Women in the Economy

Hidden Aspects of Women's Work. CHRISTINE BOSE, ROSLYN FELDBERG, and NATALIE SOKOLOFF, Eds., with the Women and Work Research Group. Praeger, New York, 1987. x, 380 pp. $39.95.

This volume is a welcome addition to a growing literature that has reshaped our perceptions of social reality over the last decade. Since the early '70s explorations of the meaning of women's paid and unpaid labor have forced us to review conventional conceptions of the economy. Orthodox approaches assumed that economic actors were either predominantly male or unaffected by the process of gender. As a result, they were unable to provide satisfactory explanations for phenomena such as labor market segregation and wage differentials between men and women.

Research on women's work has redressed, to some extent, that limitation by showing that neither labor market segregation nor wage differentials are logical outcomes of choices made by individuals in the free interaction of supply and demand. Instead, they are the result of political and economic arrangements offering different alternatives to men and women.

Another contribution of research on gender has been a clearer understanding of the relationship between domestic and paid work. In traditional views, the former is carried out as part of private life; it is linked to consumption but devoid of meaning as productive labor. The home is thus portrayed as the flip side of the economic coin.

Feminist scholars have challenged that assumption and persuasively argued that domestic work is integral to the economy. Perhaps more important, feminists have clarified the relationship between reproductive work and labor market insertion patterns. They have also demonstrated how the specificity of women's condition in the work force stems from the need to reconcile contradictory demands in the spheres of unpaid and paid employment.

Hidden Aspects of Women's Work takes stock of these insights and builds upon them by exploring, from a variety of angles, some of the less obvious dimensions of women's labor. Although the papers it contains are of uneven quality, they form a useful collection bridging the interests of sociologists, anthropologists, economists, historians, literary critics, and even political organizers. The book contains sections focusing on structural patterns of employment, links between the public and private spheres, and the relationship between consciousness and resistance.

Among the themes broached are the intersection of race, gender, and class, the impact of technology on clerical workers, the contradictions women face when trying to reconcile homes with jobs, the factors explaining the exclusion of women from trade unions, and the conditions surrounding the experience of women belonging to racial and ethnic minorities.

Beyond its substantive importance *Hidden Aspects of Women's Work* is also valuable for its interdisciplinary approach, itself the result of continued intellectual exchange among a group of scholars since 1979. Through their research and discussions, these researchers found that the nature of women's daily experience as workers and members of households is obscured in several ways: Isolated by nuclear families, ad hoc child care arrangements, and dispersed workplaces, most women interpret their experience as part of a unique individual history. The uniqueness, however, is illusory for the most part. The widespread degradation of women's work, including low wages and less than satisfactory working conditions, the frequent sexual harassment, and the contradiction between life on the job and life at home are all consequences of power differentials involving gender as well as class and race. The book succeeds in exposing this reality through historical and ethnographic research.

Hidden Aspects of Women's Work is at its best when providing detailed accounts of women's experience in different sectors of the economy and historical periods. One chapter offers a comparison of the conditions faced by Chinese-American, Chicano, and Afro-American women in the United States, and another provides a compelling portrayal of Japanese domestic workers based on interviews. These chapters exemplify the type of research needed to refine narrow approaches favored by some feminists in the past.

Both challenge the stereotype of immigrant women as passive followers of men. Women are vividly portrayed as active participants in social and economic life. Immigrants, the author states, have always worked hard to keep their families together in the face of outside forces that threatened their existence. Excluded from more conventional forms of employment, Chinese men clustered in Chinatowns and by the 1880s were mostly an urban population involved in the formation of small ethnic businesses. When Chinese women were finally admitted into the country in sizable numbers, they quickly joined the work force, laboring in family enterprises.

Women of Mexican descent have been concentrated in agricultural, manufacturing, and domestic employment since the late 19th century. Black women, from the start exempted from the myth of female frailty, worked under harsh conditions as slaves and as sharecroppers after emancipation. Finally, Japanese women immigrants, unaccustomed to working for pay in their own country, rapidly joined the labor force in the United States in order to maintain the integrity of their families and raise collective standards of living. For these four groups of women, work did not represent a path for the realization of personal aspirations but was part of a strategy for collective survival in hostile environments.

The experience of immigrant and working-class women challenges some feminist assumptions. Feminism has been criticized for an individualistic slant that emphasizes personal autonomy, rights, and fulfillment at the expense of group solidarity. Marxist-feminists in particular have depicted the family as a source of women's oppression. But for immigrants and racial minorities family life may represent refuge from or resistance to discrimination and the impersonal abuses of the capitalist marketplace.

The failure to recognize the significance of class and race as mechanisms for the domination of both men and women has had theoretical and practical costs. By presenting patriarchy as a primary instrument for the subordination of women, some authors have ended up with a caricature of social reality where the bad guys are always men and women are forever powerless but virtuous.

This book is not free of such narrow analytical frameworks. One chapter, for example, tackles the question of women's employment by indulging in broad generalizations that make it difficult to discern any type of change over time. Women are portrayed as "puppets of history," always manipulated and victimized by men and the social artifacts they have constructed. The chapter contains a wealth of data and useful information, but both are enmeshed in a web of complaints bereft of historical nuance.

Something similar may be said about another contribution that focuses on a distinc-

tion between private and public patriarchy. If anything, it is an illustration of the reasons why patriarchy has remained a problematic concept. According to the author, women were originally oppressed by men as members of families. This constituted a private form of patriarchy. Industrial capitalism gradually broke down the bonds of kinship, substituting for them impersonal forms of authority in the marketplace, the firm, and the corporation. This represented a triumph of public over private patriarchy. From this overly schematic approach, the author has no alternative but to conclude that public patriarchy, though still oppressive of women, represents an improvement over the past insofar as it provides freer access to jobs and earnings and therefore greater autonomy and independence for women.

Undoubtedly, some women have benefited from changes brought about by industrial capitalism as a result of their membership in privileged classes. Others have found their conditions of life debased as a result of the same process. The point is that neither of these transformations can be fully explained by invoking patriarchy in isolation from other factors. To say that class and ethnicity also matter is not enough unless we are willing to examine the articulation between patterns of domination and labor appropriation involving men as well as women.

One way to do this is by investigating the part played by gender in the maintenance of exploitative systems of production. Highly polarized definitions of womanhood and manhood have been key factors in the maintenance of class-divided societies. Expectations and behaviors surrounding definitions of manhood have been instrumental in the exploitation of male labor. "Providers" and "heads of households" may obtain net benefits from their status, but they are also compelled to fulfill onerous responsibilities that subordinate them to employers.

In a complementary vein, the ideal of transforming all women into home-bound mothers and wives serves to obscure the manner in which reproductive labor subsidizes processes of capitalist accumulation by absorbing costs that investors are unwilling to assume. By taking such factors into consideration, we are in a better position to understand the mechanisms that link class with gender.

Then there is the question of resistance and outright confrontation. Neither women nor men have invariably accepted institutional definitions passively. Three chapters in *Hidden Aspects of Women's Work* explore this subject. One is an engaging description of work and labor organizing in Troy, New York, in the late 19th century. This excellent piece discusses the relationship between family composition and women's participation in workers' organizations. This issue has important implications for understanding working women in general. The author correctly states that avoiding stark contrasts between women and men and looking at conditions under which some women are able to organize successfully reveals subtle differences between male and female workers and among women workers in the same and different industries, occupations, and communities.

A final word of praise should be said about two other chapters, one dealing with the elaboration of minimum wage legislation for women between 1910 and 1925 and one relating the peculiar undercount of women's employment in 1900 and 1980. The first piece is exemplary for its breadth and detail. The second confirms a long-held suspicion: The apparent jump in women's employment during the latter half of the 20th century may be an artifact of census methodologies that tended to ignore women as "real" workers in the past. That most people still believe that women's involvement in productive labor is a recent phenomenon is a testimony to the power of ideology over facts.

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Hidden Aspects of Women's Work* is that it adds new information to the vital and ongoing debate about the meaning of women's labor. This is a theme that should be of interest to social scientists of various theoretical persuasions.

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Champions of Relativity

Einstein in Spain. Relativity and the Recovery of Science. THOMAS F. GLICK. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1988. xiv, 391 pp., illus. $42.

In the words of its author, this book is "a contribution to the history of civil discourse in matters of science in an ideologically polarized society" (p. xi). Glick, who has previously examined the reception of Darwinism and psychoanalysis in Spain, argues that the enthusiastic response to relativity—crystallized by the visit of Albert Einstein to Spain in 1923—was the result of a new consensus among an otherwise ideologically divided elite on the need for more scientific research, a consensus that disintegrated only in the tense political atmosphere of the

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