Gender and Class: Women’s Working Lives in a Dormitory Labor Regime in China

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The thirty years since Women on the Line has witnessed great achievement in the literature of gender and work both in the West and Global South. There was a booming literature since the 1970s and 1980s in the fields of sociology, anthropology, women studies, and cultural studies—most of them excellent works that touch upon sophisticated debates on the interplay between gender and work, production and reproduction, dominance, and resistance in an increasingly globalized context.

Over the past thirty years, a rapid extended reproduction of capitalism on a global scale, in Rosa Luxemburg’s sense, contributed to a dramatic remaking of class and gender relations in the world. A farewell to “class analysis” has not made class relations in the West obsolete but has further transplanted them into the Third World societies in which gender relations are part and parcel of the rapid transformation of class relations. Inspired by the labor historian Prof. Alice Kessler-Harris, I would like to argue that class and gender are not parallel dimensions of social analysis. Instead gender is central to the formation of the working classes in history and in contemporary contexts. The classical English working class had been represented by a male worker who was the breadwinner of the household, a skilled laborer at the workplace, a potential militant in strikes, and a trade unionist. This image of the traditional working class has been greatly challenged by the rapid expansion of mass production, transnationalization of production, the feminization of labor use in the Global South, and the rise of new service economies in the West. Today any discussion of a new working class is unimaginable without the presence of female workers.

Gender is not only an issue of identity attached to the formation of the working class. Gender ideology, gender relations, and gender structure are all central to the making and remaking of the working class. Like Miriam Glucksmann, I spent seven months working on the line in an electronics assembly plant. Some of my experience on the line paralleled that of Glucksmann. The typical examples are the gendered division of labor at the workplace and the Taylorist methods of organizing production. Some of the differences reflect the new global context of industrial production. For instance, the global production in China was characteristic of a dormitory labor regime, and hence all the workers, including myself, had to stay at the factory dormitories while Glucksmann was able to live at home. Studying and working with Chinese women workers in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1995 and 1996, I argue that the demand for cheap and productive labor to fuel transnational capital accumulation requires a gendering process of the working class, more