriage, used in hospitality, exchanged in crises, and so on, an important aspect of the articulation between production and reproduction.

If *Women United, Women Divided* does not quite fulfill the promise of its introductory chapter, that of incorporating empirical studies of women's solidarity and collective action into a theoretical framework based on contrasting modes of production, it is nevertheless a stimulating book. And if its range of case materials seems too narrow, this is only to say that much remains to be done. The virtue of collections of essays that grow out of seminars and small groups is rarely comprehensive exploration of a given problem or balanced presentation of cases. These are potential virtues of the "reader" for which articles are commissioned or assembled from published materials. The seminar or discussion-group product has another virtue: the capacity to disseminate fresh ideas and stimulate further talk, as well as to add more data to the information pool. This book is commendable on both these counts.

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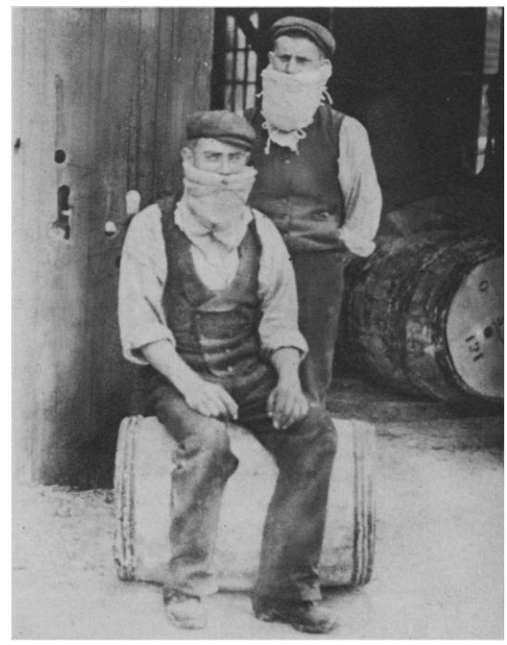
Social and Technical Remains

World Industrial Archaeology. KENNETH HUDSON. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979. viii, 248 pp., illus. Cloth, $37.50; paper, $9.95. New Studies in Archaeology.

Since the 1950's, "industrial archeologists" have been concerned with studying, recording, and where possible preserving the remains of industrial structures and machines of the last 200 years. Kenneth Hudson is an Englishman who has written numerous books in a campaign to arouse general interest in the



Bleach packers at a Tyneside chemical works around 1900. "At the peak of its prosperity [Tyneside] gave employment to at least 10,000 people." Alkali, sulfuric acid, and soda were produced. "The work ranked among the most unpleasant that industry had to offer. This was especially true of bleach packing and lime dressing. Men engaged on these tasks wrapped their faces in a roll of flannel several yards long. . . . No other form of protective clothing was available. Minor acid burns were frequent and men fell into the soda vats from time to time and were not uncommonly overcome by fumes." [W. A. Campbell; reproduced in *World Industrial Archaeology*]