Revisiting *The Machinery of Dominance* : *Women, Men, and Technical Know-How*

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

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Toward the end of *The Machinery of Dominance*, Cynthia Cockburn writes that she had started the book with the assumption that in the pairing of gender and technology, it was *technology* that was the more powerful term, "with its resonance of the hard, the effective." Gender, she continues, "seemed the abstract one, the ephemeral factor" (251). However, by the end of the book, she had reached the conclusion that "of the two, gender is more implacable and tyrannical" (251). "It is not," she argues, "technology that is out of control, but capitalism *and men*" (255; emphasis in original). It is, in many ways, a jarring diagnosis that runs counter to much contemporary "postfeminist" thinking about gender as fluid and playful, and about masculinity as in crisis. The (predominantly female) students in my undergraduate module Technologies of the Gendered Body bridle at the suggestion of such structural, gendered inequality and argue indignantly against the "urgent message" that Cockburn offers in the book's introduction—a "plea for more commitment of support to women-only projects" (13). They take comfort in the fact that the book was written twenty-three years ago—before most of them were born—dismissing it either as historical commentary on a more sexist and discriminatory time, or as the product of an ideologically fueled mode of feminism that has had its day.

However, while Cockburn expresses some surprise in her commentary in this issue of *WSQ* that *The Machinery of Dominance* has been remembered "post-postmodernism," the opportunity to reread it for this review brought home to me (perhaps depressingly) the continued salience of its analysis for contemporary thinking on the complex relationship between gender and technology in everyday life, and its material effects.

The Machinery of Dominance sets out to explore the impacts of technological change on women's technological competence and its associated em-

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ployment opportunities. Cockburn achieved this through two years of research focusing on three industries: clothing, mail order firms, and computed tomography (CT) scanning. This analysis is accompanied by further research at five "upstream" enterprises that develop, provide, and service the technologies being implemented in the three industries. While the individual circumstances of each industry/enterprise vary, the detailed analysis across those contexts paints a consistent picture of the relationship between gender and technology. Women emerge as the *operators* of machinery, but do not have, nor are expected to have, knowledge of the inner workings of those machines. As Cockburn notes: "Women may push the buttons, but they may not meddle with the works" (12). This division of labor is far from innocent. Designated as unskilled, the women were paid less, and had far fewer opportunities for career advancement or skill development. Furthermore, it is the technical skills (to build or repair machinery) that are transferable, further disadvantaging women by limiting their mobility within the job market—a particularly poignant finding now, given the current global financial crisis and its anticipated impact on employment.

But the inequalities that this division of labor produces are not confined to the financial domain, but also affected the *quality* of the women's working lives. An important element of this was the women's literal containment. Where previously, the women had moved about (for example, picking items off shelves to make up mail orders), mechanization meant that the goods increasingly traveled to them, confining them to ever smaller spaces and exposing them to increased managerial surveillance. Cockburn offers the poignant image of the women standing at the "carousel" in a mail order company, with each woman's work space marked out by a small square of carpet (161); their work is reduced to small, quickly accomplished, repetitive tasks, lacking the satisfaction of a sustained task and a final product. Cockburn argues emphatically that "the truth is that the men's jobs deliver more satisfaction to the men who do them than women's jobs do to them" (160). It is a stark and sobering statement that refuses the myths of complementarity that many of the workers and managers relied upon to justify the gendered division of labor; a complementarity that is structured to produce inequality. As one senior male physicist observed: "Women are more fitted for the humdrum sort of jobs" (135). This echoes the contemporary biologically grounded arguments about women's superior suitability for detailed (but repetitive and poorly paid) assembly line work as a result of their "nimble fingers."

One of the greatest strengths of the book is its very graceful incorporation of these "big picture" patterns across different industrial contexts with microlevel illustrations—small but memorable asides and observations dropped judiciously (and often wittily) into the broader analysis. The small square of carpet that the women at the mail order company have to stand on is one example of this, but others abound: the senior manager who commented that his job was "to know when a woman is the kind who wants her bottom pinched, or whether she needs her bottom kicked" (74); the woman who was told, by way of incentive to take a job, that she would be "able to pop out and get [her] hair done in the lunch break" (137); the men being allowed to apply for voluntary severance pay rather than suffer the indignities of being transferred to low-status women's jobs (107). The book is littered with this rich, but disturbing, data; you want to read these snippets out loud to the person next to you because they're funny, but that's so only because they're appalling. It would be nice to think that these are the obsolete remnants of a sexist past, but the steady contemporary flow of sex discrimination/harassment cases—for example, in the military and in the City—suggest otherwise.

For Cockburn, the ending of technological inequality is predicated on "the dissociation of gender from occupation" as well as "the ending of the broader social division of labor by which masculinity is associated with economic production and femininity with reproduction and domestic life" (250). It is a tall order, both then and now. What *The Machinery of Dominance* offers us is a rigorous analysis of how the gendering of technology works in practice, of why it is never so simple as getting more women into engineering. As Cockburn argues, while "implacable and tyrannical" gender remains intact as "a major organizing principle, if not *the* organizing principle, in our perception of the world and everything in it" (251), women's acquisition of technological competence can only ever be a beginning of a broader struggle for "dismantling the gender structure" (251). It is this unabashed commitment, rooted in detailed and compelling research, that makes *The Machinery of Dominance* as relevant today as it ever was.

For a biography of Karen Throsby, please see page 18.