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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification. An introduction to Current Debates* (2nd edition), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998,**

Class remains a salient topic for sociology, especially but not only in the face of continued assertions that we are witnessing the end of class. Whether or not class interests are articulated as such, the fact remains that the dominant economic classes retain significant power to realise their own interests. This, and the continuing production of 'volumes' of work on and about class, justify Crompton's decision to produce a second edition of this comprehensive survey of the field. But this book is far more than a survey or overview. It is a refreshing assertion that, if class analysts and theorists would talk to and listen to each other, then an exciting and dynamic understanding of class processes and structures could be achieved.

The first edition of this same book provided a balanced and wide-ranging review of empirical and theoretical research on class. It aimed, specifically, to delineate the different schools of thought, to make each aware of the other in order that stagnant debates might move forward in an informed manner. Clearly the book did not achieve this one end, so Crompton is trying again to get class analysts to talk 'to' rather than 'past' each other. If she still does not achieve that goal she has nevertheless produced another valuable, up-to-date book, which should be compulsory reading for anyone remotely interested in class and stratification. It is of special interest for anyone who wants to read a balanced and considered summary of a mass of controversial and often contradictory literature.

The first three chapters are similar to the first edition, tracing the history of the concept of class and its various applications within sociology, from the classical theorists to the now classic class measures developed by Wright and Goldthorpe. These chapters remain invaluable review chapters which locate work on classes firmly within theoretical frameworks addressing social stratification and differentiation. Chapter Four discusses what Crompton calls the 'employment aggregate' approach to social class analysis and provides the opportunity for her to change position since the first edition. Rather than determining which might be the best measure of class, she insists, class analysts need to accept the limitations of the project of operationalising theoretical concepts. She examines the impact of changes in the nature of work, such as the expansion of women's work, flexible labour and technological advances, on the employment aggregate approach and concludes that there are 'insoluble difficulties in the identification of "class" independently of the other factors that structure employment relations'. However, this does not mean that the approach should be abandoned. Rather, (1) its limitations should be acknowledged, (2) researchers should use the measure that most suits their purpose, and (3) those interested in class and stratification should recognise that not all class 'problems' can be explored using the employment aggregate approach.

In Chapter Five recent theoretical developments (including postmodernist and post-structuralist 'end of class' debates) are visited and criticised. Crompton argues that many of the 'death of class' theses arise from sociologists talking about class in different ways. As a result she is able to argue that both sides are right and both sides are wrong. The employment aggregate approach is theoretically thin and makes no attempt to examine social processes of class formation, but makes a useful contribution to empirical analysis of social structures. The 'end of class' debates focus on societal shifts which are, indeed, having an impact on individual

and group identities but the authors have no right to use those arguments to conclude that employment classifications are not useful social indicators.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 expand on and unpack earlier themes. Chapter 6 locates debates on lifestyle and consumption firmly within debates on stratification; cleverly uniting the diverse approaches to class and class analysis under the theme's umbrella. Faithful to Crompton's approach that class amounts to much more than employment aggregates, the next chapter examines the relevance of other forms of differentiation and access to power and status. Struggles for citizenship rights by women, ethnic minorities and the socially excluded are viewed in terms of class struggle; that is struggle which confronts and challenges the wishes of the ruling, dominant class. Without doing it overtly, this chapter does most to define the limitations of the employment aggregate approach to class analysis and concedes a little to those who are arguing that class is losing some of its salience.

Finally, Crompton argues that class is one, still important, facet of stratification in modern societies. Those concerned to locate, understand and break down structured inequalities should recognise that it takes many different forms. More importantly, they should be talking to each other in an acknowledgement that they are using class to mean different things, and that they are each saying things that might be of interest to the other. I find this all incredibly refreshing. Perhaps Britain *is* meritocratic, though it remains class-bound. Perhaps class consciousness is diminishing, but perhaps *not* for the capitalist class. Perhaps there is both continuity and change in the class structure of contemporary capitalist societies.

KAREN O'REILLY

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**Benjamin H. Gottlieb, E. Kevin Kelloway and Elizabeth Barham, *Flexible Work Arrangements: Managing the Work-Family Boundary*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1998, paper, £18.99, viii+198 pp.**

'Flexibility' is perhaps one of the most ambiguous terms currently used in the discourse about working practices. At the most general level it may simply refer to the extent to which hiring and firing practices and wage levels respond to overall changes in the economy. At the organisational level it is often taken to mean flexibility for the individual employer – for instance an ability to expand or contract the size of the workforce in response to changing hourly, weekly or seasonal demands, or the ability to shift multi-skilled workers from task to task depending on the specific needs of the job in hand. In other situations it refers to flexibility for the worker: for instance the ability to vary working hours to fit in with the timetables imposed externally by the requirements of caring, or to change the location of work in order to adapt to the constraints on energy or mobility resulting from a disability.

To make matters even more complicated, flexible working patterns may take very different forms depending on the cultural context, the regulatory climate, the skill-levels involved, the sectoral characteristics and a number of other variables. These may be sharply contrasting in their social impacts. Any attempt to generalise about flexible working practices is thus fraught with difficulties. While some forms may improve productivity and efficiency, for instance, others may impede them. Whilst some may allow working parents to respond in a more relaxed way to the needs of their children, and help to develop the confidence that comes from dependability, others might introduce new levels of stress and unpredictability into an already precarious relationship.

This thorough study from Canada sheds useful light on this complexity. From the outset it insists on differentiating not only between different kinds of flexible working arrangements but also between the different kinds of personal and family situation which might give rise to the need for such arrangements. The authors look separately at the pros and cons of flexitime, compressed-hours working, telecommuting or teleworking, 'hotelling' (more commonly known in the UK as 'hot-desking'), part-time working and job-sharing, as well as a variety of different forms of leave arrangement and childcare support. They also distinguish between a variety of different forms of care-giving, both to children and elders. Careful not to elide the interests of employers and those of workers, they look at the ways in which work interrupts family life as well as the ways in which family demands disrupt work and assess the costs and benefits to both parties separately.

Drawing on the results of three large surveys, they conclude that there is no simple 'right' form of flexible working arrangement. Indeed no form of flexible working pattern appears to make a significant difference either to productivity or to stress levels by objective measures. However the factor which appears to contribute most strongly to the success of any working arrangement (judged both by managers' appraisals as well as by the workers themselves) is the degree of choice which the worker concerned has exercised in designing and selecting it. The authors conclude that 'it appears that the benefits of flexible work arrangements arise from and are contingent upon the subjective sense of enhanced control that employees gain from choosing the arrangement that is right for them' (p 123).

This book is aimed firmly at managers and one of its strengths is its presentation of a clear methodology for developing a flexible working strategy in any given workplace, which includes advice on defining and making the case for flexible working arrangements, surveying the needs and attitudes of staff and managers, developing procedures for planning and implementation, including management training, and finally evaluating the results. This is a model of its kind and could usefully be read by research students as well as by the human resource managers and management consultants who are most likely to find themselves following in the authors' footsteps.

From the point of view of an academic readership, however, this strength is also a weakness. The pragmatic focus on finding workable solutions prevents the authors from exploring some of the deeper issues which they touch on, tantalisingly, in their introduction. They mention, for instance, the 'cascade of phone calls that "light up the switchboard" every afternoon when latchkey children return home from school' (8) without exploring the implications of this childhood solitude on family life. We must turn to the more qualitative research of scholars like Arlie Russell Hochschild (author of *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home becomes Work*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997 and *The Second Shift*, New York: Avon, 1989) to gain a deeper insight into the profound shifts which are taking place in the structure of both home-life and work-life in the wake of women's large-scale entry into the North American workforce.

It is perhaps only in the light of such studies, which combine the techniques of psychology and ethnography with those of conventional sociology, that we can appreciate the extent to which the traditional boundaries between 'home' and 'work' are breaking down, and understand the ways in which the ambiguity inherent in the word 'flexibility' reflects deeper tensions and conflicts both in the private depths of the human psyche and in the public culture which we, and our children, now inhabit.

**Lydia Martens, *Exclusion and Inclusion, the gender composition of British and Dutch workforces*: Avebury, 1997, £39.50, xi + 243 pp.**

This is an ambitious book that makes aggregate comparisons of women's labour force activity in Britain and Holland and also develops substantial historical accounts both of marriage bars in the two societies and of women's employment in a British bank and a Dutch bank from the 1940s onwards. These separate but related facets of enquiry are knitted together by an explanation which puts marriage bars to the fore and considers women's exclusion/inclusion in terms of the interaction of the ideology of women's domesticity and of the strength of demand for (female) labour. Different interactions characterise the two societies.

In Holland traditional gender ideology of male wage earning/female domesticity was institutionalised by state action in relation to marriage bars. By contrast, in Britain, state influence in the establishment of occupational marriage bars for women was virtually absent and was only marginally present in their abolition – in occupations over which the state had some control e.g. school teaching and the civil service. In Holland marriage bars persisted longer and married women's entry into the labour force lagged behind the levels experienced in post-war Britain by a gap of about twenty years. The author attributes the greater state involvement in marriage bars in Holland to the role of the state in the religious division of Dutch society. The twentieth-century state explicitly pivoted on the split between the famous 'pillars' of Dutch Society: Catholics, Protestants and Socialists (the latter, one assumes, publicly holding *no* religious belief. The competitive confessionalism coincided in an explicit moralisation of layers and branches of the Dutch State around, amongst other things, traditional gender ideology. The strength of religious ideology and organisation counteracted class division in Dutch society and firmly entrenched domestic ideology and occupational marriage bars amongst all classes. In Britain less explicit politicisation of religious divisions made gender ideology/marriage bars less institutionally entrenched, more subject to differences of interest between women and more subject to economic pressures of post-war labour markets.

From the 1970s onwards, rates of female employment and married women's participation in employment in the two societies have become more similar with a general rise in part-time working (in both societies) and a lack of publicly funded child care facilities. Differences of emphasis between the two societies involve in Holland relatively more part-time work, of a somewhat higher quality, and recent greater increase in public resourcing of child care. These differences are exemplified in the case studies of the two banks. On a national level the differences of emphasis are associated with 'the more distinct shift in British politics to neo-conservatism' (165) whilst in Holland the 'pillarisation' of state and society contrives to have an effect through coalition politics and a corporatist state which has blunted the impact of neo-conservatism.

The different facets of investigation in this study are all the product of one author. She writes from a bi-societal gaze, having been brought up in Holland, then subsequently studying and working in Britain over the years to produce first a Ph.D and then a book out of this material. The single authorship produces a high degree of focused comparison between the two societies. It goes beyond the parallel but separate case studies that often make, and mar, comparative investigations. The author's prose tends to convey the weight of the responsibility she carried: it is marked by intense effort to convey every aspect of her thought. She seems less ready than native-speaking writers to assume that the space in between words will be understood.

In the final analysis, however, the author carries the ambitious empirical range

of her study well. The three kinds of comparisons – on aggregate employment, on marriage bars and on employment in banking – are clearly marshalled, with much fascinating detail. This is particularly the case with the section on marriage bars, which grounds previous more general reference by Sylvia Walby to their role in the structuring of women's employment. It leaves the reader with a sense of the depth of marriage bars as an issue and of questions to be further explored: were marriage bars circumvented? who colluded? who informed? what were the financial benefits to women of retirement on marriage? The Civil Service, for instance, operated a system of 'marriage gratuities'.

The theoretical integration of the study is less actively and less satisfactorily discharged, possibly because of the weight of the empirical investigation. This study was a long time in the making and it does not appear to have kept up with theoretical developments very actively. This is the case in relation to theorisation of women's employment. There is also something rather staid about institutional comparisons of the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society and the class-stratified nature of Britain. This focus pays little attention to the relevant issue of the construction of citizenship and national identity as a framework for women's emancipation and employment. Nor should one be too readily satisfied with a characterisation of the British state that remarks on the absence of the pillarisation found in Holland, when Britain, and one assumes the statistics relating to women's employment in Britain, incorporates Northern Ireland.

PATRICIA WALTERS

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**Nancy A. Naples (ed.) *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class and Gender*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, paper £14.99, xi+ 411 pp.**

The 1990s has witnessed a backlash against feminism and the emergence of what has been coined 'postfeminism'. As the term suggests, postfeminism announces the end of the era of radical struggles for women's rights and the ushering in of a new phase in which younger women are confidently enjoying the gains won by their foremothers. Postfeminism has largely been a conservative tool to undermine progressive feminist activists and scholars. Deployed strategically, it divides women into outdated, angry radicals, and '90s women' who are assertive without being aggressive, career-oriented yet feminine, determined but not man-hating. Collective struggles for women's rights are therefore depicted as marginal and unnecessary.

If the woman's movement has been vulnerable to these hostile representations, it is because internal contradictions were emerging independently of external pressures. In Britain from the late 1970s, African, Asian and Caribbean women launched a critique of feminism. Highlighting racism within the women's movement and Eurocentrism within feminist analyses, black women argued that the women's movement was premised on white women's experiences and was thus irrelevant to black working-class women's lives. Where white women demanded the right to abortion on demand, black women were fighting forced sterilisations and use of unsafe birth control devices, where white women saw the family as a site of oppression and violence, black women pointed out that they were battling to reunite their families against racist immigration controls, and where white women fought to have access to the public sphere of work, black women pointed to long histories of exploitative work outside the home. Thus, feminist theory and praxis was already under attack from within for failing to represent diverse

women's concerns. This failure to incorporate diverse race and class interests, left large numbers of working-class and black women outside the ranks of the women's movement. The energy of their activism in the labour movement, anti-racist struggles and other struggles for social justice was therefore lost to the women's movement of the 1970s and 80s.

In the 1990s, there has been an energetic attempt to revitalize feminism through a radical process of reconstruction. Conceptualising feminism(s) as plural, these new analyses expand understandings of 'women's concerns' beyond a narrow interest in gender-based discrimination and begin to look at how race, class, gender and sexuality intersect to restrict women's lives in diverse ways. While immense achievements have been made in shifting the theoretical basis for understanding women's oppression, scholars have been slower to provide empirical examples. 'Community Activism and Feminist Politics', edited by Nancy Naples, brings together scholars on the cutting edge of thinking about 'race', class, gender and resistance, to illustrate these new theoretical approaches through empirical studies of grassroots organising in the United States.

Naples and her contributors challenge us to expand our definition of 'women's issues'. While some of the articles examine 'women's organisations', many focus on movements which include both men and women such as housing rights, environmental and school based struggles. In making this shift, the contributors highlight what many working-class and black women activists have long claimed, that they must draw on diverse allegiances in fighting exploitation. Building alliances with men may require very different strategies from those advocated by many white feminist organisers. As, Sharon Bays (chapter 13) illustrates in her study of Hmong women, tackling anti-immigrant sentiment required forms of leadership which minimised conflict with male members of the community. While some feminist scholars have seen these types of affiliations as evidence of an underdeveloped feminist consciousness, Bays' study reveals that this tactic emerged out of a sophisticated political analysis of gendered and racialised dynamics.

An ongoing concern of feminist research has been how to integrate political commitment with academic rigour. By writing themselves into their research, the authors in this collection offer new insights into the interplay of research and activism. Hondagneu-Sotelo's participant observation of Mexican immigrant domestic workers (chapter 8) arose out of her community activism and in turn led to the production of 'fotonovelas' – didactic comic strips – which gave practical advice about pay and subcontracting. Similarly Lisa Sun-Hee Park's position as an 'organic-activist-researcher' (chapter 7) enabled her to ground her research into a Korean women's helpline in intimate and nuanced understandings of culture, history and community politics. These action-research projects offer immensely useful lessons for re-thinking the relationship between the campus and black communities in Britain.

For scholars researching their communities of origin, a shared ethnic origin may provide a location from which to enter into anti-hierarchical relations with their subjects. Researching communities of colour provides different dilemmas for white researchers. Susan Parkison Stern explores the complex effects of white racialised class privilege in her conversation-based research project into a predominantly African-American school (chapter 4). Racialised expectations shaped not only the unequal experiences of white and black schoolchildren, but also led to differences between her and the other parents in their sense of entitlement and willingness to challenge school authorities. Explorations such as this, as Nancy Naples reminds us (chapter 14), enable us to interrogate notions of standpoint and positionality which inform much recent feminist theory. By so effectively combining methodological concerns with empirical questions about the scope and

nature of women's activism, the contributors open up new and fruitful avenues of action, research and pedagogy.

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**Jennie Popay, Jeff Hearn and Jeanette Edwards (eds), *Men, Gender Divisions and Welfare*, London: Routledge, 1998, paper, £15.99, xiv+347 pp.**

In response to late twentieth-century moral panics about lone mothers, falling rates of marriage, child sexual abuse, crime, long-term unemployment and the demise of the male breadwinner, much has been written in the columns of broadsheets and tabloids alike about 'the trouble with men'. Academic articles and texts have also taken up this issue with explorations of the impact of demographic, cultural and economic shifts on men's identity, their lived experiences and the nature of masculinity. The contributors to *Men, Gender Division and Welfare* are concerned equally with 'the trouble with men', albeit through a particular focus upon formal and informal welfare services and the complexities and contradictions in men's relations with these services. Most importantly, however, the contributors have deployed this focus as a means by which to open up and develop many of the broader debates around masculinity, gender relations and gender relationships.

The strength of the book lies in its clearly structured theoretical and empirical framework which consistently positions gender at the core of multi-layered analyses of the issues and debates around men and masculinity. Through three distinct sections, 'Theory, discourse and policy', 'Women and men on men and welfare', and 'Service providers, men and welfare', the contributors illustrate not only the gendered processes at play in and around welfare and social policy, but also the resultant implications for users and providers of welfare services.

As introduction to the concerns of the empirical studies contained within the book, the first section, 'Theory, discourse and policy' provides a comprehensive theoretical and historical overview of the relationship between men and welfare, and then considers the current discourses which cluster around 'troubled' masculinities today. To highlight the nature of these discourses, Jeff Hearn and Fiona Williams focus respectively upon young men and fatherhood to demonstrate the ways in which the problems of young men and 'absent/distant' fathers have been constructed and represented through the various competing narratives which have developed over the past ten years.

The remaining two sections of *Men, Gender Divisions and Welfare* are based on seven research projects which were funded, from 1991 to 1995, by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and which investigated a diverse number of welfare problems and their effects upon individuals and communities. These projects were undertaken by researchers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and the research methods undertaken were equally varied. As a result, the chapters in these two sections are mixed both in their content and the form and extent of their analyses. Most chapters, however, usefully quote from semi-structured or indepth interviews to exemplify attitudes towards, and experiences of, men and welfare services and to illustrate the ambivalence and contradictions inherent within many of those attitudes and experiences.

The section, 'Women and men on men and welfare', is based upon research which investigated how women and men understand and articulate men's relationship to welfare. Chapters within this section are divided into *women's*

discussions of the men in their lives; *men's* experiences of the welfare system; and the responses by *women* and *men* who live together about the issues surrounding men and welfare. Substantively they cover such areas as men's violence, men as carers, the meaning and experience of parenting and the experiences of employed wives with unemployed husbands in mining communities. Contributors importantly demonstrate the different ways in which men can 'be simultaneously present and absent from welfare' (3) not only because of the diversity of their understanding and experiences of family life and employment, but also because of the ways in which the traditional gender division of labour has been regularly left unquestioned by welfare organisations and policy makers. In their discussion of male carers in marriage, for example, Gillian Parker and Julie Seymour point out that 'Men, as carers, seem paradoxically to be both invisible and "ultra-visible" to welfare practitioners. They may be invisible when gendered assumptions by welfare workers exclude them as potential sources of informal care . . . [while] those men who *are* identified as carers may be "ultra-visible" due to the gendered nature of most caring tasks.' (191)

This theme of the presence and absence of men within welfare discourses and services is further extended in the third and final section, 'Service providers, men and welfare.' Here, in her chapter about community health and welfare provision for families, Jeannette Edwards argues that men are '*made absent*' (260) by the language and practice of welfare workers which excludes men from discussion about their children and which presumes that women are the 'natural' carers within families. The gendered nature of the tensions between users and providers of welfare are similarly developed in the two concluding chapters which investigate the network of relations between unemployed men, working wives and local welfare service practitioners and health professionals, and the potential problems around increasing men's participation in professional childcare.

*Men, Gender Divisions and Welfare* thus covers a wide range of issues within a clearly articulated analytical framework. Its own silences about the nature of lesbians' and gay men's relation with welfare are acknowledged in the Introduction although, despite the focus which the research projects have upon heterosexual relationships, some discussion of homosexuality might have been usefully incorporated into the theoretical overview of the debates around men and masculinities. Nevertheless, the book brings together a thought-provoking collection of empirical studies which illustrate the central importance of gender to understanding the use and delivery of health and social services. It will, therefore, be an invaluable text for students and practitioners alike.

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**Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War*, London: UCL Press, 1998, £40.00, xii + 297 pp.**

For many years the work of the Women's Co-operative Guild has been best known to feminist historians through the personal testimonies of its members, published as *Maternity* (1915) and *Life As We Have Known It* (1931), and republished by Virago in the late 1970s. Through these collections women spoke of their lives as wives and mothers and also as workers and political activists, providing rare first-hand accounts of the experiences of working class women.

Gillian Scott's welcome contribution to the history and politics of the Guild provides an account of the political background to its development from its

inception in 1883 to its decline during the 1940s. Based on extensive research, her book focuses in particular on the Guild's relationship with the Labour and Co-operative Parties and provides a detailed and often depressing account of the ways in which the energies of the early autonomous Guild branches were stifled by increasing centralisation of power and subjection to Party policies in the inter-war years.

The early years of the Guild were characterised by concern over domestic issues affecting working class wives (overwhelmingly, its membership was not engaged in paid work) and support for radical and even revolutionary public causes. In the domestic sphere it revived the arguments of an earlier co-operator, William Thompson, by arguing for technological solutions to housework and collective approaches to childcare. It also supported the Russian revolution, opposed wartime profiteering and demanded British withdrawal from Ireland.

Gillian Scott attributes much of the Guild's early political character to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, its General Secretary from 1889 to 1921, who forged contacts with, amongst others, James Larkin, Sylvia Pankhurst and Alexandra Kollontai. Under her leadership, the Guild combined campaigns over public sphere issues such as suffrage, women's unionisation, protective legislation and equal rights with a determination to bring to public attention the abuse and oppression of women in marriage – forced childbearing, sexual and physical assault and financial dependency. It was by lifting the curtain on “the hidden suffering” of married life’ (135) that the Guild became known as a ‘trade union for married women’ (22) and it was this which attracted hostility from men within the labour and co-operative movement. When the Guild gave evidence in favour of divorce law reform to the Royal Commission on Divorce in 1910 it was attacked by Roman Catholic organisations and eventually threatened with withdrawal of its grant by the Co-operative Union. Undaunted, the Guild retained its policy and did without the grant.

Gillian Scott argues that the character of the Guild began to change in the years following the first world war when the enfranchisement of women and the electoral success of the Labour Party undermined its ability to maintain a tradition of Party political neutrality. Its support was threatened as politically conscious working class women joined the Labour Party Women's Sections whose membership rapidly overtook that of the Guild. In 1921 Margaret Llewelyn Davies retired and Eleanor Barton, General Secretary from 1925, set about subordinating the Guild to the policies of the Labour and Co-operative Parties, centralising power and restricting branch autonomy. Communist Party members were excluded from holding office.

Policy disagreements arose within the Guild, as they did between ‘new’ and ‘old’ feminists in other feminist organisations in the inter-war period. However Gillian Scott argues that the conflicts within the Guild had a special character, representing dissension between a still radical membership and a leadership in thrall to the policies of the Labour Party. She traces a history of radical policy-making by members at Congress, constantly frustrated by a more conservative leadership which refused to enact its decisions. While the 1923 Guild Congress overwhelmingly supported the provision of birth control, the leadership, bowing to a Labour government which the following year issued a circular forbidding any mention of birth control in maternity clinics, refused to initiate a national campaign on the issue. Backing away from its earlier critiques of marital oppression, the Guild, like the Labour Party, gave its approval to measures to support ‘the family’ (rather than women) and to equal rights in the public sphere. The Guild's early support for family endowment paid to the mother was shelved after TUC and Labour Party objections to its potential for undermining the male ‘family

wage'. After 1923, Scott argues, the leadership of the Guild took no initiatives on women's issues without the approval of the Labour Party. The 1930s saw rule changes which made support of Labour and Co-operative Party policies a condition of membership.

Ironically it was, according to Scott, Barton's subsequent insistence on a policy at variance from that of the Labour Party which all but fatally weakened the Women's Co-operative Guild. Its support for pacifism, adopted after the first world war, came under increasing criticism in the 1930s with German re-armament, the Spanish Civil War and the growth of anti-fascism on the British left. Barton's resistance to a proposed change in policy at conferences in the late 1930s and her refusal to allow the Guild to become involved in civil defence measures led to a 40% drop in membership as members left to join other women's organisations which supported war work. Prominent amongst these was the Townswomen's Guild, an earlier offshoot of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, long feared as a rival to the Women's Co-operative Guild. By the end of the war, the Guild had lost many of its most active and radical members.

This book makes an important contribution to the history of feminist and labour movement politics and is particularly useful on the relationship between feminism and labour in the inter-war period. It is accessibly written and organised. Tables of branch and individual membership are included; each chapter is extensively referenced and a comprehensive index and bibliography are provided. It is to be hoped that it will soon be available in a cheaper paperback edition.

HELEN GURDEN

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**Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1998, £12.99 (paperback) ix+234 pp.**

Films in the 1990s can no longer portray working women as unusual exceptions, or as decorative additions to the office – or the pin-money earners that 50s and 60s cinema could get away with. So a scholarly analysis of contemporary cinema's representation of women and work and its relationship with the unmitigatingly sexual representation of women it continues to produce would have been interesting enough. This is what – prompted by the neat double-entendre of the title – I was anticipating in Yvonne Tasker's timely and valuable new book, *Working Girls*. After all, despite the advances of feminism, serious film actresses are even now having to sell themselves on their appearance, and on their bodies, to land good roles that often, still, demean the work women do by an insistence on sexualising them. There was, I thought, ample material here for a solid critical investigation.

But Tasker's book offers a much more far-reaching study of contemporary mainstream cinema (for which read Hollywood, almost entirely), the full scope of which even the subtitle – Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema – doesn't suggest. On a daunting scale, in just a couple of hundred pages, she conducts a sophisticated analysis of numerous filmic responses to women's new roles and behaviour, and to shifts in cultural consciousness and markets, in which the conventional category 'work' is thoroughly interwoven with many other practices and conditions. She approaches the whole critical canvas of identity, representation, authorship, narrative and industry with an eclecticism and inclusiveness that serves to demonstrate the impossibility of generalisations and neatly-summed up accounts of cultural movements (which deep-down, I confess, I was looking for).

As if to serve as a corrective to readers who seek over-simple correlations

between representation and ideology, her first chapter starts with the phenomenon of cross-dressing. This allows her ever-present referents – class, ‘race’ and sexuality – to establish a discursive centrality. The proliferation of fantasies of personal transformation in popular cinema today, and, importantly, the way they may be differently read by audiences of different social and sexual orientations, provides a necessary postmodern perspective on the following chapters. These chapters focus on recent reworkings of classical genres (the western, the detective thriller) and conventional figures (the femme fatale, figures of comedy), and on the broad range of films that concentrate in very different ways on relationships between women. Throughout Tasker shows how culturally constructed and how changeable the concept of femininity is, and how differently valued it is according to class, ethnicity and sexual orientation – and the working status of women.

Tasker’s approach demonstrates the richness and value of the feminist contribution to cultural criticism. It shows how far it has developed from a ‘women and’ position to a postmodern inclusive critical discourse which tackles issues of difference and power and exploitation, and recognises the uncharted appropriations and readings. She attempts, mostly successfully, to decentre straightness and whiteness; and in challenging the binary conceptions of identity (male/ female; straight/ gay; black/ white) on which popular cinema has always thrived, she exposes how far they still underlie much critical thinking.

While it might be inferred that a book of this intensity and scope, bursting with illustration, is of most use (and great use) to Film Studies Students, its value is far wider, making clear that any social understanding of cinema in the 1980s and 1990s must recognise not only the huge variety of articulations of gender and sexuality, and of roles and readings available for study, but also cinema’s intersection with other areas of popular culture and with its own traditions and historical development. Reminding us that film will reflect and articulate some of the same cultural shifts that are found in other areas of popular culture, Tasker demonstrates (in perhaps the most original part of this book) how music videos and comedy shows provide constant cross-reference and cross-pollination of ideas, meanings and personnel.

It is here, perhaps, in these mainly televisual genres that the impact of women’s authority and authorship has been greatest, with significant effects on recent film output and style, and, as her last chapter spells out, on the structure of the industry itself. While Hollywood is still overwhelmingly in the grip of male money and of masculine ideology and fantasy – and men’s ideas about acceptable feminisms – a recent response of women in the position to do so has been to form their own film companies, and for more women actors to turn director, changes which both cause and respond to shifts in working practices.

A landscape this extensive and rich obviously provides problems of illustration, since few of us will be familiar with all the films Tasker refers to. She tells us just enough about each film to enable us to follow the gist, but the narrative detail (which is necessary) sometimes makes it too easy to lose sight of the larger argument being illustrated, though the clear sub-divisions of the chapters serve to re-route any distraction. It is not a book merely to dip into – it richly repays more sustained reading, offering new angles for looking at the treatment of women on the screen today. Tasker alerts us to cultural shifts taking place, and the shaping influence of women directors, performers and producers. But the pace of change still seems tediously slow: beautiful bodies and glossy lips still seem prerequisites for a woman to make it.