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Gender, Work, and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain

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understanding the relationship between human capital accumulation, economic growth, and inequality.

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Gender, Work, and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain. By Joyce Burnette. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 377 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-88063-3, \$99.00 (cloth).

Discrimination or the rational outcome of an efficient market—which explains the concentration of women in a limited range of low-paying jobs? This is the central question behind Joyce Burnette's examination of one of the most important topics in economic history: the impact of Britain's Industrial Revolution on the work and wages of men and women. Much ink has been spilt, and many keyboards exhausted, in writing about this topic. Burnette enters the field with an argument that—although not new—is controversial: “occupational sorting” and lower wages for women were a rational, efficient, and optimal response to biological differences. It was not discrimination, but biology—in particular, gender differences in physical strength—that led to women's inferior productivity and hence pay. Allocating men to strength-intensive jobs, and women to less physically demanding ones, served to maximize female (and male) income, minimize the gender gap, and promote economic efficiency. Competition was the key to this happy outcome. Only in dark anti-competitive recesses of the labor market could distributional coalitions impose discriminatory practices at a cost to the economy, employers, and women.

Is this biological or economic determinism? Burnette “take[s] biology seriously” (p. 13) but does not wish to be seen as arguing that gender gaps were good or inevitable. That said, she does argue that reproductive roles and—principally—physical strength “are sufficient to explain much of the occupational segregation and gender wage gap that we observe in Industrial Revolution Britain” (p. 12). Simultaneously, Burnette asserts the primacy of economic motivation as the driving force. It is the reason why capitalists seek profits, and why organizations that can exclude a competing labor supply do so. Greed is not always good, but it is always there. It is the engine driving the

train, while ideology is the caboose (p. 6). Past scholars, according to Burnette, have concentrated too much on the ideological rhetoric of gender roles in explaining customary wages and employment patterns. For Burnette, causation runs the other way. It is not ideology shaping the material world, but that world—influenced by biological difference—that gives rise to custom, with individuals using “ideology as a cover for their naked self-interest” (p. 7).

Words can be at odds with reality, so it is to that material actuality that Burnette turns. Chapters 1 and 2 are strong and helpful contributions to our knowledge about the work done by women and men, and the wages they were paid. In particular, Burnette augments flawed census data (reworked by Higgs) with fragmentary but copious primary-source indications of the employment ratio, as well as with information taken from parliamentary papers and commercial directories. The rich information she thus painstakingly assembles enables her to look beyond the usual issues to such matters as the gendered nature of business ownership. Included on the broad canvas Burnette paints are the changing and regionally varied experience of work, the nature of cottage industry and its decline, the impact of technological change, and the fluidity of gender roles. There are lace makers and straw plaiters, charwomen and nurses, single women and family units, widows becoming free-women in their late husbands' trades, and many worlds thrown upside-down by industrialization. Chapter 1 concludes that women's labor market participation was widespread and not entirely restricted to “women's work,” but that gender was important and pronounced in determining individual working outcomes.

The book proceeds with an examination of wages, and this is where arguments about discrimination versus market rationality, based on labor productivity, are drawn into focus. Of particular interest is the author's discussion of physical strength and the interactions between the strength needs of new technologies. Subsequent chapters examine occupational sorting and barriers to women's employment. The foreshadowed conclusion is amplified: competitive markets were good for the economy and good for women, because they minimized the penalty of biological differences through occupational sorting. Exploiting comparative advantage minimized the gender gap. In competitive sectors, then, the gender gap was an artifact of productivity differences between the sexes. Only in the absence of competition could discrimination flourish at the hand of unions and other combinations.

Productivity differences are thus central to

the argument. When comparing like with like, Burnette claims, women were less productive than men from the age of 15. Anecdotal evidence drawn from agricultural Britain in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries is contradictory and quickly dismissed. Instead, Burnette rightly argues the need for “direct evidence from output” (p. 100). However, what evidence she offers is not direct at all. None comes from the country or period being studied. Instead, the productivity comparisons Burnette cites are taken from nineteenth-century U.S. manufacturing earnings statistics, slave cotton-picking rates, slave prices, and production functions for the United States, China, Peru, France—anywhere but Britain. Coercive labor is treated as equivalent to free labor, and measures of dubious quality are invoked. This is poor history.

The closest we come to evidence on productivity drawn from Britain during industrialization is an account from Michael Huberman’s 1996 study of work in Lancashire, *Escape from the Market*. The argument offered is inferential, simplistic, and flawed. The cotton-spinning firm of McConnell and Kennedy paid women lower piece rates than men: seemingly a very clear case of discrimination. Not so, Burnette informs us. In 1810, the firm shifted to employing all female spinners at these lower rates. Burnette writes,

If women mule-spinners in fact were equally productive and were paid less, then the firm’s profits should have increased. In fact, the firm found its profits falling, in spite of the fact that it paid the female spinners lower piece-rates. *So it turns out that in this case the difference in piece-rates was justified by differences in productivity.* (p. 90—emphasis added)

The paucity of this argument is alarming. Profit rates rise and fall for a number of reasons—shifts in demand, supply, quality and cost of inputs, efficiency of management, technological change including the organization of work, and more. Indeed, we are given an organizational reason why profits might have fallen: when the company employed male spinners, it permitted them to oversee the work of piecers; when women were spinning, this supervisory task shifted to (male) overlookers and wastage increased by 63%. This might be evidence of the declining productivity of piecers and overlookers; it might raise questions about the cost of customary attitudes toward women managing the labor of others; it certainly suggests inefficient organization; it is weak evidence of low female productivity.

Superior male productivity might be credible, but it is not proven. Yes, biology matters. Strength can influence productivity—as can other factors—but this depends on the nature of work. Technologies’ ability to substitute human strength

with wind, water, coal, and other forms of power was key in industrialization. Nor is it apparent that strength conferred a wage premium on the taller, stronger Irish. Strength can be an overstated asset. It also needs to be seen as historically subjective. Height, reach, and strength are at least partly conditional on historical circumstances, such as household access to, and allocation of, resources that affect nutrition, health, growth, and other forms of human capital. If men were more productive, how much of that advantage was owing to their being better fed than women? Inherited sex difference may not be the answer.

Like Burnette, I tend to think that economics trumps custom. However, the latter is not extinguished instantaneously, nor are economic interests unitary. Hence the story told to Engels by Joe about Joe’s friend Jack. Jack had been a good worker and ample provider for his family, until the Lancashire economy changed. He was left unemployed and dependent on his working wife.

Poor Jack was ashamed ... “There is work enough for women folks and childer hereabouts, but none for men ... it’s a good bit that she has been the man in the haul and I the woman; it is bad work, Joe,” and he cried bitterly, and said, “It has not been always so.... I should never have believed that either thou or anyone else would have seen me mending my wife’s stockings, for it is bad work ... but now the world is upside down. Mary has to work and I have to stop at home, mind the childer, sweep and wash, bake and mend; and, when the poor woman comes home at night, she is knocked up. Thou knows, Joe, it’s hard for one that was used different.” “Yes, boy, it is hard.” And then Jack began to cry again, and he wished he had never married, and that he had never been born; but he had never thought, when he wed Mary, that it would come to this. “I have often cried over it,” said Jack. Now when Joe heard this, he told me that he had cursed and damned the factories, and the masters, and the Government, with all the curses that he had learned while he was in the factory from a child. (quoted in Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1969 edition, pp. 173–74)

Jack was crippled by the role reversal wrought upon his family: he does not simply invent a new and more comfortable ideology to sustain his new economic position, as Burnette maintains (p. 6). Custom lingers. Jack, Joe, and Engels shared a sense of violation regarding male breadwinners and women homemakers. Engels invited the reader to be shocked by this “insane state of things ... which unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness” (p. 174). No one records Mary’s feelings on the matter, nor those of their children, although later Engels notes the challenge to family relations wrought by children working and their empowerment through wages.

Customary practices, and customary wages, are too readily dismissed in this study. Australia had a customary family wage at the heart of its arbitration system, with increments for skill, not productivity. When this changed in the Second World War, and women war workers were told they were worth less than a man because they produced less, in disbelief they demanded a timed contest between the sexes. Alas, they were denied. Direct evidence is hard to come by, but it is needed to sustain Burnette's argument that the gender gap was a productivity gap. It is unconvincing to argue that women's wages were low because their productivity was low, and that we know that their productivity was low by examining their wages.

So, can we use Burnette's argument to make sense of her opening story: that of the Glasgow cotton manufacturers? We are told that employers had no interest in discriminating against women workers, and that discrimination only arose in non-competitive market sectors where men could harness specialized skills to carve a niche that excluded women (an argument that runs throughout much research into the politics of work and labor process theory). And yet the book commences with Glasgow's cotton manufacturers metaphori-

cally held hostage by low-skilled men. Employers were forced to sack their all-female work force and recruit men—possibly the same men responsible for death threats, murder, beatings, shootings, and damage to factories. These entrepreneurs had invested heavily in highly productive new technology and brought it in against the combination by employing comparatively quiescent women, whom they allegedly paid male rates. The working men labeled their temporary replacements as “whores” who spent their money on drinking with young men, while honest working men could not feed starving families. Burnette tells us all this, but it is unclear how strength, productivity, or childbearing explain these events. The story seems to highlight issues at odds with Burnette's central themes. Burnette seems so driven by her own conviction regarding the merits of competition that the world she describes is sometimes at odds with the world that was.

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