

FOREWORD

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A mere fifty years ago, women were a marginalized and largely unobserved social group, both in social life and in the writings of social scientists. They were one of the principal forgotten peoples along with socially defined “minorities” and persons practicing socially repudiated sexualities. The subordination of women to men goes back a very long way, possibly to the inception of human collective life. It has no doubt taken different forms in different kinds of historical social systems. The advent of the modern world-system built around a capitalist world-economy continued this subordination in new ways. There was one important change. One of the major legacies of the French Revolution was to define the “people” as the locus of sovereignty and, therefore, of the formal equality of all “citizens” who constituted this “people.”

Were not women people? The story ever since then has been to develop all kinds of rationales to deny women their status as part of the sovereign “people” and, therefore, to negate their claims to equal rights with men. A struggle over legitimacy ensued, and that struggle was grounded in conflict between theoretical equality and practical inequality.

The world-revolution of 1968 had as one of its major features the revolt of the forgotten peoples, both in social life and in the structures of knowledge. Feminist movements arose to pursue these demands in every sphere of life. Slowly, women were able to obtain rights to suffrage, which changed something but, as it turned out, not all that much. In the history of feminist movements, the world-revolution of 1968 gave a new and important impetus to their organizations. Most particularly, feminist movements raised the issue, previously not in the forefront of their consciousness, of women in the structures of knowledge.

A major part of this effort was to make the distinction between sex (an old category) and gender (a new one). Sex refers to a biological construct. Therefore, it had been considered a given in social contexts. One could not change one’s sex, or so it was believed (at least before the advent of the technological advances of more recent years). Gender as a concept refers not to

biology but to the social definition of social roles. And social definitions are clearly open to manipulation and transformation.

The concept of gender made possible a considerable advance in the social sciences. It permitted analysis of the ways in which the world-system has institutionalized sexism, legitimating thereby the practical subordination of women to men. It helped uncover the multiple ways in which children (starting from their earliest life) were socialized into expectations and practices that continued the unequal treatment. And, of course, it led to the creation of research and teaching structures that would continue such analyses within universities, in specialized literature, in national and international organizations, and even in governmental bureaucracies.

Slowly, the concept of gender opened up new arenas of social science work beyond the old ghetto of studies of family life. Yet, half a century later, it is astonishing how many arenas remain sheltered from these concerns. There is an incredible amount of foot-dragging and resistance to introducing gender in very many subject areas. One of these areas has been the now-blossoming arena of studies of commodity chains.

The realm of commodity chains is relatively new. It was created out of the concern of those involved in world-systems analysis to demonstrate that “transnational” economic transactions are not a recent phenomenon, a form of “globalization” of what had previously been intrastate economic behavior. Instead, it was argued that “commodity chains” crossing multiple state borders had been the basic and continuing reality of economic life in the modern world-system from its outset in the long sixteenth century.

Once this area of study was launched, more and more scholars realized how much could be learned about the ways in which the axial division of labor functioned and made possible the enormous transfer of surplus value from producers throughout the modern world-system to a small group that accumulated ever-expanding capital, the basic objective and normative pressure of capitalism as a historical system.

How was it possible not to notice that these commodity chains were gendered? Indeed, not only were they gendered, but gender was itself a principal constitutive feature of the commodity chains. Obviously, there has been political, economic, and scholarly resistance to incorporating gender into the structures of knowledge. That it was possible for this neglect to be challenged is a tribute to the continued pressure from the “forgotten people” not to tolerate such forgetting.

This volume may not be the first in which anyone has introduced gender into discussions about commodity chains, but to my knowledge it is the first that has made gendered commodity chains the issue under discussion. This book calls attention to “hidden women’s work” in “laborer households.” This is the point. The work is *hidden*. But by whom? Obviously, by all of us.

And here the social scientists bear the most guilt. For is it not the very point of the social sciences to uncover the hidden that lies under the surface of all social phenomena? Is it not the very point of the social sciences to uncover in whose interests and in what ways realities are hidden and then justified as normal, as inevitable, indeed, as rational?

This book opens the discussion. It does not close it. We have a very long way to go in uncovering the hidden, in elaborating the processes, in showing how they continue to reinforce and expand the inequalities, and in understanding the fact that rationality is in the eyes of the beholder.

But if we have a long way to go, we do not have a long time in which to do this work. The modern world-system is in its terminal crisis, in which the existing system cannot continue and is, therefore, in the midst of a bifurcation and transition into the system (or systems) that will replace it (Prigogine 1996: 157–62, Wallerstein 1995a: 155–63). The world is collectively choosing between two alternative possible futures: one that continues the worst features of the present system (perhaps in an even worse form) or one that shifts our civilizational orientation to that of a relatively democratic, relatively egalitarian world.

Part of this terminal crisis is a crisis in the structures of knowledge, in which the concept of gender is playing a key role. We shall either move toward a radically reconstructed epistemology in which reconstructed historical social sciences will play a key unifying role, overcoming the modern divide between the sciences and the humanities, or we shall not do so. The effort to overcome the antiquated structures of knowledge that have dominated the world-system for two centuries now is part and parcel of the effort to tilt the choice toward the civilizational option of a relatively democratic and relatively egalitarian world.

The work on gender is very difficult because of the resistance, but it is also very urgent. We have, as the saying goes, not a minute to lose, which is why this book constitutes an important contribution not merely to the social sciences but to the larger world political scene.