

ON THE MACHINERY OF DOMINANCE:
WOMEN, MEN, AND
TECHNICAL KNOW-HOW

CYNTHIA COCKBURN

A quarter century has passed since I wrote *The Machinery of Dominance*. Back then, socialist feminists were struggling to understand the connection between capitalism and patriarchy, as social systems. Heidi Hartmann's "The Unhappy Marriage of Capitalism and Patriarchy" (Hartmann 1981) came out while I was writing this, Zillah Eisenstein's *Capitalist Patriarchy* (Eisenstein 1979) had appeared two years before. One system or two? How related? That conceptual project was tough. Mid-eighties we abandoned it. Still today we haven't got it sorted. Meantime, what I was doing in *Machinery of Dominance* (Cockburn 1985), it now seems, was showing how, if you get right down to the level of cultures—cultures of the workplace and its labor processes, cultures in which technologies are invented and put to work—it isn't difficult at all to see the relations of capitalism and patriarchy being produced and reproduced simultaneously.

The book starts by trying to grasp the significance of technology as a medium of power. In the early eighties we were fresh out of the feminist "Capital reading groups." We understood the contradictions and tensions between the interests of the capitalist, the skilled worker and the unskilled laborer. We understood the importance of that special category of worker that had historically garnered the creative, transferable skills of engineering, the one who uniquely was able to design and control the instruments of labor, owned by the capitalist, that shaped and disciplined the labor processes of the ordinary worker. We saw his contradictory class position. He was the only one whose job and earnings weren't threatened as one new machine after another revolutionized the factories.

The difference was, we feminist readers of *Capital* noticed the "he" in the story of the technologist. We were helping each other understand and boldly assert that power is more complex than it appears in *Capital*. Power had been flowing and thrusting over the long haul of history not only

[WSQ: *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2009)]
© 2009 by Cynthia Cockburn. All rights reserved.

through precapitalist and capitalist class relations but also through patriarchal gender relations. There was economic power and there was sex/gender power. If you took a feminist lens to the unedifying sight of human relations in Marx's mid-nineteenth century, it was not just capitalism unleashed you were looking at, but also brute male power. The steam-powered tools had huge significance for the owners of the means of production, but they had utility too for men as men.

What was also new in this book—or around this moment, for other women were writing about it as well—is an insistence that exploitative labor relations and labor processes occurred in the family as well as the workplace. The two sites were connected. Capitalism's skilled men were privileged scions of patriarchy as well as lions of industry. I showed, through the history of the engineering union, how technically skilled men (perfectly correct in fearing that women could undermine their position in the labor market) chose the fateful patriarchal route of excluding women, rather than extending to us their organization and their skills.

I think it may help to locate this book between *Brothers* (Cockburn 1983), two years earlier, and *Gender and Technology in the Making* (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993), published much later. In *Brothers* I'd made a study, in the tradition of leftist male authors, of a group of skilled men, composers in the newspaper industry. But I'd proudly (brashly?) turned the tradition on its head by showing that the achievements of these working-class heroes were predicated on a shameful exclusion and exploitation of women at work and at home. But how did they do it, exactly? Marxian thought at this time was stuck in something of a dichotomy. One school of thought about class hegemony prioritized economic power above all else, the other stressed the importance of ideology. This seemed to me, trying to understand gender hegemony at the same time as class, a false pairing. The converse of the ideological was not in fact "the economic," it was *the material*. And the material was much more than the economic. It comprised also the *sociopolitical* (paradigmatically the organizing strategies of the trade unions) and the *physical*—including men's acquired bodily competence and technical mastery. I wrote about this in an article, "The Material of Male Power" (Cockburn 1981). I knew we had to supply a masculine content to the powerful material process of transforming and managing matter. Men had to be visible in their physicality if patriarchal gender relations were to be seen clearly "working" both at work and in the domestic sphere.

The case studies in *Machinery of Dominance* are instances of the computerization of labor processes. I used the long conversations I had with both men and women to uncover how technical competence and incompetence entered their subjective sense of self. This was cultural studies, seeking to understand identity processes. I saw how people are gendered by the jobs they do and in turn how jobs are actively gendered by virtue of who does them. I came out of the empirical work suggesting that this, combined with a continual division, retooling, and revolutionizing of labor processes in capitalism is what enables men to continually claim for masculinity the superior positions in the sexual division of labor and thereby maintain their distance from and control over women. But it was not just job advantage I saw the engineers getting. It was a sense of identity as men. Men are seduced, like the young Dr. Frankenstein, by technology's promise of transcendence. Their clever invention affords them a step above the humdrum, an escape from immanence. Meantime, capital exploits men by means of their masculine sense of self. Men dislodge each other in the capitalist and patriarchal rankings of labor. The feminine is diminished. And technology is applied to inhuman ends.

After this bold-going-on-rash utterance, *Gender and Technology in the Making*, which came eight years after *Machinery*, strikes me as rather banal—and not only because its subject, the microwave oven, is profoundly so. The research was a gender analysis of the life cycle of a microwave oven, from design through production to sales, marketing, and consumer use, to see how gender relations shape technology while technology relations shape gender.

A sea change had been occurring in academic thought, and you can see Susan Ormrod, my co-researcher, and me tussling with new challenges and taking divergent routes as we “did” the microwave oven. Poststructuralism had invented, and rubbished, “structuralism.” While I continued to believe, and still do, that social institutions and systems of relationship are significant and explanatory in studies of power, it had become de rigueur to stress, as we did already by page six of *Gender and Technology*, that social structure must never be seen as determining; “human beings may never be reduced to mere ‘bearers’ of structure.” Postmodernism, besides, had somehow evaporated the material. The current lexicon was continually drawing us toward “the discursive.”

While, interestingly, the empirical work caused no division between us (because you have to speak the language of the person you are interviewing), writing up the book caused us to part company. Susan thrived in the newly

developing arena of technology studies called “actor-network” theory. Her analysis drew on the new currency of discursive practices, representation and meanings, translation, interpretive flexibility. She authored the contribution we made to an edited collection of similar studies from ten European countries (Ormrod 1994). I was the one who actually drafted *Gender and Technology*, and, although the language of capital, class, and the sexual division of labor has drained away (who would have heard it?), nonetheless the materiality remains, guaranteed by the focus on a metallic engineered product with a strange new source of energy and the messy substances of food. I notice too my unshaken conviction that cultural studies of people making sense of their work and life is a trusty path to a systemic understanding of power.

Since the mid-nineties I’ve been trying to understand gender in relation to militarization and war. Here capitalism is center stage again, by now neoliberal and global, and a perennial source of violence. The urgency of the theme leaves me (us?) no choice but to return to the unresolved antagonism between socialist and feminist thought. The struggle to understand the sources of war, and the part played by patriarchal gender relations in predisposing societies to war, makes me look at *Machinery* with refreshed eyes. I’m surprised it’s remembered, post-postmodernism. Reading it again, as this essay has required me to do, I think I’m glad it’s there as a marker for a renewal of the socialist feminist project, in a time when production relations are so changed, “class” is eclipsed, socialism and patriarchy are unsayable, yet oppression and exploitation are more dire than ever.

WORKS CITED

- Cockburn, Cynthia. 1981. “The Material of Male Power.” *Feminist Review* No.9.
- . 1983. *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*. London: Pluto Press.
- . 1985. *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men, and Technical Know-How*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cockburn, Cynthia, and Susan Ormrod. 1993. *Gender and Technology in the Making*. London: Sage.
- Eisenstein, Zillah, ed. 1979. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Hartmann, Heidi. 1981. “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union.” In *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent. London: Pluto Press.
- Ormrod, Susan. 1994. “‘Let’s Nuke the Dinner’: Discursive Practices of Gender in the Creation of a New Cooking Process.” In *Bringing Technology Home: Gender and Technology in a Changing Europe*, eds. Cynthia Cockburn and Ruza Furst-Dilic. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Cynthia Cockburn is a feminist researcher and writer, and lives in London where she is visiting professor in the Department of Sociology at City University. She is known for writings based on empirical social research, and for a materialist approach that grounds theory in the practice of labor or political action. After two decades in gender studies of labor processes in contexts of technological and organizational change, she turned to the field of gender in relation to militarism, war and peace-making. She is active in the international network Women in Black against War. Her most recent book is *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (Zed Books 2007).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.