

# Ideologies and Innovation: Gender Dimensions of Business History

Alice Kessler-Harris  
*Rutgers University*

An illustration from Alfred Chandler's venerable study, *Strategy and Structure*, provides the framework for my argument. In one of his examples, Chandler tells us that the Sears, Roebuck company, eager to move from a mail order house to retail operations in the mid-1920s adopted a unique strategy. In contrast to its mail order business (where clothing and drygoods predominated) Sears' chair, Robert Wood, decreed that the new retail outlets would concentrate on "hard lines and 'big tickets'". The move created complicated problems of distribution and authority, but none was more complicated than the issue of how buying and selling "big ticket" items would influence the organization of personnel and administrative apparatus. From the beginning, according to Chandler, Sears "Gave its store appeal to the man--the family--the home--the car--and relatively little appeal to style.' It concentrated on hard lines like furniture, hardware, tools, guns, fishing tackle, and most important of all, the durable goods created by the coming of the automobile and electric power, such as tires, batteries, and other automobile accessories, refrigerators, washing machines and other electrical appliances" [2, p. 236].

To sell these goods effectively Sears developed a particular kind of organization, and hired personnel who differed from those employed by the traditional department store. Retail stores were assigned to one of 33 districts, and each store was categorized as either an A, B, or C venture, roughly corresponding to the size of the unit. Only B category stores carried a reasonable mix of soft and hard goods. After some delay, the organization was functionally divided, with several vice presidents holding the authority over decisions as to distribution, inventories, and sales strategies. Neither the managers of the 33 districts nor store managers were left with much authority. This organizational structure, according to Chandler, was necessary in order to accommodate both the separate interests of mail order and retail sales, and in order to insure that Sears own volume lines were effectively represented [2, p. 236]. Though Chandler does not say this, Sears' own data suggest that its organization influenced its hiring and promotion practices, creating a culture which, as reflected in its personnel manuals, represented many sales jobs, and all job ladders, as particularly masculine. The successful candidate for these jobs was described as "a special breed of cat,' with a sharper intellect and

more powerful personality," as someone who possesses "a lot of drive and physical vigor, [and] is socially dominant" [9, p. 27].

In 1979, fifty years after the Sears business re-organization was completed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission took Sears Roebuck to court, contending that women had been denied opportunities to sell "big ticket" items and a wide array of "hard goods," including those most closely associated with automobiles and men's sports, as well as all major appliances. The EEOC cited the company's personnel manuals as evidence of persistent imaging of jobs as masculine. Sears, in its defense, argued vehemently that the company's officers did not rely on its personnel manuals at all. Rather, they called on their own past experience with commission sales people. Based on that experience, Sears held that these were jobs that most women simply did not want. Women, argued the Sears counsel, in a brief that the district judge quoted approvingly, "feared or disliked the dog-eat-dog competition," were uncomfortable or unfamiliar with products sold on commission, feared being unable to compete, being unsuccessful and losing their jobs [9, pp. 28, 64]. In short, Sears, believing that a male culture was necessary to sell its goods, successfully constructed such a culture in the workplace. Confronted with a charge of discrimination, the company argued that the demands of the job at issue required participation in the culture it had created. Judge John Nordberg, confirming the existence of gendered ideology, concluded that indeed these were jobs that women could not be expected to want.

It is not my purpose here to debate the merits of the case, nor to suggest a linear relationship between the way Sears originally conceived its mission and the resulting structure. But surely the gender-based assumptions around which this corporation, like many others, has structured its operations is worth noting. That these assumptions were widely accepted and commonly approved by men and women only makes them more worthy of the historian's detective work. Their invisibility does not in any respect render ideologies of gender difference less powerful as mechanisms for structuring the world around around them. Arguably, it makes them more powerful, in this case influencing not only what would be sold, but how it would be marketed, who the appropriate managers and sales people would be, how the chain of authority would function, and so on.

These gendered perceptions are part of a larger ideological framework that moves people to act. As historians we quickly see that the way we behave as economic creatures is not naturally conceived, nor are the rules that govern us value and gender neutral constructions free of race or class bias. To uncover the framework we need to accept that economic laws are not "natural" in any sense of the word, but rather that they are simply the names we give to a set of practices and a body of knowledge with which we are comfortable. If profit maximization and stability are imperatives, they function within a social context that requires elucidation. The economic laws to which they respond contain a complex set of instructions. The practices intended to implement them, including the search for innovation, efficiency, hierarchy, and technology, are defined by human agency. They are not naturally conceived, nor are they value and gender neutral constructions.

Our quest then is to explore the dynamic by which we come to accept a human construct as natural. In this search, the situation of women (or of people of color) becomes merely illustrative. At root, we want to understand how racial, ethnic, and gender differences are utilized in the construction of economic systems. Or, to put it another way, how the making of men and women affects how we think about economic order, and thus how we value order, technology, and innovation.

Several developments make it easier to take this route. The first is the rapid emergence and increasing sophistication of social studies of industry, of technology, and of efficiency. I am thinking here not only of the work of Harry Braverman and David Noble, but also of recent work that acknowledges the importance of family and community and culture in shaping decisions [1, 4, 7, 8, 10]. One of the clearest statements appears in Alfred Chandler's *The Visible Hand*. Chandler argued there that "the visible hand of management" had replaced the "invisible hand of market forces." In the modern business enterprise, he suggested, top managers had taken the place of the market in allocating resources for future production and distribution [3, pp. 7, 12]. The argument opens the need to expose human motivations and enhances our sensitivity to the influence of social and political forces. But our understanding of the impact of these forces on theories of economic production has not kept pace. I want to suggest that this is largely because we have not sufficiently interrogated the assumptions on which social and political pressures are based.

The second development derives from post-modern discourse. At the core of post-modernism lies a skepticism about beliefs concerning truths, knowledge, power, self, and language that are often taken for granted and that serve as legitimation for western culture. By challenging what appears to be neutral, and raising questions about customarily accepted notions of understanding, the historical community seeks a new ground for interpreting our past. And by raising questions about the existence of a stable and coherent self with consistent meaning, post-modernism enables us to see how culture and character play themselves out over time and space. Post-modernism enables us to move economic laws from the centre of our understanding of what culture is all about to a product of discovery with changing meaning without at the same time compromising the notion that there was after all some material root that both required and would reward examination.

At the same time, post-modernism challenges the conviction that knowledge acquired from the use of reason will be necessarily "true." Since it offers no way to construct a model of a culture without oneself in it, no way to know a culture independently, it relegates the search for consensus to the desires of particular subjects influenced by the surrounding social/cultural context. It opens the door to questions about the neutrality of knowledge, and to skepticism about its socially beneficial consequences. Post-modernism inserts a self-consciousness about the scholar/interpreter--a way of distancing. It challenges the transparency of language as merely the medium in and through which representation occurs. Instead, scholars who use it argue that both language and the objects it represents are socially constructed. Thus,

language (representation) is an exercise of power that can guide the consciousness and therefore the actions of individuals.

A relational stance calls on some of the insights of post-modernism to insist on the importance of the "other" to the shaping of the center. "Race/class/gender and ethnicity" may appear to be a figure of speech (an overused trope), but our understanding of their interwoven relationship continues to grow with time. Historians who operate in this mode are encouraged to ask how, for example, ideas about masculinity among managers might influence their sense of community and loyalty, their views of family, their economic behavior and social expectations, helping to structure a sexually segmented labor force, and to influence the shape of the female labor market.

I don't want to suggest that those of us interested in economic history need to turn into deconstructionists--quite the opposite--but in so far as postmodernism has influenced the parameters of how people think, and forced us all into a healthy skepticism, it has served to alter the shape of history and to encourage even scholars who reject it to abandon the last romantic belief that ideas can emerge apart from culture. It does this by problematizing what appears "natural" in our systems of thought, turning the idea of a free market, for example, from a relatively simple occurrence into a contested experience. It exposes to examination the way in which our economic priorities have been shaped by the existence of "other" regions and cultures in reciprocal relationship. It makes accessible an understanding of the emergence of groups with divergent visions of power, order, efficiency, and the proper role of the state.

Within the framework of post-modernism, a feminist methodology moves us in new directions. Suspicious of dichotomies, and of fixed categories, it serves as a critical instrument for examining the roots of differences. For example, it assumes that masculinity and femininity are categories defined by culture and subject to historical change. It interrogates the opposition between power and love, soft and hard, emotional and rational. A feminist method insists on exploring the irrational, sexual, and personal, as ways of enlarging our understanding of history.

Together, feminist theory and the growth of a social history of industry suggest that the forces of production are subject to the influence of special interests.<sup>1</sup> I do not wish this to be interpreted as an argument that they are no more than the expression of self interest [5, p. 5] or that self interest sums up their content and direction. Rather, as Evelyn Fox Keller puts it, in a somewhat different context, they constitute an invitation to explore "predilections based on emotional as well as social and political commitments...." [5, p. 11] Keller suggests that this approach invites us to enter the domain of social and linguistic practices that help determine a priority of interests and the criteria of success within the business community. In these day-to-day practices, she argues, we can find how preferred

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to the work of Evelyn Fox Keller [5] for the development of these ideas.

alternatives are selected and less congenial ones remain hidden or are dismissed.

In the light of ideological pre-disposition, and particularly of its gendered nature, it is worth looking at some of the arrangements we take for granted: our notions of what constitutes order, the value of hierarchy, the nature of control, and the range of choices open to management. We operate from the assumption that men, women, and the economy are created together out of an interlocking dynamic of cognitive, emotional, and social forces. We do not yet fully understand that dynamic, but we understand enough, I think, to suggest some of the complex ways it functions.

Let us look for example at how ideology supports the conjunction between men and work, and reinforces the complementary disjunction between women and work. The dichotomy between family and work has been used by many to justify everything from the rapidity of labor turnover among women to women's lesser commitment to jobs to refusal to take responsibility to women's lack of interest in certain job categories. Women are still seen as the preserve of the family, men as the legitimate heirs of special privilege in the public sphere. In consequence women have for years been denied some kinds of work, and their exclusion rationalized as a reflection of the division between public and private, or strength and weakness. But the perception is itself an affirmation of a particular ideal of masculinity.

If we interrogate the dichotomy we discover that the categories of family and work have more permeable boundaries than the ideology supposes. They are constructed as oppositional only when circumstances warrant. For example, both the notion of the "corporate wife" and the "working mother" conflate the categories; but the ideological pressure placed on each inhibits the efforts of the one to resist work and of the other to plunge fully into it. The treatment of each of these types of women is subject to a variety of factors having to do with demography, the stage of economic transformation, and demands for work skills.

Historical efforts of many wage-earning women (particularly women of color) to challenge the dichotomy have failed largely because the ideology of gender difference has been deployed against them. Wage work, women were told, would require neglecting families. And yet, we have examples of the reverse. Southern textile mills in the North Carolina Piedmont, before the advent of scientific management, accommodated the family lives of women very comfortably by providing time to nurse babies, clean house, prepare meals, and even supervise children from factory windows.

Homework provides an alternative example. Though justified by an ideology that reified the home, homework in many cases turned the home into little more than an extension of the factory. The ideology nevertheless helped to limit women's access to jobs and influence the aspirations of job hunters and the creation of job ladders. It contributed to masculine images of turf around jobs and shaped expectations of men's and women's wages. It also helped to categorize jobs and de-limit competition for them, providing a rationale for hard work for men as well as the advantages of selectively constructed labor markets.

The notion of the wage offers a similar example. Theoretically, the market treats men and women neutrally, judging only the characteristics of their labor.<sup>2</sup> The wage, economists tell us, is rooted in the play of supply and demand. And then, in acquiescence to the knowledge that there are no perfect markets, it is modified. Depending on the school of economists, and its location in space and time, an interpreter may see the wage as a product of more or less rigid laws, the press of population, the productivity of industry, the level of social services, the value of the product produced, the behavior and expectations of workers.

Popular perceptions of the wage are far richer than these descriptions would imply. In the popular mind, the wage has nearly always had an adjective attached. Ideas of a "just" wage and a "fair" wage have marked the struggles of working people since the end of the middle ages. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notions of a "family" wage and a "living" wage dominated discussion of the labor market. During the depression of the 1930s, public disapproval attempted to restrict the work of those who earned a "luxury" wage in favor of those who depended on a "necessity" wage.

These popular images alert us to look at the wage for meanings that transcend the economists' models. They suggest that the wage is neither neutral nor natural, but rather contains a series of ideological messages that manifest themselves in the real worlds of human relationships, political compromise, and social struggle. Popular images reveal a set of social constructs hidden inside the wage that convey messages about the nature of the world and about fairness and justice within it. And they suggest a set of gendered instructions that speak to men and women and to the relations between them.

Even a quick comparison opens up these messages. A "man's" wage is a badge of honor. It conjures up images of self-sufficiency and strength, of ordered families, and just rewards for service performed. A "woman's" wage, in contrast, is frequently a term of opprobrium. It belongs to someone who is not male and therefore not deserving. Historically, a measure of women's exploitation, it has become a metaphor for women's place. Earned primarily by women without adequate male support, it became a symbol of family degradation, a mark of poverty, a revelation of family secrets, an attack on social order. Earned by single women, it was a comment on personality and sexuality. In the U.S. the woman's wage was until the 1930s uniquely the subject of regulation and control, of discomfort and commentary.

It should not surprise us then that in this moment of ideological turmoil over gender differences the issue of comparable worth has come to the fore. The argument for comparable worth reflects a breakdown of the compromise that dictated an ideological wage for women on the grounds that her place was in the home, and a market wage for men based on the notion that jobs should be rewarded for the skill, experience, education, and responsibility they reflected. As gender differences have been increasingly challenged as a

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<sup>2</sup>These ideas are drawn from, and expanded upon, in [ 6].

regulating ideology so the division of wages has been increasingly exposed. Comparable worth is threatening enough to have been called the looniest idea since loony tunes, and to have been accused of threatening to tear down the free market system. But it is threatening not because it costs some finite sum to implement but because it challenges a structure of jobs and rewards built around ideology. It speaks not to the issue of women's jobs alone but to the structure of a labor market built under particular ideological constraints.

Let us return then to the question with which we started. Why is it important to think about ideology in relation to economic history? I would suggest that failing to do so omits a crucial dimension not necessarily of individual experience, but of how we construct experience. Like a psychologist who refuses to acknowledge the theory of the unconscious, the historian who refuses to use the tools of ideology operates with blinders on. If we want to come anywhere near the minds of historical actors, if we want to approach a multi-dimensional perspective, we need to be aware of the full range of cultural signals that guided decision making at all levels.

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