

# Book Reviews

**Girls, Wives, Factory Lives.** Anna Pollert. *London: Macmillan, 1981, Pp. 251.*

This study of women's factory work in England makes for an interesting and exciting book. In my view, it is the best work on this subject to have appeared so far. Part of its strength is its completeness - every aspect of the subject is investigated - but more importantly, the insightfulness of the analysis is really outstanding.

Pollert conducted her research in a small Imperial Tobacco plant in Bristol. There were 220 employees in the plant, 140 of them women. Pollert did all of her interviewing on the plant floor although she was not actually employed by the company. The factory, as it turned out, closed down a couple of years after Pollert finished her shop-floor research. Since she had not yet published her findings, she was able to include this follow-up aspect in her study, which adds some interesting additional information.

In singling out completeness as one of the outstanding aspects of the study, I am referring to the fact that Pollert has investigated the background of every possible aspect of the situation. She reviews the labour struggles of the period in the United Kingdom and the history of labour struggles in Bristol where the plant is located; she looks in detail at the past and present operations of the Imperial Tobacco Company; she devotes a chapter each to the question of management strategies and the introduction of a new pay scheme based on measured day work - to replace a piecework system - and she provides an interesting review and critique of the literature in the area. Pollert leaves few stones unturned, few possible questions unanswered.

The other great strength is the analysis, especially her analysis of why women seem to give a contradictory response to their situation - one of both acceptance and rejection. In the case of the women she studied, they recognised both their exploitation and oppression and they shared certain aspects of both capitalist ("progress is inevitable") and patriarchal ("men deserve jobs before women") ideology. Although this phenomenon had been observed by others, this contradiction has never been satisfactorily explained, as Pollert points out in her review of the literature. Pollert explains the contradiction in terms of the women's position in the factory as double victims - victims of both oppression and exploitation. She makes an analogy with Iranian women. Iranian women demonstrated against having to wear the veil to work, "of being oppressed in order to be exploited." Pollert suggests that the situation is not different in any basic way for any woman worker. The factory workers she was studying were oppressed by their bosses, their male co-workers and their unions as well as exploited by capital. And this is what explains the women's contradictory responses to their situation. As double victims of both exploitation and oppression, it is very difficult for them to do anything about it. They may recognize both their oppression and exploitation, but they may end up accepting it, at least on the surface.

Pollert goes beyond just offering this explanation. She also illustrates how acceptance/rejection comes about in practice. Two situations are described; the first, which had taken place when a group of women had sought changes in the new pay scheme, and the second, which took place while she was there, in which a group of younger women got involved in a one-day strike.

The women preferred piecework to the new pay scheme based on measured day work. They felt that under piecework they could regulate their own pace and the fastest could earn a great

deal extra. On measured day work, there were real limits to what they could earn. As workers, they lost control of the situation. When the new pay scheme was being introduced, the women asked for an extra grade above the top grade proposed. They felt that this would cut down on their unpaid labour and increase incentives. Getting no support from their shop steward, they went over his head to union headquarters. They also got a negative response from the union executive. In fact, he called them "greyhounds" who needed to be "curbed." The whole experience turned into one of demoralization. In the words of one of the disillusioned women, "you can't win anything, because the union won't back you up." The women ultimately turned to self-blame. Their situation was as it was because they had never put forward a female shop steward. Also involved was the fact that "we won't stick together." As they saw it, no one wanted to stick her neck out because they were afraid the others wouldn't support them. In Pollert's words:

Instead of balancing self-criticism with criticism of their union organization, the women 'personalised' a complex situation, and sought refuge in a cynical ready-made ideology of individualism.

Three years later, while Pollert was there, there was a dispute over a national wage claim. The women, in general, went along with the union figuring that they had nothing to lose. One particular group of young women tried to become actively involved in the situation. In doing so they attended their "first ever" union meeting. Pollert, who also attended the meeting, describes it as at first being mis-handled by the factory union leaders, making the members, and particularly the women, very angry. But then the meeting was taken over by a union officer who, by a clever piece of manipulation, managed to get a vaguely worded motion passed. Even after the meeting, the women who had attended had some hope, but they were given no further opportunity to participate in decisions concern-

ing action. A work stoppage notice was just passed down to the workers from the union leaders and, even worse, a week later, the second day of stoppage was called off and a dubious pay offer accepted - £2.70 instead of the £3.50 being sought. When this latter information reached the women, it came "like a bombshell." As Pollert puts it:

Suddenly a veil of illusion was torn off; they saw through it all, the steamrolling, then the smooth-tongued flattery, the placatory, vague promises of militancy. They were livid at their own leaders.

But the ultimate reaction was one of turning away from the issue. There was no more mention of the strike, the discussion turned to general ideological issues - the "troubles of the world"; the "greed" of the modern worker - especially the dockers who were out on strike at the time: "job snatchers" such as "working wives" and "coloured people" and the unemployed whom some of the women referred to as "tramps and layabouts." The demoralization that came out of the strike, according to Pollert, "ventilated yet hardened, deep fears and prejudices." Pollert refers to this reaction as "common sense" versus "good sense." "Common sense" comes out of individualistic explanations, whereas "good sense" comes out of understanding the system and how it works.

The mood that Pollert left the women in was one of humorous fatalism. One of the women advised her: "Live for today, my love, and let tomorrow take care of itself."

In these sections Pollert has shown very effectively how the apparent contradictions in women workers' consciousness develops. Awareness of oppression and exploitation leads not to action and change but to disillusion and demoralization because the initiatives toward such action and change are stifled. The disillusion and demoralization lead to self-blame, individualistic

ideologies and fatalism. It is interesting to note that in the second attempt at participation in workplace issues, i.e., the one-day strike, it was the older women who had been involved in the earlier action who were the least enthusiastic about the wage claim - "their bitterness had beaten them into apathy, timidity, or both."

Although the above analysis and the illustrations of how it works in practice are the highlights of the book, Pollert provides some other interesting insights as well. She has a good chapter on women's response to the double day of labour. She suggests that women have no leisure time, no escape from work either at home or at the factory apart from imaginary escape in the form of fantasies of vacations and travel. For the most severely affected, the only refuge is illness and even mental hospitals.

Another interesting chapter contrasts the interaction of young and old women workers with managers. In fact, both groups of women are quite saucy and disrespectful in these interactions. It is one of the only allowable resistances to their situation. They get away with it because in the modern factory the managers adopt the human relations style of management while it is the machine and job assessment which provide most of the discipline of the workers. Whereas a bantering with sexual innuendos takes place between the managers and the younger women, the older women are more like nagging housewives mocking and belittling the managers with aggressive wit. In both cases the situation is turned against the women. It becomes a way of containing their resistance; as Pollert puts it, it becomes simply a matter of "shopfloor style."

Pollert ends her study on a positive note. She sees grounds for optimism. Despite the disillusion, demoralization and defeat of the women, sexual oppression at work has its own dynamic in that it provokes resistance - in this case "escape, bending the rules, mucking in, laughs, sexy bravado, biting wit." Pollert suggests that

the defiance is there, what is lacking is "shop-floor control and organisation." Also, women's double burden of factory and domestic work is "(the) seed (of their) strength" since it "creates the possibility of bringing *privatised* concerns into a *shared, collective* sphere." Finally, within the trade union, women's present weakness could become their strength. Their "exclusion, weakness and lack of tactical experience" could be turned into "newness, enthusiasm, honesty and initiative" in other circumstances with support from other workers and the union. All in all, oppression leads to revolt. The greater the oppression, the greater the potential revolt. In these terms, there would seem to be a lot of potential from these women.

Despite these grounds for optimism, the situation at the factory did not end on a positive note. Five years later, most of the women Pollert had interviewed were back in their homes. After the factory had closed down, only five out of the forty whom Pollert was able to trace, had taken advantage of the company's offer of re-employment and were still working. Twenty had drifted away before the factory shut down and fifteen had accepted the company's redundancy offer.

The final irony may be that (given the economic situation) these women may never be able to come back to work, whether they want to or not. Pollert suggests that at this point, women must fight for the very "right to work." For if women do not work, the revolutionary potential stemming from oppression and exploitation at the factory will be lost. Women will never be able to do much from the isolation of their individual households.

To conclude this review, I would like to mention aspects of Pollert's approach to the research. For instance, she did not actually work at the factory, thus her method was not really participant observation. Initially this was because she could not get a job, but later she was glad she was not employed as such. She argues that what

might have been lost in actually experiencing the job was compensated for by a lot greater freedom to talk and move around from department to department. Also she deliberately did not interview women outside of the factory - i.e., in their homes or socially in pubs. She feels that this would have been an invasion of their privacy. In addition she argues that the information that she did get on these aspects of the women's lives came in its most relevant possible form for her purposes, as it was filtered through factory experience. Lastly, Pollert did not just accept and passively record whatever the women told her, rather, she actively argued with them. In explaining this "interventionist research" approach, Pollert says:

It was (I hope) less patronising than the attitude which comprises the fascination of seeing "how the masses think"; I genuinely wanted to argue with and challenge attitudes as well as to learn.

With all the strengths of the book, Pollert can probably be forgiven for one curious lapse. There is a section of the text where she uses the word "girls" instead of "women" to refer to adult females. And this same term appears in the title of the book! Possibly Pollert, given the chance, could justify this also. She does such a brilliant job of explaining everything else.

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**Women, The Family And The Economy.** S. J. Wilson. *Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1982.*

In dealing with the sociology of women, work and the family, we are no longer limited to works primarily in the British and American contexts. With the publication of S. J. Wilson's *Women,*

*The Family and The Economy* we have a basic, if brief, source which focuses on Canada. The book's value lies not so much in the presentation of new statistics and facts or original historical material, although the selection and use of these are very good, but in the integration and synthesis of existing historical and sociological materials on women in Canada. Wilson's intention to assess critically the current state of knowledge and methodology and to articulate the questions and issues with which we should concern ourselves is successfully executed. The author states that the book focuses on "the changes in family and work roles of Canadian women" with an emphasis on women's experience in the social world. Therefore, at the centre is "the relationship between women's domestic roles and their secondary position in other social institutions," particularly as it involves the issue of economic dependence, including ideological and structural barriers which maintain women's subordination in Canadian society.

The strength of the book can be summarized in terms of four attributes: scholarship, organization, critical perspective, Canadian context. First, the text reflects a scholarly grasp of the literature and is complemented by provocative, useful footnotes. The Socratic emphasis on questions helps to accentuate the crucial issues and to avoid the slogans and outworn generalizations of other texts. Wilson presents her arguments cogently and is careful to specify the limits of the work, avoiding tangents while providing references to important sources for related topics. She is particularly skillful in showing the interconnections of social factors which define and structure women's situations. Various theoretical positions for understanding women, work and family are discussed succinctly and critically, especially in Chapters One and Three. Although her agreement with the Schwendingers' assertion that sociologists have been historically "sexist to a man" and with the implication that women had no role in the founding and early development of sociology can be seriously chal-