

## For Better or Worcester: Reflections on *Gender, Work and Space*

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Richard Walker<sup>†</sup>

*Gender, Work and Space* is a book of substance, reflected in the look and the heft of the artifact itself.<sup>1</sup> Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt have given us the single best study of local labor markets, their microgeography and their gendering. This is a sorely neglected field of study in both economic geography and in gender studies, which have, by and large, moved along separate tracks of political economy and an anti-economistic radical feminism. It's about time the two were joined, although it is not an altogether unproblematic junction, as the reader of this book soon discovers. Nevertheless, this is a very good and very valuable book to which students and researchers from industrial geography, urban geography and gender studies will turn whenever the subjects of segmented labor markets and women's double-bind between wage-work and home-work come up.

The question Hanson and Pratt pose is how does the geography of labor markets structure and condition women's lives and affirm their plight in a patriarchal world? That is, how are women trapped in space by the dual constrictions of domestic responsibilities and an inferior position in the realm of wage-labor? They seek to answer this question through a superb, in-depth empirical study of women going out to work in Worcester, Massachusetts (center of a large regional labor-shed west of the Boston metropolitan area).

They lay out, at an exceedingly fine scale, the way local labor markets operate to draw different people into different workplaces, occupations and sectors, with all the attendant divergence in kinds of work done, reward structures, and prospects for the future. And they do so from the perspective of women, illustrating the clarities and sensitivities that come from a feminist perspective rather than simply an empiricist one of

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gathering raw data and crunching numbers (though they can do that kind of metal-bending labor as well as anyone). What they demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt is that labor markets are unfairly structured, to the disadvantage of women, the manual working class, the poorest people, and racial minorities.

We knew this was so, of course, thanks to the pioneering work on dual and segmented labor markets by Piore, Gordon, Amsden, and others (Doeringer and Piore 1972, Edwards et al., 1975, Amsden, 1980, Wilkinson, 1981). That work obviously inspired Hanson and Pratt when they originally conceived the Worcester study back in the early 1980s. But segmented labor market theory went out of fashion some time ago, as radical economics lost its momentary initiative and was eclipsed by the shift to the neo-liberal right and by the postmodern, post-political economy turn. Along the way, segmented labor market theory took some hits from neo-liberal researchers,<sup>2</sup> while the economism and classism of political economy were targeted by post-Marxist radicals of various stripes. Don't forget the geographers and theorists of space in all this, for labor market theory was poorly spatialized in its early incarnations.

What Hanson and Pratt achieve is no less than the resurrection of segmented labor market theory, particularly for geographers and urbanists. The theory comes back much stronger, because these authors avoid the errors of employing a naked logic of economics, class or even patriarchy. They are aware of a host of forces at work on the lives of the women of Worcester, including gender, class, division of labor, parenting, community, geography and race. They carefully unpack and repack the empirical data from various angles, showing that certain key ideas about the inequalities of gender, class and so forth do hold up under close scrutiny – but not on their own. That is, the edifice of constraint in everyday life leans awkwardly on a set of mutually supporting props.

### The Shifting Grounds of Inquiry

*Gender, Work and Space* comes in three segments: chapters 1–3 explain the book and set the stage with the needed theoretical furniture and regional history; chapters 4–7 present the evidence; and chapter 8 wraps up. I only wish to treat the first and second parts in detail, beginning with the theory and justification provided in the opening chapter.

The first chapter is a theoretical overture in two parts, which clearly reflects two distinct eras of thought in a project that had a long genesis and extended closure. The first part lays out labor market theory, and is based on a feminist political economy, while the second opens up the problem of subjectivity and unfreedom from a cultural feminism stand-

point. Both are valid and complement each other, but Hanson and Pratt seem to have written them at different stages of their intellectual lives – the early and late 1980s – and never quite reconciled the discordances between them. So the chapter and the book as a whole sit uneasily astride two horses.

Labor market theory is nimbly summarized. Occupational and sectoral segregation by gender is taken as fact, for which an immense body of evidence had been assembled by the early 1980s. It is explained, in liberal theory, from the supply side, by reference to the different qualities of workers, i.e., their skills or human capital. In radical approaches the emphasis shifts to the demand side, and the ability of employers to divide and conquer labor by applying discriminatory criteria in hiring. Women and racial minorities are channeled into “appropriate” jobs, and paid less for their trouble. The sociologists are then called upon for the theory of networks and community interaction in order to link labor demand and supply and to embed economic transactions in the necessary social fabric. Finally, geography wraps up the whole social economy of labor in a spatial division of labor, following on the insights of Massey (1984) and Scott (1988).

The second half of the opening chapter switches over to the problem of situated theory and the subject position of women, in a manner akin to Donna Haraway (1989). Hanson and Pratt realize that their study rests heavily on interviews with women, and thus consists of a set of stories out of which researchers construct a further layer of narrative accounts. Subjectivity, representation and identity cannot be evaded in this presumably “economic” relation of demand and supply in labor markets. In particular, the women's stories rest on experiences and perceptions of space, and their sense of mobility, borders and containment. These are no bourgeois *flâneuses* moving freely about the city in search of jobs, possessed of a far-reaching or synthetic gaze over the possible terrain of employment. Quite the contrary, they are bound by duty, personal attachments, community ties and the rest of life's entanglements within a surprisingly constricted space of job search and life paths.

The usefulness of this discussion is readily apparent in the critical reflections Hanson and Pratt make subsequently on their own research methods in Chapter 3. They are well aware of the way the academic onlooker constructs knowledge through an imperfect and chaotic process that relies on the eyes, ears and minds of graduate students and the considerable hubris of unifying authorship. Bruno Latour is invoked to good effect – although the need of post-structuralists to call upon French men to do their foundational work is always surprising to me. It's a shame that the authors seem unaware of geographical debates on two fronts of concern to them. One is the tendentious argument over the

authorial voice as a male preserve, for which David Harvey has come in for more than his fair share of criticism (Massey, 1991; Harvey, 1992). The other is the recovery of Bill Bunge's "Geographical Expeditions" to the inner city in the late 1960s, which Hanson and Pratt echo in their "Worcester Expeditions" (Merrifield, 1995). And I don't suppose it would have done any harm to refer to Harraway's (1989) cautions about research funded by the National Geographic Society.

However revealing such discussions of authorial narrative might be, they are ultimately subordinate to the story-telling and story-living of the people, which is why studies such as this are undertaken. Hanson and Pratt succeed to a considerable degree in making the situations of Worcester women come alive for us through the course of the book. This is no mean trick, because it is exceedingly hard to blend with the kind of analytic form of the research report. The latter can easily become an anchor dragging on the empirical bottom of the sea of inquiry, but such anchoring can be a virtue when compared to many free-wheeling cultural studies of the postmodern *oeuvre*, as the authors appreciate. Indeed, at the end of the book, Hanson and Pratt return to "narratives of containment" among the women of Worcester and the contrast between these spatially rooted and restricted stories and the sort of postmodern feminist tale that traffics in metaphors of traveling, transience, diaspora, and transgression is striking. Liminality has little purchase for the working class women of Worcester, who are more imprisoned than liberated by their encounters with geography. All the same *Gender, Work and Space* itself lacks for one thing that both postmodernists and empiricists disdain, the grand narrative. I shall return to this at the end.

### The Heart of Local Geography

Such utopian hopes aside, the book the authors *did* in fact write does a most thorough job of investigation and clarification of the forces at work in local labor markets. The findings come out in orderly sequence in Chapters 4 through 7. The first of these ("Distance and Gendered Geographies") begins with the classic journey-to-work and commuting fields around employment nodes in the larger metropolitan area.<sup>3</sup> The clarity with which workers are sorted by industry and occupation into a spatial division of labor at the micro-geographic level is astonishing. The most striking fact unveiled, on which the argument as a whole rests, is how very *local* labor markets are. For women, moreover, they are even more geographically constrained, with commuting distances shorter for women of all classes. This is not an income constraint on the journey to work, as is typically argued with reference to historically shorter working class

commutes, but a spatial constraint that translates into lower income. Spatial limits thus become the operative cause to be investigated further, from both the labor supply and labor demand sides.

The next chapter ("Household Arrangements and the Geography of Employment") takes a look at the spatial rootedness of residential patterns of working class families. This is more a New England habit than a patriarchal one, which relies on the inheritance and sharing of housing. Job search begins from the house site outward, putting women at immediate disadvantage in finding the best jobs. This disadvantage becomes critical when the time and distance constraints of mothering and domestic labor come into play. Strategies for coping with family responsibilities, such as part-time work or sequential scheduling of work by parents, place even more time and space limits on the job search. What is particularly striking is that there is little evidence that women in non-traditional households – presumably less encumbered by husbands and children – fare much better in escaping their domestic and spatial bondage.

Turning to the demand side, Hanson and Pratt find the same old, same old gender stereotypes still going strong in the minds of employers. Indeed, bosses are quite strategic in using the geography of labor markets, especially the unfreedom of women, to their advantage in hiring and even factory location decisions. The manual working class, in particular, is recruited largely by word of mouth, which runs along existing social and spatial channels, disturbing nothing in the status quo. Upper level segments of technical and professional labor are recruited more formally, through newspaper ads and the like, and reach farther into the hinterlands. This does not disturb the spatial order, either, because those more extensive and fluid skilled labor markets are geographically apart from those of manual and clerical workers. Finally, male and female recruitment runs along quite distinct, gendered networks that extend the sexual division of labor from the factory to the home and back again.

The final observational chapter ("Communities and Gendered Work") broadens things out to the community level. Here networks are not mere carriers of information, but social resources; indeed, neighborhoods (localities) are resource pools, as well as ideological fields embodying place-bound knowledge and communal reinforcement of family systems and gender roles. All this recalls work of a generation ago on urban social segregation, the geography of poverty and mental maps (e.g., Morrill and Wohlenberg, 1971, Peet, 1977, Smith, 1979). Regrettably, Hanson and Pratt make no effort to reach back into that pot of ideas outside the realm of gender and labor market studies. Nonetheless, they do a reasonable job of tying up the whole, self-reinforcing cluster of local jobs, local labor supply and local social relations at a fine scale. (This linkage to the economy of wage-work is what so much of the old social geography was

missing). The key finding for segmented labor market studies and economic geography is that localization is such a strong factor that wages differ markedly for the same work across local labor markets.

### Reworking Feminist Political Economy

*Gender, Work and Space* is an invaluable document for those of us laboring in the vineyards of economic and urban geography. It, along with Jamie Peck's new book (Peck, 1996), fills a crucial gap in the literature. I have put it to immediate use in recent papers on industrial suburbanization and immigration to California.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in other respects this book does not succeed in moving a gendered political economy forward. What is missing? That question is, for me, the way to make the best use of this opportunity for reflection and discussion. And it raises matters of theory that drive the research agenda and the interpretation of the evidence before us. To begin with, the authors' original position was a rather atheoretical and positivist one, with Hanson the mentor and Pratt the acolyte, if I am not mistaken. Into this positivism a growing feminism intruded, which led the authors to undertake a more telling investigation of labor markets than would have otherwise been the case. But their next move, driven by currents within feminism – and, I believe, by a certain inflection between student and teacher with Pratt's growing stature and changing interests – was toward a postmodern stance on narrative and subjectivity that softened their empiricism by emphasizing the interpretive role of the scholar against the positivist gods-eye view and numerology. Nothing wrong there, but what of the road not taken?

That is, what of other developments in political economy not encompassed by the post-modern feminist turn? Subsequent radical work in economic geography, which Hanson and Pratt should have known about, is largely absent from the pages of *Gender, Work and Space*. In this regard, their evolution contrasts sharply with mine, since our paths came so close at a point over a decade ago when labor and labor markets were central to my work.

First of all, Hanson and Pratt fail to get beyond a rather static notion of spatial divisions of labor. Massey deployed the term, recall, in the context of massive industrial restructuring, and accompanied it with the crucial idea of sedimented layers of historical practices in the overall economic landscape of capitalism (Massey, 1984; Marshall, 1987). Worcester's industrial clusters and urban fabric have expanded and been altered in important ways which this book cannot tell us about. The direction that Michael Storper and I took in *The Capitalist Imperative* (1989) was to look not for stability but for the ways in which industry produces regions

over time, and how it does so in relation to labor – its skills, wages, migrations, segmentation, etc. True, industry in Worcester appears to trade on stability of labor relations and labor markets, as many established regions do. Even so, that stability is something consciously reproduced over time by the bosses; their predation on women's unfree labor is not merely discriminatory but strategic, and crucial to Worcester's ongoing reputation as a conservative "scab hole." It is also reproduced by conditions of industrial decline in which workers find themselves, leading to survival strategies of familial houses and family support systems. These may not, in other words, be traditional as much as constructed.

Second, the division of labor is missing as a structural feature of modern economies that ought to be engaged theoretically for its widespread causal powers. Of course, it is there on almost every page of this book. It is everywhere in the narrative, but nowhere in the analysis. The division of labor is "the ghost in the labor market" in Hanson and Pratt's study, as it is in so much political economy and feminist writing. Background to class, gender and race, never foreground for study. This perennial oversight is what Andrew Sayer and I called attention to in *The New Social Economy* (1992). It, too, might have spurred further reflection on the evidence by our authors.

Third, the political economy of the region is severely truncated in Hanson and Pratt's account, which has its feet on the ground of everyday labor markets but never lifts its head up high enough to scan the larger landscape of history, politics and society in Worcester and New England. This is what I have tried to do in surveys of the Midwest and California (Walker et al., 1990; Page and Walker, 1991; Walker, 1995). The lack of a macro-regional sensibility and analytics in *Gender, Work and Space* is manifest from early in Chapter 2, a short history of labor and gender in Worcester, in which Hanson and Pratt fly past the idea of "historically sedimented practices" without adequate articulation or theorization. Contrast this with the work of Pred on the formation of local cultural practices and social orders (Pred, 1990, 1995). It further points up the peculiarities of social relations in the local area, and in New England more broadly.

This is where some sort of "grand narrative" might be invoked to good effect, by calling upon the rich reserve of historical studies of the region – most recently by Cronon (1983), Merchant (1989) and Peet (1996). Nowhere else in the United States is localism more profoundly instantiated than in the northeast corner of the country, and this has to give us pause for comparative thought. It is wrapped up with a culture of community and family with deep roots in Puritan settlement, the early republic, class and race stratification, and long industrial decline. Hanson and Pratt are well aware of the oddities of their study area, but nowhere do they contend with the literature or issues of regionalism in geography, which

would mean raising their eyes above the horizon of labor markets to a more sweeping panorama of regional space and time. This is perfectly understandable at one level, but it raises dissatisfactions in my geographer's heart. As feminist geographers know very well, it is often at and just beyond the borders of inquiry that the most revealing questions lie.

These utopian criticisms (of a book not yet written) spring from certain grand narratives to which I still hold fast. One concerns the necessity for theory in the construction of knowledge, and the way theories lend coherence and direction to lines of thought (rather than just polluting our heads with preconceived fabrications). Another speaks of the long march of capitalist industrialization, which has lifted (and smashed) the fortunes of region after region across the developed world. A third is the place of the division of labor in modernization, so often invoked, so little considered in its own right. A fourth is the divergence of regional social relations in a world of contending capitalisms and uneven development. None of these is an exclusive tale, the only story. Yet like the narrative of gender and patriarchy, these theories in political economy have purchase on a wide range of phenomena in geographical history, because they address crucial dimensions of human existence. We need to give voice to these processes as well as to their agents and their victims in our writings.

## Notes

1. The book is part of a striking black-jacketed series, "International Studies of Women and Place" – which may not survive the recent corporate buyout of Routledge.
2. But see responses by Dickens and Lang, 1985, 1988.
3. The authors do not delve into the considerable literature on journey-to-work, which may be a virtue. It's too bad, however, that they make no mention of the historical work of Vance (1960) on New England's early journey-to-work patterns.
4. Indeed, I must confess to considerable envy at what Hanson and Pratt have achieved, because Michael Storper and I put in a grant proposal on the topic of submetropolitan labor markets to the National Science Foundation at almost the same time Hanson and Pratt began their research in the early 1980s, when we were working in exactly the same domain, inspired by the same questions and the same people. They won the grant and we did not; they continued the work, we did not – at least not in the same way (but see chapter 6 of Storper and Walker, 1989).

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