

**GONE
TOMORROW
AUSTRALIA IN THE 80s**
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8. The Hand That Pours the Gin

The hand that rocks the cradle and drives the multi-horsepower station wagon is often the hand that mixes the gin and tonic before dinner.

Market Services Pty Ltd Report, 1979

Early in 1972, the *Australian Women's Weekly* carried an advertisement with the headline "Bradmill dares you to a love-in". Between daisy-patterned sheets a young woman rested beside a young man with beads around his neck and on his left arm. A month later, an advertisement for Bond's briefs clearly indicated that men had something between their legs. Late in 1974, another advertisement for men's underwear showed a man reclining on a couch, front forward, in net briefs with a centre cloth patch. The headline read "LOOK AGAIN ... IT'S HOLEPROOF". A sexual revolution had moved into suburbia by courtesy of its co-founders and promoters in the merchandising corporations.

Corporations not only want more women customers. They now employ more of them. This chapter is built around some of the ways in which production and consumption spur each other and it introduces these links through the pages of women's magazines. But first it carries forward our discussion of de-labourisation by dealing with two special problems facing women workers, namely part-time employment and the threat of microprocessors.

II

Between 1911 and 1954 the numbers of women with jobs outside their homes increased with the population but the percentage of women in the

workforce remained fairly constant at around 25 per cent. A spectacular rise in both numbers and percentages took place between 1964 and 1975: "In 1964-65 the 1,300,000 females employed represented about 28 per cent of total employment. In 1975-76, this figure had grown to 2,000,000 representing about 35 per cent of total employment."¹¹ During these 11 years, female employment grew by 4 per cent each year while male employment rose by only 1.4 per cent partly because boys were staying at school for longer and men were retiring earlier.

Even more important were the changes in the kinds of women with jobs. Many more were married, had young children, were migrants or had higher education. Between 1947 and 1970, the proportion of married women with jobs grew from one in five to one in three, and their share of the female labour force rose from 15 to 54 per cent. In May 1969, a government survey showed that more than 400,000 employed women had children under 12 years of age. Almost a quarter of the total female workforce were migrants and they often had the least skilled jobs as cleaners or on assembly lines. At the other extreme, more girls were being educated and the number of female undergraduates rose from 4300 in 1947 to 22,000 in 1968, overwhelmingly for arts degrees with school teaching as the career prospect.

De-industrialisation often meant de-womanisation since female labour was grouped in the most labour intensive industries such as clothing, and when factories closed down the women employees were left without jobs and without the prospect of finding others. Elsewhere de-labourisation involves the retooling of industries so that they will require skilled workers — and that does not mean women since they have had almost no opportunities to hold the necessary apprenticeships. Many of the jobs which women got were in the tertiary or service sector which grew whilst manufacturing declined. Of the 334,000 females who entered the workforce between 1971 and 1979, 290,000 did so as part-time employees, with nearly 80 per cent going into the service sector.

Before the post-1974 rise in unemployment there had been a growth in part-time work, especially for females. Then between May 1974 and May 1978, the part-time percentage of the workforce rose from 8.7 to 15.2, three-quarters of whom were women. Much of the growth in the workforce since 1972 has been in part-time employment, that is, of people working more than one but fewer than 35 hours of paid labour a week. Between 1973 and 1979, the number of full-time employees in the retail industry, for instance, fell by 13,000 while the number of part-timers rose by 78,000, of whom 61,000 were women.

To discuss women in the workforce in the early 1980s is to ask, "Why so many part-timers?" It is true that some people prefer part-time employment because it allows for other activities; these happy few are a small element among those in the part-time workforce who get no real

choice. Increasing numbers of people are now forced to work part-time because there are no full-time jobs. In the year to March 1981, full-time employment of females fell by 11,000 so that part-time work offered the only additional opportunities for work. Part-time work is concealed unemployment. Women with young children are frequently obliged to prefer part-time work because they are denied abortion or child care and because women are still almost always responsible for housework and child raising. From the other side, certain employers prefer part-time workers who are easier to control and cost less because they are entitled to fewer benefits such as holidays, maternity leave and long service leave. Most of all, as one cleaner complained, "You are expected to put a nine-to-five job into nine-to-three hours."¹²

Married women workers are accused of causing unemployment with the *Australian* heading "If Mum Quit Work There'd be Jobs for the Boys (and Girls)".¹³ Such claims ignore the fact that most married women have only part-time jobs and that they seek jobs in a labour market that is sexually segregated so that there can be very little competition between the sexes for particular jobs. As one writer put it: "Women's work is never done — by men."¹⁴ Sexual segmenting has been the one constant feature of the Australian labour market throughout this century. Nonetheless, the kinds of jobs labelled as male and female have shifted dramatically. For example, until the Great War of 1914-19, office work was a male preserve. Similarly, during the 1950s, women replaced men as bank clerks when ledger machines replaced hand-entry ledgers; cost-cutting devices encouraged the employment of less expensive female labour. Thus women have often joined the labour force through de-skilled work processes. Competition between the sexes for jobs is rarely direct but generally takes place under the cover of de-skilling. Microprocessors are extending de-skilling in ways that deprive women of many of the jobs hitherto left for them.

III

Because of the sexual division of the labour market, twice as many females as males hold jobs that are "at risk" from microprocessors, jobs such as sales assistants, clerks, stenographers and typists. And these are already the areas of greatest unemployment: 60 per cent of unemployed females register as clerical or administrative workers. Schools and colleges continue to equip tens of thousands of girls with skills that are already outdated.

Some of the increased employment in the service sector resulted from extra demand but a lot of the new jobs existed because productivity was so

low. An American survey argued that blue collar productivity doubled during the 1960s while white collar productivity stagnated: "The reason is simple: factory workers are backed by increasingly sophisticated technologies, yet most office workers rely on equipment and technologies that have changed little in 50 years."⁵⁵ Far from continuing to expand throughout the 1980s so as to absorb workers who lose their jobs in manufacturing, the service sector has already begun to cut its own labour force. Shop assistants are now rare and their numbers have been reduced to one or two at point-of-sale registers which can also control stock levels and reorder, especially in huge self-service stores. While retail stores are where most of us have suffered from reductions in service employment, the prospect of automated office systems is causing greater alarm.

Bank officers expect their employers to eliminate 30 to 40 per cent of their 110,000 jobs during the 1980s: after hours cash machines are in use. At present, 40 per cent of the bank staff are females under 28 years of age who will not be replaced. Other jobs will disappear as a result of the bank mergers of May 1981. This further concentration of financial power was provoked by the anticipated entry of foreign banks into the Australian capital market. To meet this challenge for the most profitable areas of banking, five Australian private banks have been reduced to three. In such indirect ways are jobs jeopardised because of the demands of foreign investment in the promised resources boom.

The computer hardware industry is almost entirely foreign-owned, a fact which could be as disturbing as all the other elements of overseas control put together, since microprocessors represent an all-pervasive technology that can reshape every sector, industry, firm and job. The president of the US firm National Semiconductor was not braggling when he said: "He who controls this industry controls all industry."⁵⁶ It is still not too late for Australia to follow Japan's free enterprise example by protecting locally owned producers against imported computers and by setting up a research and development programme on microprocessors so that we can have some say in the rate and direction of this revolution.

Fears about word processors are often expressed in terms of, "This machine will do the work of seven typists", when what the equipment will do is to save about 10 per cent of a secretary's daily work. Word processors will allow firms to undertake some activities that are not now possible; they will also continue to trim the work performed by office staff; they will further downgrade the skills of secretaries as well as increasing the risk of tenosynovitis, a chronic inflammation of the hand joints. Computerisation of the South Australian TAB hurt the almost exclusively female part-time staff: agency managers lost about a fifth of their work hours and a lot of their job satisfaction; casual staff dropped 50 to 75 per cent of their hours; some 10 per cent were retrained.

When considering the threats which word processors offer to office workers, some care is necessary since a few of the claims about what microchips can do are just the self-promotion by an industry that is overloaded with producers. The computer industry is another instance of that anarchy which is built into capitalist competition. Japanese firms and newer technologies fractured IBM's market dominance so that scores of companies are now scrambling for sales. At the same time, purchasers are beginning to take a second look at the worth of automated offices. *Business Week* asked, "Who needs a smart typewriter?"⁵⁷ The local management consultant, John P. Young, reported that firms found that "if business fell off, you couldn't put it [the computer] to work to do other things, and no matter how hard things got you couldn't fire it. The leasing charges on the interest bill still had to be met."⁵⁸ The productivity of the more moderately priced electronic typewriters is being questioned. In reply, Exxon defended its Qyx model as being the first purchase towards an entirely automated office. Given the rate of innovation, this argument is less than convincing since today's typewriter, no matter how sophisticated, is hardly likely to fit in with anything built five years hence. There is some evidence of computerisation increasing costs so that its benefits to employers are hard to quantify.

Despite four volumes of the Myers Committee *Report* on technological change, there are still no authoritative statistics on anything connected with word processors. We don't know how many there are or how many workers have been displaced. What will this office equipment mean for employment in the 1980s? At the very least, the introduction of electronic systems has strangled three decades of growth in office, retail and administrative employment opportunities. A quite cautious study assumed that word processors would displace 30,000 to 40,000 workers by the end of 1981 and it noted that this figure was equal to almost a fifth of typing and secretarial jobs in 1976: "That this technology now threatens office employment should surprise only those who have long regarded the whole tertiary sector as a convenient employment sink to accommodate those displaced from the primary and secondary sectors."⁵⁹

One growth area is in micro-electronic consumer goods and gadgets, from digital watches to 'Star Wars'. While new technologies are destroying jobs the corporations are inducing fresh needs that will add to the cost of producing labour power. This conflict between capitalism's need to hold down wages whilst increasing the workers' demand is insoluble. It continues to bring about an infinity of such short-term reliefs as the aiming of merchandising campaigns at housewives who are thereby encouraged towards two-income families in order to pay for the products advertised on television, and in magazines like the *Women's Weekly* and *Cleo*.