

A Spirited, Albeit Flawed, Attack on Custom

Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain. Joyce Burnette. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 377 pages.

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<1> Looking primarily, although not exclusively, at the labor market for women from the laboring classes, Joyce Burnette seeks to challenge much of the existing orthodoxy regarding the determinants for women's experience of work during the Industrial Revolution era in Britain. Contrary to the pioneering work of Ivy Pinchbeck, this book argues that work opportunities for women declined with the onset of the factory age, as did their wages relative to those of men. More controversial is the author's strongly held belief that custom and gender ideology had very little impact in determining women's relatively low wages and low levels of employment, arguing that custom and ideology were used to explain pre-determined patterns of pay and occupational allocation, rather than being determinants themselves. Therefore, the increasingly hostile social and cultural climate towards the work of women in this period is held to be insignificant for women's deteriorating work opportunities. Although she is not the first to make this point, Burnette justly highlights how the gender wage gap has often been overstated due to factors such as women working fewer hours and, within domestic production units, the remuneration for the work of the family being paid to the head of household, who was typically male. She is also correct in stating that it was extremely rare for women to receive a lower piece-rate than men when they performed identical work. To try and avoid the difficulties in assessing the gender wage gap for Britain at this time, especially given that this work is intended to provide an aggregate picture rather than focusing on a specific industry, the author draws on an impressive range of data, including Census reports, Parliamentary investigations, commercial directories, and individual wage data from both agricultural and industrial employers.

<2> Burnette successfully argues that in a free labor market all the differences between men's and women's jobs can be ultimately explained by strength differences and the fact that only women can give birth and breastfeed. Additionally, women had a comparative advantage in childcare due to their lower strength relative to males, further depressing their relative wages. Burnette argues that strength was still crucial at this time, with industrialization taking a long time to significantly reduce the strength necessary to perform many jobs. Indeed, she points to several tasks where the strength requirement actually increased, for example textile spinning, framework knitting, and the shift from sickle to scythe in agriculture. The high levels of fertility during the Industrial Revolution meant that women had to spend a lot of time in a state of

pregnancy or having to breastfeed, exaggerating the comparative advantage of men in working outside the home relative to women. The argument for the importance of this biologically determined male advantage in wage labor is supported by the fact that apprenticeship (which often served as a barrier to entry for women) was in decline, while government restrictions on the work of women were not introduced until the 1840s, and even then only applied to a small number of industries.

<3> Aside from biologically determined differences, this book contends that the only other significant barrier to women's work were the actions of male "distributional coalitions" (i.e., proto-trade unions, trade unions, and professional associations), who wished to limit the labor supply in their particular industries. Burnette describes how many trade guilds, contrary to the common practice in Europe, did not prevent women from joining their ranks. Additionally, their influence declined over the course of the Industrial Revolution. However, the emerging trade unions were frequently hostile to the employment of women. Although men were unable to combine and exclude women in unskilled trades, they were increasingly able to do so for occupations requiring skill. Despite Burnette not explicitly defining what she means by "skill," it is implied that it is any operation that requires knowledge or talent and takes time to learn, with the teaching needing to be done by a specialist. For her argument this interpretation works well, but it would have been interesting to see her interact more fully with the debates within women's history regarding definitions of "skill," and how they are determined.⁽¹⁾ Because male workers' ideological and intra-familial power interests coincided with their economic interest, it is argued that they were the most important non-biological force for excluding women from wage earning occupations. Although it may seem hard to determine whether it was economic interest (which benefited from any reduction in the labor supply) or gender ideology that drove the actions of male trade unions, Burnette argues that since employers' economic interest (which opposed their gender ideology, since they wished to minimize labor costs) trumped their ideology, we can conclude that economic motivations were probably primary for male trade unions as well.

<4> Drawing on the work of Gary Becker, this book argues that only monopolistic employers should be able to discriminate according to gender (or, indeed, any other characteristic), since discrimination is inefficient and competition will result in firms with higher costs failing. Thus, George Cadbury was able to prevent married women from working at his firm because his powerful brand gave him monopolistic power, but it is argued that this was rare, and the monopsony model (under which employers have the ability to discriminate despite not having monopolistic power, because they are the sole, or main, employer of a given form of labor within their locality) is rejected on the basis of twentieth-century data. From this reasoning, Burnette claims that employers could not have been influential in limiting women's work opportunities, and despite what they may have said in public, employers typically fought to employ women. However, it seems probable that markets were far less well integrated during the Industrial Revolution than they have been in recent times due to factors such as less well developed transport and communications. Indeed, despite selling in the cotton market, which was highly competitive, Henry Ashworth was able to keep up a strong resistance to employing married women and the wage gap between adult males and females at his firm was larger than typical as a means to discourage married women from working. This suggests strongly that Ashworth had monopsony power, and it seems unlikely that he was alone in this, demonstrating that some

employers do seem to have had some kind of conscious influence in determining women's job opportunities.

<5> As well as consciously desiring to exclude women, which is likely to have been true only in a small number of cases, employers may also have increasingly suffered from what Ellen Jordan has termed “androcentric blindness” (i.e., employers underestimate women's capabilities due to the influence of ideology, and thus give excessive preference to male workers), given an ideology increasingly against women's work. Burnette fails adequately to refute this thesis. Nor does she appreciate the importance of the resistance that non-unionized male workers could have to female supervision. A few isolated examples of women working as overseers or managers are presented as evidence that there were no artificial barriers to women attaining these posts. However, the rarity of this is downplayed. Moreover, no mention is made of the fact that when women did work in a supervisory capacity, the workers under their direction almost always exclusively women and/or children. Despite cotton firms continually struggling to find overseers with an understanding of the processes, we hardly ever find women in this role, even in sectors where they comprised the vast majority of the workforce (e.g., carding). Citing Michael Huberman, Burnette claims that it was falling profits rather than gender ideology that caused the M’Connel and Kennedy spinning firm to stop employing women. However, she does not mention that Huberman thinks that females, unlike males, not supervising their assistants was crucial for their lower cost effectiveness. Female mule-spinners not supervising their assistants appears to have been standard practice across the cotton region and it is difficult to explain this in the absence of ideologically driven working-class male resistance to female supervision. And it seems improbable that this kind of attitude was restricted to workers in the cotton industry.

<6> Briefly departing from her materialist approach, the author agrees with Heidi Hartmann that men partly desired to exclude women so as to protect their power within the family. She also describes how families could be a source of discrimination; although part of the lower investment in education and training for female offspring can be attributed to lower expected lifetime earning power, ideology also seems to have been significant for this. There is interesting discussion, albeit brief, of the necessity of avoiding placing modern values and expectations regarding the desirability of work for women onto historical actors. It has been assumed, often implicitly, by many feminist historians that women at this time wished to work. However, given the differing nature of the work available at this time compared to the late twentieth century, and the lack of evidence we have on women's attitudes to work during the Industrial Revolution, this ought not be assumed. Despite the criticisms I have made, this remains a powerfully argued and thought-provoking work, and will provide much inspiration and causes for contention among historians of women's work.

Endnotes

(1)For example, see Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Review* 4 (1980): 79-88.(^)