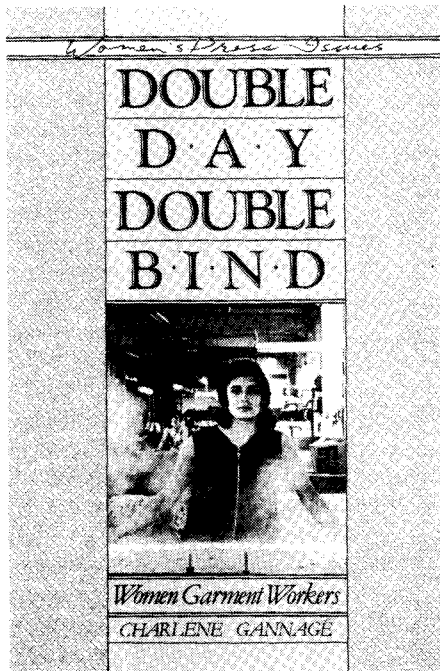




BOOK REVIEWS



DOUBLE DAY, DOUBLE BIND: WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS

Charlene Gannage. Toronto: Women's Press, 1986.

Linda Briskin

Charlene Gannage in *Double Day, Double Bind* attempts to unravel the complex life and work experience of immigrant women workers at Edna Manufacturing, a garment factory on Spadina in Toronto. The success of this book is twofold: first, it breaks the silence and solicits and records the voices of immigrant women; secondly, it details the complex factors which contribute to the development of gender and union consciousness, and which converge to create barriers to women's union participation. These factors include the organization of the work process, the system of payment, paternalistic employer/employee relations characteristic of small family-owned businesses; the ethnic division of the work place, skill differentiation, the

gender division of labour; the double day for women, the structures and ideology of business unionism and patriarchal gender ideology.

Before we meet the women themselves, Gannage discusses her research process. She documents the problems of gaining access to the women, the difficulties she had interviewing, the tensions and hostilities often generated by the process, and her own struggle to maintain her self confidence. For example, at one point she reports that a union bureaucrat "advised me that I was too aggressive, too direct in my questions, that I cornered people, that I did not allow them an out, that I was too persistent and academic. He suggested that I be more feminine in my approach."

I found this discussion fascinating. But I would have liked the personal character of it to be referenced to the ongoing feminist debate about how to do research, how to bridge the gap between researchers and respondents, etc.¹

We first meet the women of Edna manufacturing talking about their double day of labour. Gannage moves from the women's experience of the double day to look at how both the company and the union divide the workers. This sets the stage for making sense of women's limited participation in the union.

In listening to these women speak of their work and their lives, I was struck by the relentless drudgery: their victimization by the capitalist work process and by a gender ideology that makes them responsible for housework and family life.

I want to provide everything because Monday, start again to go to work. I don't want to leave everything. I want to fix everything. I kill myself sometimes. Maybe when I die, I relax. When I die, I finish everything.

They are driven by economic necessity and the desire to educate their children. The pressure of the double day means, however, that they have little time to spend with their children. They look forward to retirement and becoming grand-

mothers: "You've got no time to enjoy your own children. But with grandchildren — everything."

Yet despite the pressures, they communicate a tremendous sense of determination and purpose: to work, to survive, to make better opportunities for their children. And they are often committed to wage work for reasons beyond the economic.

I like work. Somehow I feel useful. I enjoy working... You have your own money you enjoy that and you enjoy helping your husband... you feel you belong to the world. You work, you make progress.

This is consistent with research which has demonstrated that, from the point of view of physical and psychological health, the double day of work is better for women than staying at home fulltime. For example, Coleman and Antonucci (1982) argue that for women, "employment is... one of the most important predictors of physical health and lack of psychological anxiety."²

Canadian research on immigrant housewives suggests that employment might be especially important for immigrant women. Roxanna Ng and Judith Ramirez document the tremendous stress experienced by the immigrant woman, isolated in her home because of the language barrier, lack of support networks, etc.³

Gannage moves from women's experience of the double day to look at how the company divides the workers through the labour process, mobilizing the gender and ethnic division of labour as well as material and ideological differentiation by skill. Of particular interest is Gannage's description of how different systems of wage payment (some workers are paid by the piece, some by the hour and some by the week) structure competition, consciousness and degrees of worker solidarity.

Workers acknowledge that the pressures of piece work create health problems but many also feel that piece work

gives them control over the work process, and in particular over the timing of the work. This is especially important to women, who often have to leave work early to pick up children. At the same time, the system of piece work increases competition between workers and provides a substitute for more overt systems of management supervision. In this way workers come to participate in their own exploitation. In contrast, the highly skilled cutters who are paid a weekly wage work at a more reasonable pace and are able to develop a workplace *camaraderie*.

Gannage emphasizes that the gender division of labour has implications for women's trade union participation. In the garment trade, men do creative purposeful work, identify with the quality of the finished production, take pride in their work and have a degree of control over the work process. Women on the other hand do repetitive, more routinized and adjunct work: "Although women workers develop speed, dexterity and expertise in their particular task, these skills are not recognized at face value but rather are defined as 'women's work,' that is, menial or marginal work deserving low pay. This view of women's work as marginal has consequences for women's trade union participation." It certainly contributes to their lack of status in the union.

Further, the fact that the union intervenes directly into the labour process (settling prices and distribution of work) for the skilled male workers gives these workers an active tie to the union (although Gannage might stress more that this is a mixed blessing and certainly contributes to the employer/ union alliance). For the non-craft and mostly women workers, there is no involvement of the union at the shop level; rather the foreman and employer supervise production. Thus in Gannage's view the very structure of the work process distances women from the union.

Despite the fact that many of the women are not active in the union, they do support unions, but have divergent views on whether the union should be militant or should focus on 'cooperating' with the employer.

Sheila: "They seldom have strikes now, they're smarter than that. They come to an agreement... A strike doesn't bring you anything. You lose time. You lose your patience. You are bitter against one another. At the end, it's the same old story."

Maria: "I am not against people who go to strike. You go to strike because it is necessary... I think with strike we can say

we are people we want something too, we not animal... How do you think all those human rights of the worker got in there. Nobody's boss wants to give more money. Why give it? because the union is strong and the people agree with the union."

Almost none of the women, however, believe that the union should take up women's issues. When asked about whether the union should be involved in fighting for child care, one of the few women activists in the union replied, "They haven't got money for that. I don't think this is a union's job." About language classes for immigrant women, she said, "It's a waste of time. If you are speaking about women, they are rushing always home because they have their husbands at home." About meetings on work time, "That's impossible. Factories has a limit. The bosses need the work. It's a private industry... It's impossible."

Double Day, Double Bind concretely challenges any notion that we can study the politics of unions in isolation, independent of the complex interweaving of work, family and community experience. At the same time, the book is not entirely successful. I would like to comment on two methodological questions about how the book is constructed: the presentation and organization of the voices of the women, and the question of audience and theory.

Gannage's recording the voices of immigrant women — so long silenced by their class, ethnicity and gender — is undeniably important. However the voices are so tangled together that it is difficult for any of the women to emerge as a unique personality. I would have preferred being introduced to six or eight of the women that we would encounter throughout, with whom I could then associate particular class and ethnic histories.

So much of the feminist methodological struggle is to hold onto 'difference'. The jumble and tangle of voices does somewhat of a disservice to this goal, as it constructs an undifferentiated 'immigrant woman' rather than a materially rooted multiplicity of voices.

My second concern is two fold: the question of audience and the presentation of the theoretical framework. The Prologue to *Double Day Double Bind* introduces some of the marxist feminist debates about women's work. It is problematic because of the difficulty of the language, the assumptions inherent in the presentation and its location at the beginning of the book. The Prologue not only inadvertently reinforces the common

belief in the inaccessibility of theory, but it also confuses the reader about the substance of the book. It is only into the second chapter that we begin to get a sense of the book's focus and structure. It is also the case that the theoretical material is not well integrated throughout, but often appears tacked on at the beginning and end of the chapters.

The book would have been better served by an introduction which outlined the framework of the presentation and which provided a concrete discussion of the conditions of Canadian immigrant women workers, and of the current state of the union movement — both of which would have helped the reader to situate women's experience at Edna Manufacturing.

As feminist writers we need to be more self-consciously aware of our audience and of the need to make feminist theory accessible. In struggling with this problematic, three questions suggest themselves to me: first, what does the reader need to know in order to grasp the significance and richness of the empirical material; secondly, how can the theoretical framework be introduced so as to make it accessible to the wide audience who would be interested in the material — in this case the conditions of immigrant women workers in a garment factory. Finally and perhaps most importantly: how can the *necessity* of a theoretical framework be made apparent to the reader so that when it is developed (in conjunction with, or after the presentation of the empirical material, I suggest) it would be welcomed.

¹ For example, see Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: a contradiction in terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1981), pp. 30-61.

² Quoted in Carol Tavis and Carole Wade, *The Longest War* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1984), p. 278.

³ Roxana Ng and Judith Ramirez, *Immigrant Housewives in Canada* (Toronto: The Immigrant Women's Centre, 1981).