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COMPROMISING POSITIONS:  
THE CLASS AND GENDER BASIS OF NEO-FORDISM  
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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In the early 1980s the emergence of new industrial districts in Western Europe and the spread of Japanese 'lean' management practices gave rise to theories premised on the "end of Fordism" and of new, post-Fordist paradigms that promised to lead work down essentially neo-craft lines. By the end of the decade, employers and governments more or less embraced neo-liberal conceptions of labor market imperatives in pursuit of goals unanticipated fully by these post-Fordist models. National-based institutional legacies place different constraints on the adoption of neo-liberal strategies. Employers and social policy-makers have, nonetheless, sought to achieve major changes in the rules governing social insurance arrangements, and employment relations more generally, including provisions that would relax regulations on the use of part-time and temporary labor. Although much remains in flux, an examination of restructuring cross-nationally reveals paths that cannot be found easily on any post-Fordist map.

Theories of economic restructuring regard current developments as constituting more or less novel production techniques and regulation modes as expressed by the concepts of either flexible specialization or post-Fordism. Each of these names implies the end of one production regime and the shift to another. The search for names to signify the 'death' of mass production prematurely assumes a transcendent logic. Any name that abstracts from the most "visible" forms, particularly as drawn from developments in manufacturing, exaggerate the stability, uniformity, and coherence of each "model." Names that evoke singular meaning have blinded observers from

seeing tenacious Fordist logic and diverted

their attention from the gendered nature of flexible practices. The unraveling of institutions based on Fordist compromises becomes an important point of departure for documenting a range of emergent flexible neo-Fordist practices. Fordist class compromises embedded a male-breadwinner gender contract compromising women's positions and standardizing employment contracts around the needs, interests and authority of men. Men and women negotiated the challenges of restructuring from those positions. A focus on gender compromises and gender contracts can make visible the gendered dimensions of work transformation in each country. My usage of neo-Fordism as an in-between category implies that Fordism no longer uniquely defines stable identities, social relationships, institutional repertoires, and cultural expressions. Neo-Fordism signals destandardization of employment relations, decentralization of the institutions of interest inter-mediation, displacement of work sites and communities, and decentering of identity formation. Yet the instability and uncertainty that characterize the current era should not exaggerate the passage of old methods of doing work or former ways of signifying gendered class identities. The logic of neo-Fordism retains although reconstitutes the fault-lines of class, gender, race, national-based hierarchies.

Fordist institutional repertoires that constitute the social mode of regulation developed in the context of and in reference to a male breadwinner gender contract. The "male breadwinner" model provided the initial framework for the constitution of major institutions including welfare regimes, education system, and social security system. As a consequence, women and men enter the labor market facing different domestic responsibilities and different employment opportunity structures. Employment opportunity structures for women are constructed in relationship to 'social motherhood,' that is, the social construction of mothering as a female-centered activity. Because of restrictive cultural values about women's familial and domestic role, as well as ideologies about the gender-specificity of job tasks, female workers have

been confined to occupational and industrial positions that are subordinate to those of male workers.

Social policies mediate both the conditions which women supply their labor and the organization of labor demand. Feminists have directed attention to the impact of social policies on either dismantling or reinforcing the male 'bread winner' gender contract. In those cases where the male breadwinner gender contract remains strong (as in Germany and in Japan), women depend on income transfers from an individual full-time male worker. The German and Japanese compromises encouraged women to serve as full-time, unpaid housewives and part-time wage laborers. Underdeveloped social policies posed a trade-off between employment and family formation. "The family's virtual dependence on the male earner's income and entitlements meant that unions came to battle for job security (for example, seniority principles, the regulation of hiring and firing practices) and the 'family wage'" (Esping-Anderson 1997, 75). The mode of regulation thus "nurtured the emergence of rigid 'insider/outsider' labor markets with consequent marginalization and peripheralization, particularly among youth and women workers" (one might add 'foreign' workers). Cases where the male breadwinner gender contract is weak (as in Sweden) have modified social motherhood toward what Hirdman calls a 'equality contract'. A map of neo-Fordist forms can not be drawn unless we uncover the institutional roots in Fordist class and gender compromises. Restructuring has not dismantled former institutional repertoires nor replaced them with new modes of regulation. The logic of Fordist compromises still informs how and under what condition men and women supply their labor and experience work. Comparative research is critical for understanding the continuing bases of gender inequality that are produced and reproduced in the contemporary workplace.