H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Clare Wightman. *More than Munitions: Women, Work and the Engineering Industries, 1900-1950.* London: Longman, 1999. 224 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-41435-8.

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Published on H-Women (February, 2000)

It's the Economy Stupid: Or Why Gender is not a Useful Category of Analysis

The history of working-class women has been the subject of numerous studies by historians of both labor and gender. These books and articles could keep one busy for years. Few business or economic historians, however, have turned their gaze on the subject. Clare Wightman's study of the engineering industry in England, with her detailed knowledge of industrial policy, management, and production, gives a great deal of insight into the employment of women workers.

More than Munitions is a work of revisionist history. "One of the aims," of her book, she states, "is to question further the decisive importance attributed to the 'gender ideology' of employers and male trade unionists in shaping the history of women's work" (13). Early on, she argues that ideology, while important, was not singularly important. Other factors were more significant: market concerns, the nature of engineering production, the reliance on and need for flexible production, and the necessity of skilled workers. There is a "need for a broader range of reasons," she writes explaining the increase of women workers in the industry, "not confined to ideological prescriptions, deskilling and mechanization, or trade union opposition, to explain the history of women's work" (29). The bulk of the book is an attempt to disprove the prevailing gender thesis: Women were introduced into factory work to displace more highly skilled male workers. Women – as unskilled workers –were cheaper, therefore the introduction of women goes hand-in-hand with the introduction of deskilling technology.

Her interesting chapter on World War I "aims to show economic reasons for the reluctance of employers to take up dilution, extended female employment and release skilled labour that the 'ideology' argument described ... leaves out" (48). She argues that the engineering industry was a complicated mix of craft and mass production and that employers were "rarely able to break away from dependence on skill" (48). With the increasing need for munitions, the British government designed policy to increase munitions production, a policy that relaxed work-rules and increased the number of unskilled workers in the industry. Wightman argues that women were introduced to engineering work not as replacements for skilled male workers. Instead, the skilled jobs were often subdivided. Factories combined standardization with

flexible production. They believed that the skilled worker was central to their industry; they were "reluctant to sacrifice him for changes in production, which were unlikely to be needed in peacetime" (57). As in America, the end of the war spelled an end to high levels of women's employment in the engineering industry. Unlike America, however, the introduction of women did not revolutionize production. Engineering work in England at least was still based on skill, not semi-skilled machine tenders.

Postwar England saw an employer backlash resulting in a 1922 industry wide lockout. The 1922 agreement was unique for two reasons: it included all the major unions and it gave management the uncontested right to manage. Yet, she argues, management "did not automatically opt for female labour ... there had to be a number of factors in place for women to seem a profitable alliterative to male workers" (95). According to Wightman, unions were not unified in their opposition to women, and those that strenuously opposed women workers did so not because of a gender ideology. Skilled unions opposed women as they opposed all unskilled workers – strictly on economic grounds. They "were all potential threats to skilled unions attempting to control access to jobs and protect their won standards of living" (102).

World War II had a profound impact on industry. Once again labor shortages and increased need necessitated the increase of women in industrial jobs. By 1943, 600,000 workers or 34% of the workforce were female and most were conscripted workers – drafted into industry. Companies were at first reluctant to employ women in skilled jobs, and Government policy required equal pay. Wightman states that employers did not want to get stuck with a higher rate of pay for women. To avoid this they divided the jobs by adding setter-uppers and thereby could pay female workers lower rates. Yet, she states, "the greatest increase in women's employment came in those trades, which had employed the largest proportion of women before the war, such as electrical engineering" (153). World War II was not revolutionary. Indeed, it only hastened the employment of women in industries which had a high degree of mechanization. In industries that still relied on skilled workers, little long-term change resulted.

Yet, the number of women in industry is much larger in 1950 than 1930. If the two world wars cannot account for the change, what does? Wightman maintains that "labour shortages and the modernizing reconstruction plans of trade unions gave rise to more positive and radical attitudes towards women engineering workers" (175).

In the end, Wightman argues that several factors are more important than gender ideology in understanding the timing and increase of women workers: a need to maintain flexible production, unstable markets, a need to relatively skilled workers, and the complex relationship of gender to trade unions. She does not deny that gender – what Americans would typically call domestic-ideology was important, but she states that "those who stress the agency of ideology neglect what is a more complicated picture" (186).

While this is surely an important book, there are several areas that are not fully explored. First, Wightman sets up "gender ideology" as a straw man that she easily knocks down, but most proponents of gender ideology argue that gender is deeply connected to a whole host of other factors. Ruth Milkman, for example, maintains in *Gender at Work*, that gender or domestic ideology influenced all aspects of union and management. Wightman too easily separates gender from economics. Recent studies have shown that the economy can be gendered. Second, she fails to place her story in its larger context. During the period she studies, what did it mean that the Labour Party controlled the government? Did it have an impact on the unions' ability to negotiate? Lastly, one would have liked to hear the voices of the women workers themselves. How did they feel about the changes they faced?

With this said, this is an important book, which is expertly researched. It is rare that a scholar uses union, business and government records as well as Wightman. She expertly shows the industrial relations process from the inside and traces the key factors in each contract. *More than Munitions* will hopefully renew the debate over women's employment and at the same time force us to think about gender and economic factors in new ways.

Citation: Richard A. Greenwald. Review of Wightman., Clare, *More than Munitions: Women, Work and the Engineering Industries, 1900-1950.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

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