

REVIEWS

WOMEN IN CONTROL: DILEMMAS OF A WORKERS CO-OPERATIVE

Judy Wajcman

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This is a depressing book but an honest one. The author looks without false sentiment at the failure of a women's co-operative, both to prosper and to radicalise the women involved in it. Judy Wajcman was a participant observer at Fakenham enterprises in 1975, working with women at jobs that ranged from folding and packing products to collecting their children from school. Gradually she pieced together the story and the relationships that unfolded within it.

Fakenham is a small country town in Norfolk where job openings are few and unpleasant. About 50 women were employed in the local shoe factory, a satellite of a Norwich firm for whom it functioned as a 'closing room', sewing shoe uppers. In 1972 the firm went bankrupt and the factory was to be scrapped.

The women decided to occupy the plant and organise a work-in. The unions, ASTMS and NUFLAT, were not enthusiastic. 'Unable to assume a conventional role, the union had no role at all within the enterprise.' Nonetheless, some of the women maintained the occupation for 18 weeks, while they looked for a backer to buy the factory and continue the business of making shoes.

At this point, the Scott Bader Commonwealth Ltd, a pioneer worker co-operative, came to the rescue, injected a little (too little) capital, and helped the women to set up a co-op along lines evolved by the Industrial Common Ownership Movement. The Board of Directors comprised three nominees of Scott Bader and three of the women. The co-op was named Fakenham Enterprises.

Then followed a long hard slog to obtain work. Turning the firm co-operative could not alter its relationship to the market. Having neither the capital nor the managerial and marketing skills to go into business with their own product, Fakenham had to remain dependent on contract work for bigger firms. They branched out from shoe uppers to other leather goods and garments.

Scott Bader, it seems, were never very happy with the women's aspirations for true collectivism and self-management. This went beyond the ICOM principle which was more accurately 'worker

participation in management'. They put pressure on the women to subordinate principle to becoming profitable fast. They put in a (male) manager who rode rough-shod over the women's democracy. They urged acceptance of a take-over which the women refused to agree to. Eventually they cut their losses and withdrew.

By 1975, Fakenham, for want of other work, had become so heavily dependent on sub-contract orders for one firm that the women were little more than home-workers gathered under one roof. They even had to give in finally to piece payment. The co-op enterprise had folded by 1977.

Judy Wajcman tells a story in which the women are recognisable, their characters and contradictions clearly understood. She got to know their home life, the full extent of the 'double shift' each went home to complete in her own kitchen. She interviewed husbands and was told by many that they felt their wives were silly to accept the insecurity, the long hours and the low pay for the mere illusion of independence. It was better, they said, to let a boss take the risks — a conclusion later reached by the 'Lee Jeans' women in Scotland. What the women needed, some of the men said, was a man as manager.

The result of this defeated attempt at autonomy was that the women's political perspectives were unchanged. They had never reckoned much to the unions, now they reckoned less. Few had had much confidence in their own ability to manage — now they knew they were right. They still (by and large) thought and voted Tory, still deferred to the authority of their husbands. They had been destroyed by the capitalist and patriarchal system they had tried to flout — but it felt as though they were to blame for the failure.

Judy Wajcman's conclusions are tough. 'Co-operatives are not a panacea. Naively embarked upon, they cannot provide more than a temporary alternative and are as likely to inhibit as to develop consciousness . . . Shifting responsibility for a firm's viability onto the workers increases the potential for demoralisation.' These conclusions have been criticised by some in the co-operative movement.

My own conclusions from the story would be rather different. That working women should try, even if in the long run they fail, to take their economic chances into their own hands and engage for a while in a different kind of struggle, not with the boss but with the market, should surely not be discouraged. The women would have



been out of work altogether without this initiative. *They chose, we have to respect the choice.* I wish it had been possible in the book to point towards some ways out of the dilemma of the Fakenham women. It would be helpful to explore the irreducible minimum conditions and expectations for experiments of this kind. For we surely have to have such fall-back positions within our range of options.

It is as though Judy Wajcman feels there is some other, imminent political moment about to come in women's lives that will *really* have the potential of changing their consciousness, so long as the possibility has not already been squandered on an unsuccessful 'co-operative' venture. I doubt myself that there is such a moment about to dawn, for which our consciousness must be kept in seed form ready to germinate and flower. Where I agree with Judy Wajcman's conclusions is in anger at the imposition of male managerial and financial 'talent' as the price of the left intellectual support. That indeed does make you feel like being shot of the whole 'co-op' ethic.

Cynthia Cockburn

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