

BROTHERS

Cynthia Cockburn

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Brothers is a feminist book about a profoundly masculine industry, printing. Based on research in four newspaper offices and intensive interviews with 50 compositors, Cynthia Cockburn unravels the dramatic changes which have taken place in newspaper printing over the past few years as 'hot metal' composition has been replaced by 'cold' photocomposition. She analyses the economic crises suffered by the industry in the long postwar boom, and the endeavours by newspaper owners to restore profitability by breaking craft control over printing and introducing new computerised technology. A major focus of the book is the introduction of new technology. This has played a key role in the struggle between capital and labour in the newspaper industry. It has also given rise to new forms of management. The story of the second Lord Thompson's endeavours to introduce photocomposition at *Times* newspapers, which led to a nine-month lock-out, is a well known part of recent trade union history.

Cynthia Cockburn approaches the question of how new technology has been introduced in the newspaper industry through the eyes of the group of workers who have been most immediately affected, the compositors. The newspaper industry in London has, unusually, kept its own workforce and retrained it in the new methods of work. It thus provides an excellent example of how one group of skilled male workers has adjusted to technological change. In many other industries the transformation of the workforce has been effected by sacking old workers and taking on new workers, or by moving production to Third World countries where labour is considerably cheaper.

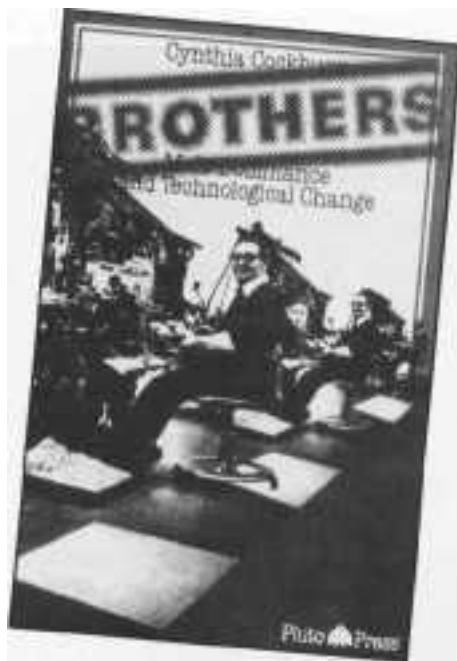
The book invites us to explore the complex and contradictory ways in which the compositors' lives have been changing. It analyses the changing relationships of the compositors to management, to semi-skilled and unskilled workers, to women workers, and (more speculatively) to their families and society in general. Cynthia Cockburn explores the complex meanings which these changes have for the individual men, and for their class consciousness. Reading the book I found myself sympathising with the compositors who feel they have lost their skills and their status, and who no longer

take the same pride in their work. At the same time, however, I was struck by the conservatism of many of the compositors' responses — a conservatism expressed in their desire to differentiate themselves from semi-skilled and unskilled workers, to maintain very high wages, to distinguish their work from women's work (typing particularly), and to preserve a very masculine orientation towards work. The book is so well written that Cynthia Cockburn carries the reader effortlessly through these complex changes. Reading the book I felt that I could begin to grasp the lived experience of this beleaguered yet privileged group of skilled male workers.

Brothers is much more than a well-told story, however. It is a major contribution to Marxist and feminist thinking in a whole range of areas: the labour process, paid work, new technology, skill, ideology, class and class consciousness, gender and gender consciousness, alternative conceptions of work, capitalism and patriarchy. I found the book's arguments about skill and ideology particularly interesting. Cynthia Cockburn unravels a number of meanings of skill, and suggests that skill and control over the labour process should be distinguished. She questions Harry Braverman's view that deskilling and degradation are the same thing, and suggests that skill has a gender as well as a class dimension.

Perhaps her most contentious point is that a socialist perspective on skill should consider the use values of the commodities produced. It should not accept, as many trade unions do, a purely instrumental view of skill. *Brothers* adopts a Gramscian conception of ideology, but unlike many Marxist analyses of ideology, it considers both class and gendered aspects. Cynthia's analysis of the sexual ideologies expressed by the compositors whom she interviewed is particularly interesting, and represents a real step forward in thinking about patriarchal forms of ideology.

She distinguishes three aspects of this ideology: an essentialism which sees men and women as possessing sex-specific characteristics and potentials; an appeal to complementarity which sees a man or woman as part of a couple; and a split, in men's images of women, between the wife/mother/daughter and the sex object. These are all being threatened by the entry of women into the men's sphere of work in the wake of new technology. The men are thus being confronted by new contradictions. Partly because Cynthia Cockburn develops her theoretical arguments in relation to detailed interview materials, and partly because she addresses herself to a



political project — of how the working class might become a class-for-itself — *Brothers* avoids the sterile academicism and theoreticism which has prevailed in many writings on similar subjects.

The book is weak in certain areas and I shall conclude by briefly discussing two. First, I found the general discussions of Marxism and feminism unsatisfactory. Cynthia Cockburn asserts that Marxism and feminism are two holistic world-views. Like Heidi Hartmann, she sees Marxism dealing with class relations, and feminism with the sex/gender system. Each system has its own material base and ideological expressions. In the case of Marxism the base lies in economic relations. In the case of feminism, physical and social relations and the reproduction of human life constitute the base. The problem with this formulation of the relationships between sex and gender relations and class relations is that the two spheres are not properly integrated at the level of theory. We are left with two rather abstract theoretical edifices with little guidance as to how each might relate to the other, either in the historical development of patriarchy and capitalism or in contemporary society.

At many points in *Brothers* Cynthia Cockburn discusses the class and gendered aspects of the compositors' experiences brilliantly. She also shows quite clearly how gender relations are reconstructed and reproduced throughout society, and not just in the family, as feminists have often asserted. There is a tension, however, between the more specific analyses and the author's more abstract formulations. The

experiences the book discusses are too complex and contradictory to fit neatly into the rather simplistic theoretical framework used for analysing Marxism and feminism in the abstract.

The second weakness is in the discussion of trade unions, which do not feature very prominently in *Brothers*. The book tells of the control over the labour process which the Fathers of the Chapel had in 'hot metal' compositing, and of the divided attitudes within the NGA about future strategies — about whether to move towards an industrial union for printing, or whether to try and preserve craft identity. There is also a graphic description of the attitudes of some of the compositors towards semi-skilled and unskilled workers which take the form of prejudice towards the members of NATSOPA and SOGAT (now merged) who are often called 'bloody Nats'. The analysis of unions would have been improved if the author had explored the compositors' attitudes towards their own union, and had given us some idea of the institutional organisation and structure of the union.

This absence becomes very important in the final chapter where the possibilities for change are discussed. Here Cynthia Cockburn discusses the major contradictions experienced by the compositors and speculates about the possible directions of change — possibilities ranging from right-wing politics to a socialist alternative committed to dismantling the hierarchies of skill and male power. She also outlines policies which a single 'media union' might adopt. Many of these policies are very radical. Many feminists in particular would be sympathetic to them. They are a far cry, however, from the actual situation of the compositors described in most of the book, and, I suspect, from the union policies currently under discussion within the printing industry.

It seems appropriate to end by posing the question which I was asked in an interview the other day: how can we both defend trade unions against the onslaught of the Thatcher government and many employers, and at the same time fundamentally transform them? *Brothers* contains lots of evidence that the print industry and the skilled men in it require transformation, and throws up many ideas about positive alternatives, but it is rather weak on the actual processes of change, and in particular on the role of trade unions. Nevertheless it is an extremely stimulating book which is highly relevant to both socialist and feminist thinking about employment.

Veronica Beechey