# Thirty Years on from *Women on the Line*: Researching Gender and Work

## Introduction: Visualizing Space and Narrating Work

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Miriam Glucksmann's ethnography of factory work, *Women on the Line*, was republished in 2009, nearly thirty years after the publication of the first edition in 1982 under the pseudonym, Ruth Cavendish. The original text is unchanged, but the new edition includes a new introduction and additional images.[1] It is an account of Glucksmann's time working in a factory in the late 1970s, something she undertook as a political act and not with the intention of writing an ethnography, as she herself discusses below. The book was quickly recognized as a seminal account of women's work and one which disentangled the operation of gender at work. It exposed the construction of sexual difference and drew attention to forms of solidarity between women of different ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, *Women on the Line* is considered to be "a paradigmatic example of gender as central to understanding work"[2] and one that has been studied closely and critiqued as well as admired.[3] Two other "feminist ethnographies"—as they came to be described[4]—were published at around the same time: Anna Pollert's *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* in 1981, and Sallie Westwood's *All Day, Every Day* in 1984. They continue to be widely cited and remain key references in sociology text books and on student reading lists.[5]

What is striking about rereading *Women on the Line* today is how relevant it remains for understanding work in the twenty-first century, including the ways in which configurations of gender, class, race, and age make for different experiences of work and life. The republication of the book is the starting point for the set of short articles presented here that reflect on its legacy and its significance for researching gender and work thirty years on.[6] In this introduction, I make some points about the visual, space, and narrative in *Women on the Line* and then outline the subsequent contributions, which start with a short article by Miriam Glucksmann herself, followed by three others: by Anna Pollert, Pun Ngai, and Carol Wolkowitz.

I met with Miriam Glucksmann to discuss this collection of short articles and in particular to ask her more about the photographs she had taken during

*International Labor and Working-Class History*
No. 81, Spring 2012, pp. 163–167
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doi:10.1017/S0147547912000099

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000099 Published online by Cambridge University Press

her time "on the line," some of which are included in the 2009 edition of the book. In the course of our discussion, she pointed out the centrality of the visual in her everyday work activity. The factory was initially an unfathomable space to her, so much so that the visual dominated her sensory experience of the workplace, especially in her first weeks there, which were marked by "having to make sense of what I saw." The arrangement of space was "alien" to her, and she spent time and effort "keeping my eyes open,"[7] trying hard to "decipher space."[8] She came to know and understand the space as a lived and inhabited one over time. She explains that it took between six weeks and three months, however, in spite of her "working at it"! At first, she had neither a conceptualization of the space in mind—a "representation of space" in Lefebvre's terms—nor a lived understanding of "representational space" already known through habit and touch. It was necessary for her to develop a form of what Grasseni calls "skilled vision,"[9] which is "never detached from a certain amount of multisensoriality especially from tactility"[10] to comprehend what she saw, including "who was who" and the gendered arrangement of space.

If looking was a habitual working (and in retrospect, an ethnographic) practice, opportunities to photograph the space were very limited, and Glucksmann's images offer a very particular and partial representation since they were all taken on a single day when the workers were on strike, hence their smiles! The inclusion of these photographs in the new edition of the book gives the reader glimpses into factory space and the age and ethnicity of the women workers. In the two images reprinted here, we see the centrality of the line in the arrangement of the space, echoed in the strips of lighting and structural features which delineate, divide, and shape the overall working environment. Miriam talks about people being separated from one another along the line, each alone in their "tiny square." In the image on the right-hand side below, this separation and spatial containment is evident in the line itself running between the women and symbolically conveyed by the presence of the post cutting the picture in two. It is also echoed in the compartmentalization of the box of speedometers in the bottom right-hand corner of the image. In the book, Miriam powerfully describes her own experience of being "boxed in" after an additional construction was added to the work bench: "I couldn't see across the line anymore or talk to anyone…"[11].





https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000099 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*Women on the Line* is also interesting as a form of sociological writing. It is a narrative account of factory life but one that makes a theoretical contribution "between the lines" to analyzing work. At the same time, it evokes the sensory experience of work. As Myra Marx Ferree wrote in her review: "This book packs more insight per page than any other case study I've read and gives the sense of the factory so well you can see it and smell it"[12]. It is an example of what Paul Stoller has called "tasteful writing"[13], where the sensory experience of a place or an activity remains integral to the published account of it, written into it to evoke the world that is being discussed instead of written out of the account as in mainstream sociology. *Women on the Line* conveys the relentlessness of the line, the speed of the work and the slowness of the day, the concentration, the boredom, and the exhaustion. It communicates how all this profoundly shapes time and the experience of life and sense of self outside of work.

The book was written from a diary that Miriam started only several weeks into her time at the factory: "After a few weeks I felt as if I'd always worked there," she explains, "and thought I'd better note things down before I forgot my first impressions entirely"[14]. It was only after she gave up the job—and the focus it produced on the bodily experience and effects of the work—that she was able to write about the organization and process of work in detail and relationships between the women. The book that later emerged was a deliberate form of sociology as storytelling that "conjure[s] up social life"[15] deploying different literary forms and devices from those of mainstream sociology.[16] This produces an account that is "vivid"[17], even "chatty"[18]; it is a "live" sociology.[19] Indeed, a review of the 2009 edition comments: "The outstanding and enduring strength of the book is the gripping and gritty account of working life."[20]

Below, Miriam Glucksmann reflects on the global changes in women's work since the publication of *Women on the Line*. She sets out the questions she asked (political, not academic) and the context of understanding women's work in the late 1970s; and she describes working life in the factory, especially the rigid hierarchies and gendered divisions of labour and the impact they had on the lives of the women who were her coworkers. If such jobs are no longer present in the global north, Glucksmann draws parallels between factory and call-center work, although the latter is marked by less solidarity and less clarity about power and control. With reference to her recent research on ready-made food, she highlights how class and gender configurations have changed over the past three decades, with looser gender divisions in workplaces in the twenty-first century, and the increased presence of both men and women migrant workers in assembly-line work.

Anna Pollert discusses her own ethnography of women factory workers, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, as a fascinating counterpoint to Glucksmann's. Motivated both by politics (socialist feminist) and pedagogy (to respond to the lack of books available for teaching at the time), Pollert's study was an explicit piece of research based on (nonparticipant) observation in which she sought to analyze wider issues of political economy through the microlevel of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000099 Published online by Cambridge University Press

workplace. She discusses the unstable, unfolding, and contradictory nature of becoming a woman worker through the intersections of class, gender, and age, in which there is both subordination and potential for change, and draws attention to the ordinary, the unspoken, and the unheard, themes that remain relevant in her more recent research on vulnerable, low-paid, unorganized workers.

Pun Ngai, author of *Made in China*, an ethnographic study of young migrant women engaged in factory work in urban China, addresses—both as a researcher and an activist—the challenges faced by women factory workers, including the issue of material working conditions. She argues that current conceptualizations of agency that do not adequately grasp real constraints miss the complexity of the lived reality of gender and class, and that gender is central to the making and remaking of class in the present context of urban China. For instance, through the specific and highly gendered "dormitory regime," rural to urban migrant women workers experience both alienation and solidarity.

Carol Wolkowitz concludes with a reflection on the role of the body in work, a central concern in her own recent writing, notably *Bodies at Work*, and a significant dimension of Glucksmann's account, now discussed in relation to the concept of embodiment in the introduction to the new edition. Through a close reading of *Women on the Line*, Wolkowitz draws attention to workers' bodily exertions as the basis for the firm's profitability. She goes on to discuss Glucksmann's book in relation to more recent ethnographies, including of service work. In particular, Wolkowitz highlights the increased place of "touch" in work, itself connected to new and/or more widespread forms of "body work," (i.e., work on the bodies of others) adding "a politics of touch in the workplace, and not just a politics of exhaustion." This discussion enhances our understanding of the embodied experience of work included in *Women on the Line.*

## NOTES

1. There is a discussion of the republication of *Women on the Line* with Miriam Glucksmann at http://nowaytomakealiving.net/post/616.
2. Susan Halford and Tim Strangleman, "In Search of the Sociology of Work," *Sociology* 43 (2009): 815.
3. Veronica Beechey, "What's So Special about Women's Employment? A Review of Some Recent Studies of Women's Paid Work," *Feminist Review* 15 (1983): 23–45; Ann Oakley, Book Review, *The British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1983): 278.
4. Anne Williams, "Diversity and Agreement in Feminist Ethnography," *Sociology* 27 (1993).
5. See for instance, Tim Strangleman and Tracey Warren, *Work and Society* (London, 2008).
6. This discussion was first put together as a panel at the *Work, Employment and Society* Conference (Brighton, September 2010). I approached Miriam with the idea of the panel that I then chaired.
7. Miriam Glucksmann, *Women on the Line* (London, 2009), 6.
8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991).
9. Christina Grasseni, "Skilled Vision: An Apprenticeship in Breeding Aesthetics," *Social Anthropology* 12 (2007): 41–55.
10. Grasseini, "Skilled Vision," 41.
11. Glucksmann, *Women on the Line*, 109.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000099 Published online by Cambridge University Press

12. Myra Marx Ferree, Book Review, *Contemporary Sociology* 25 (1996), 448.
13. Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, (Philadelphia, 1989), 29.
14. Glucksmann, *Women on the Line*, 7.
15. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis and London, 2008), 22 in Carol Smart, "Disciplined Writing: On the Problem of Writing Sociologically," Working paper #13; *Realities* (Manchester, 2010), 5.
16. Smart, "Disciplined writing".
17. Beechey, 25.
18. Marx Ferree, "Book Review", 447.
19. Les Back, *The Art of Listening* (Oxford, 2007), 165.
20. Andrew Smith, Book Review, *Work, Employment and Society*, 23 (2009), 803.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000099 Published online by Cambridge University Press