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# 1

## Introduction

### **Performing gender in the information and knowledge economy**

In the mid-1990s a radical shift in economic production took place. This shift is often compared to the introduction of steam-powered machines, which changed the economic mode of production. Like the steam engine, information communication technologies<sup>1</sup> (ICTs) transform the way in which economic value-added is created. These new technologies are the pivot of the changing economy because surplus value is created through the application of knowledge to information. Technologies speed up this application of knowledge on information and are a result of these knowledge-generating processes (Castells, 2000; 2004a). This means that these new technologies are shaped by and shape society (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999b). The new economic formation is referred to as ‘the information society’, ‘knowledge society’ or ‘new economy’,<sup>2</sup> or sometimes as ‘the weightless economy’ (Quah, 1999) or ‘software capitalism’ (Bauman, 2000).

These changes in the economic mode of production alter current workplace organisations and give rise to new management forms. Rather than muscle power being used to shift heavy industrial goods, the shared brainpower of individuals and institutions now fuels the economic engine. The means of production are no longer heavy machinery in which an industrialist has to invest, but less capital-intensive factors such as computers or brainpower. Work in the new economy no longer has to be done in a sweatshop, but can be done either in the home, as in pre-industrial times, or in state-of-the-art offices where free gourmet food, a gym, childcare, laundry and dry cleaning services on-site render the office a place where one wants to live (Elgin, 2005).<sup>3</sup>

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The new managerial forms emerging are infused with individualisation and flexibility. Work relations used to be fairly standardised for most people; today's working practices result from individual negotiations and are accordingly much more flexible. Whereas previously employers bought the labour time of a worker/employee for a fixed sum for a fixed number of hours, today's work is organised around targets to be met. How people organise their work is up to them, provided the final result fulfils the goals set (Pongratz and Voß, 2003). Moreover, jobs for life and the idea of delayed gratification seem to have become more the exception than the rule. This means that workers are increasingly required to be flexible in line with the demands of market cycles and to find work elsewhere. These changes, together with the alleged decline of other socially structuring parameters such as gender, class and race, led Beck (2000b) to state that individuals now have the chance to be the author of their own biography, although this involves risk at the same time. Sennett (1998), in particular, points to the risk attached to being flexible. Being flexible means that the individual's time horizon shrinks to the short term, and this short-term mentality results in people having difficulties in creating consistent narratives of their selves. This results, Sennett argues, in a 'corrosion of character'.

In these times of change, not only is the economy changing but also gender relations seem to be in flux. Although gender previously had an enormous influence on the life chances of individuals, theorists such as Beck (2000b) and Castells (2004b) suggest that gender as a structuring mechanism of society is becoming less relevant. Often the changes in gender relations are portrayed as directly associated with women's gains. Social movements such as feminism are said to have been so successful that gender equality appears formally to have been achieved. This is certainly the case if we look at changes in voting rights and access to education and the professions in the West. Other indicators regularly used to assess the state of gender relations are rising divorce rates, new forms of patchwork family, women's increased ability to control fecundity and the associated liberatory effects for sexuality, and women's rising presence in paid employment. These indicators add to the impression that we are witnessing a 'genderquake' (Wilkinson, 1994).

Although this suggests that gender relations have changed greatly, in other areas they appear to have changed little. Some argue that there is now a more gender-aware tone but that gender relations themselves have not changed dramatically (Coppock *et al.*, 1995; Franks, 1999; Wetterer, 2003; 2004). If we look, for example, at women's employment, it is noticeable that the labour market is polarised along gender lines, with women

clustered in low-paid, low-status jobs and men in high-paid, high-status jobs (e.g. Anker, 1997; Halford and Leonard, 2000). Although the gender pay gap is said to be narrowing, the disparity between women's and men's earnings is still stark. The pay gap is 15 per cent in the European Union (BBC, 2007) and 17 per cent in the United Kingdom (BBC, 2008). However, as more women have entered high-paid, high-status jobs, the polarisation among women has also increased (Hakim, 1996).<sup>4</sup> Many women are still faced with glass ceilings, glass cliffs or leadership labyrinths (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Ryan *et al.*, 2007; Weyer, 2007). At the same time, relationships among women at work have altered, leading to a rise in research into the 'Queen Bee' phenomenon and its link to demography (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004; Ely, 1994; 1995; Mavin, 2006a; 2006b; 2008). Women's positions in society and at work have thus become more complex and multifaceted.

The popular portrayal of women's liberation has often linked it directly to its cost to men. Although men are still disproportionately positioned in the most powerful positions in the economy and society, they are regularly portrayed as 'in crisis' (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Gill *et al.*, 2000; 2005; Hill, 1997; McDowell, 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003). Men's positions are supposedly threatened by the changes in the economy and gender relations. With women's greater presence in the labour market, men are often no longer required to be the breadwinner. Indeed, some researchers argue that men have difficulties in fulfilling this function because the new economy favours interpersonal skills and flexibility, which are qualities associated with femininity (Hill, 1997; Nixon, 2005; Webster, 2000; Weis, 2006). Women are believed to be particularly good at juggling different forms of workplace flexibility, have never relied on uninterrupted careers and have the social skills that are so desperately needed to facilitate the sharing of information and knowledge in the new economy (Peters, 2001; Pink, 2001). This implies that women are much better suited for these new jobs and men are lagging behind. Although men's positions are as heterogeneous as women's positions, the common assumption seems to be that only either men or women can do well in the economy. However, changes in gender relations and the economy are complex and defy such easy classification.

The evolving economy is an economy driven by technology. The relationship between gender and technology is, however, rarely the focus of attention in mainstream research, especially research in the work context. Feminist researchers have engaged with the opportunities and threats associated with the technoscientific developments for

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transforming gender relations (e.g. Haraway, 1997; Plant, 1997). However, as Wajcman (2004: 6) points out, feminist analyses have tended to fall into one of two camps: either overoptimistically embracing new technologies as changing gender relations dramatically or rejecting new technologies as a continuation of women's subordination. This is particularly visible in relation to technologies in the workplace, where debates have often centred on whether new technologies are good or bad for women. Rather than taking either an overoptimistic or an overpessimistic stance towards new technologies at work, it is important to pay close attention to how technologies are developed and used in different work contexts by men and women.

What is particularly striking is not only the neglect of gender and technology at work in many mainstream theories but also that many of the theories of the new economy are not based on empirical research. Although the theories are in part built on detailed quantitative and qualitative empirical research, the empirical elements are often restricted to random examples. Yet, through empirical studies it is often possible to see connections that were previously overlooked. This applies especially to research on the complex relationship between gender, technology and work.

The intersection of work, gender and technology seems highly relevant to an understanding of the changes at work. Workers in the new economy not only have to be flexible and interpersonally competent; they also have to be 'tech-savvy'. The new worker has to embrace new technologies and has to be able to use these technologies in the knowledge creation process. Although women are regularly associated with flexibility and interpersonal skills, they are often regarded as less attached to technologies defined as important in society (Gill and Grint, 1995; Wajcman, 1991). Wajcman observes that 'it is rare to see a female face among the dot.com millionaires' (2004: 111) and thereby suggests that new gender inequalities could emerge in relation to technology work. Although many of the new skills required in the new economy may be gendered feminine, being tech-savvy does not seem to be one of them. Gender seems to be an important dimension when we think about the technology-driven economy, but often this gender dimension is given little attention.

#### **The binary logic and the rigidity and fluidity of gender**

A computer is really, if you look at the basics, is really confined to zeros and ones. Either it is yes or no, true or false, there is no grey area,

there is no maybe, there is no approximate. It is really, really exact and that is what I like. (Felix, research participant, Redtech, 36 years)

Computers and gender have in common that they operate on a rigid binary logic. Zeros and ones form the basis of how computers work. These zeros and ones are answers to yes/no statements which tell the computer what to do. In these logical statements there can be only two answers. This is linked to the binary logic developed by Aristotle, who stated that 'what is A' is different from 'what is not-A', and something is either A or not-A. What is the one cannot be the other. Gender knowledge is also organised in a binary form. When asked to indicate on a form whether one is male or female, most of us submit to binary logic in deciding on one box. The categories are mutually exclusive, and one can be only either the one or the other. Regardless of whether we look at sex, gender or sexuality, all are based on the idea of duality and polarity: male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. In terms of valuation it is common that the male-men-masculine-heterosexual pole is socially valued over the female-woman-feminine-homosexual pole. This means that the binary is hierarchical. Thinking and acting in binaries is a common part of life, and these categories function to simplify everyday interactions (Degele, 2004). The way in which the gender binary is applied to everyday knowledge can be called 'doing gender' or 'performing gender'. I use 'performing gender' as an umbrella term for approaches which see gender as a social practice and as a 'doing'. The gender binary determines how gender can be performed. It also determines how a fluid performance of gender is interpreted as the expression of static gender duality. Enacting the gender binary means performing gender and being performed by gender. Performing gender becomes shorthand for the discourse analytic model of performing gender I develop in this book.

The gender binary has been theorised by gender researchers for some time. It is often perceived to be problematic, as it is rigid, static and normative and contains valuations. Therefore, many gender researchers (e.g. Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Irigaray, 1985b; Lorber, 2000) have tried to render the binaries more flexible, fluid and dynamic in one way or another or to dispense with them altogether. Much attention has been paid to how this gender binary is enacted daily. In feminist research there are two sets of approaches in theorising the gender binarisation of the world: on the one hand, ethnomethodological approaches to doing gender; on the other hand, poststructural discursive approaches to gender as performative. The latter are linked

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to Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. The former are often linked to West and Zimmerman (1987), who see gender as 'doing', as a practice. These perspectives disavow essentialist tendencies and insist on the fluidity of gender as a means to understand why gender appears to be static. Doing gender is the process by which gender is enacted in a situation by drawing on a binary logic. However, the two sets of approaches are rarely combined to explore sense-making processes around gender. There are, indeed, good reasons for not combining the theories, such as retaining the epistemological purity of the models (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, there are synergies to be gained from a careful combination, and I offer such a combination through a discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). A discourse analysis allows light to be shed on the sense-making processes in relation to performing gender.

Focusing on gender as a practice is important to understanding how gender is enacted in situations, and researchers have also explored how gender is achieved in relation to work generally and to the technology workplace specifically (e.g. Bruni *et al.*, 2004; 2005; Cockburn, 1985; Fitzsimons, 2002; Gherardi, 1994; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007; Hall, 1993; Kondo, 1990; Korvajärvi, 1998; Leidner, 1991; Martin, 2003). Some research has also started to refine theories of doing gender at work (Fournier and Smith, 2006; Nentwich and Kelan, 2007) and to develop ideas around undoing gender at work (Deutsch, 2007; Hirschauer, 2001; Pilgeram, 2007; Pullen and Knights, 2008). Martin (2006) provides an excellent summary and further development of the debates in the area of 'doing gender'. Martin distinguishes gendering practices from practising gender. The former are practices that gender. These are institutionalised practices that require and allow individuals to do gender and that set the framework in which gender can be done. Practising gender, in contrast, is the literal saying or doing in a situation. Martin also stresses the immediacy of performing gender, which often happens on an unconscious and non-reflexive level. If gender is done without reflecting about it, one way to change the way gender is done is to raise awareness and the reflexivity of those practices. This is in line with much research on stereotypes (Kelan, 2008; Roberson and Kulik, 2007).

Gender as a practice can take different shapes when the economy itself is transforming. Through these processes new ways in which subjects constitute themselves become available and older ones perish (e.g. McDowell, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). This invites the question: Is gender under these circumstances still performed with

a gender binary in mind, or is it performed in different and new ways? One way to study the intersection of changing work and gender is to look at how gender is performed at work.

## **Gender, technology and the Swiss context**

Social theorists such as Castells (2004a; 2004b) are optimistic about the new economy but do not disguise the fact that new inequalities may emerge around the ability to use ICTs in the knowledge creation process. Those who are not as able to learn and use technology will be the 'losers' of the network society. Among the 'winners' of the new economy are those who sell knowledge-intensive services around ICTs. ICT employment is one area of work that is frequently singled out as an example of the changing economy. High-level ICT work is regularly seen as the flagship of the new economy and as emblematic for the new working life, as it shows the new employment conditions, such as flexible work and self-management, that are characteristic of the new economy.

Although Castells notes the emergence of new classes, he does not comment on the fact that the new classes could also be cross-referenced with gender. As Wajcman writes, 'The hacker culture he [Castells] eulogizes is a male culture – in fact, a predominantly white middle-class culture, too' (2004: 62). Women are overrepresented in low-end ICT work such as data entry; they are rarely in the elite jobs of the network society which Castells describes. The new economy may thus be a male endeavour and may not open equal chances to all.

There is a widely proclaimed skills shortage in high-end ICT work. In 2005 the skill gap was projected to be 13.9 per cent in the European Union by 2008, which means that 350,000 ICT jobs would be unfilled (Kolding and Kroa, 2005). It is, therefore, not surprising that women are seen as a major resource to fill this skills gap (European Union, 2008). Data for the United States and Canada, however, suggest that the number of women in computer science and computer engineering undergraduate courses is not growing or is even falling. In 1993/4, 18 per cent of students were female, but by 2006/7 only 12 per cent were female (Vegso, 2008). A *New York Times* article claims that 25 years ago more women were working in ICT than today (Stross, 2008), and a report by the European Commission (2008) argues that the gap between men and women in employment in engineering and technology is persistent and will not self-correct. The sustained lack of women in ICT education and employment has puzzled many researchers (Webster, 2005).

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The social shaping of technology perspective argues that ICT work is seen by society as something that men do (Wajcman, 1991; 2004). As a consequence, women do not want to be associated with something that is coded as masculine. It is, therefore, important to investigate critically what role gender plays in these workplaces, which are often hailed as the future of work. This future of work may contain gender dimensions that have to be taken into consideration when we think about a changing economy.

The new economy is conventionally seen as happening in places such as Silicon Valley, where high-tech innovation and cool, modern workplaces go hand in hand. In contrast to the cool and modern image of Silicon Valley, Switzerland appears more like a well-organised theme park based on chocolate, cheese and cleanliness. Everything seems to run literally like clockwork, and the creative chaos of places such as Silicon Valley is almost absent from the popular perception of Switzerland. Switzerland is not an obvious choice of location in which to study ICT work, as it is not one of the new economy hot spots. However, part of the changing economy is that the economy is global. This means that the new economy is not restricted to these high-tech places; rather, these new economic formations will span the world. It is, then, logical to study other places, often not the first you think of when talking about the new economy.

Switzerland has a reputation for technical excellence, through institutions such as the world-famous Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, and for service excellence, mainly through world-class hotels. ICT companies are attracted to Zürich because of a highly educated workforce, a strong work ethic among employees and a 'business-friendly' employment law which means that employees can be laid off much more easily than in other European countries (NZZ, 2004). The ICT sector leaders, including Microsoft, IBM, Cisco and Sun, all have national headquarters or at least offices in Zürich. Google also located its European research laboratory in Zürich (Google, 2008). This clearly shows that Zürich is an ICT hub in the world and a viable ICT location that deserves further attention.

### **Aims and structure of this book**

One aim of this study is to understand how gendered subjects are constituted by focusing on how gender is performed in ICT work at a time when gender and work are changing. A particular interest of mine is what positions people have available to them and how these

positions are negotiated and taken on or rejected. My aim is, then, to expose gendering dynamics in the new working arrangements by exploring subject constitution processes as a way of doing gender in ICT work.

To show such gender performances in the ICT workplace, three areas of study are important. First, the workplace and working practices have to be studied to explore the ways in which gender is relevant for the organisation of work in the new economy. Second, it is useful to look at biographies to evaluate how the life course is used to make sense of the past, present and future. The third area relates to gender, how it is conceptualised in a work context and what kind of ideology about gender is operating. These three areas are interwoven and indicate how subjects construct themselves in light of socioeconomic change processes. These three aspects are fundamental to exploring how gendered subjectivities are produced by elites in times of gender and economic change. Therefore, one of my aims is to contribute to an understanding of how work and biographies change with economic conditions and also how gender is implied in these processes.

The book is divided into two parts: one methodological–theoretical, and one empirical. Having briefly introduced the research in this first chapter, I review in the second chapter how social scientists and gender theorists have made sense of the changes in gender relations and at work. I argue that treating gender as a performance enriches the understanding of gender, work and technology. In the third chapter I explore the epistemological and methodological approaches to gender as a process by contrasting ethnomethodological and discursive/poststructural approaches, developing a way to understand gender as a doing in a discourse analytic way.

In the first chapter of the empirical half of the book (Chapter 4), I focus on the changes at work by looking specifically at the conceptualisation of the ideal worker. I explore how the skills of the ideal worker are gendered in an ICT work environment. In Chapter 5 I discuss how ICT workers talk about their biographies and how this could be read as gendered. At the heart of Chapter 6 is the question of which understandings of gender are used by ICT workers. This chapter sheds light on the gender knowledge apparent in the ICT workplaces studied. In the conclusion I summarise the main contribution of this research and look at potential future research. In addition, I show possible limitations of seeing gender as a doing and what further research may have to consider.

**Conclusion**

In this opening chapter, I have alluded to some of the central thinking, which has shaped and influenced my research. At the heart of this book is the aim of theorising the changes at work and in gender together by looking at how gender is performed in ICT work. The notion of the binary is not only a metaphor for the transformation into a digital economy; it also provides a mental framework on the basis of which much thought around gender is organised. It is thus a metaphor for thinking through possible changes and continuities in gender at work. This idea is fleshed out in much more detail in the following chapters.

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