Racism and
Paid Work

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Preface

THIS BOOK is a culmination of many years of activist and academic work which began soon after I came with my family to Canada. Being a woman of colour in this country, I was quickly aware of the entrenched relations of gender and racism that accompanies class oppression. I remember arguing for a feminist, anti-racist and Marxist standpoint in graduate school and having to struggle against the mainstream, even against Marxist or feminist scholars. Those were often very lonely and difficult days when I realized that I was marginalized even among "progressives".

Through that process, there are several individuals who supported me and continue to do so today. However, in most cases, they do not know the important role they have played in my intellectual development. Foremost among them are the many activists with whom I work(ed) in Toronto in support of women of colour, immigrant women, and South Asians communities: Salome Loucas, Diana Abraham, Christine Almeida, Akua Benjamin, Maria Wallis, Sabera Desai, the original group of women at the South Asian Women's Group (including my mother, Madhusree Das Gupta), Alexandra Cumsille, Pramila Aggarwal and Deena Ladd are some of the women who easily come to mind. My research and teaching reflect the many lessons, strategies and resources that I gathered by working with them. I also realized there *is* the possibility for social change.

I also need to acknowledge the late Dr. Madan L. Handa, my thesis supervisor and mentor, who supported my work consistently; the late Dr. Abdul Q. Lodhi who read my thesis and gave me the inspiration to move on when I had lost the motivation to do so; Dr. Roxana Ng for collaborating with me very early in my graduate studies; Mark Goodman for his

warm encouragement and suggestion of designing a course on anti-racism at Atkinson College; my aunt, Dr. Joya Sen, who exposed me to progressive ideas and works very early on.

I would also like to thank the following members of my family for giving me unconditional love, encouragement, suppport and challenge: Amitabha Das Gupta, Madhusree Das Gupta, Tariq Saeed Kidwai, Dr. Bikram Das Gupta, Ishita Das Gupta, Esha Anum Kidwai, the late Pratip Kumar Das Gupta.

For this book specifically, I would like to acknowledge: Peter Saunders at Garamond Press for his immediate enthusiasm and encouragement; Hazelle Palmer for her excellent editorial suggestions; Cindy Wilkie, Jan Borowoy, Karen Lior, and Cynthia Enloe for reading various chapters and giving me their comments; and, to my colleagues at Atkinson College for supporting my sabbatical application during which this book was conceived and written. Finally, I would like to thank the many garment workers, nurses and people who work with them who shared with me their experiences, perceptions and insights.

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Tania Das Gupta
Toronto, January 1996

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Theoretical Framework: Class, Racism and Gender

Introducing this Book

THIS BOOK explicitly addresses racism in paid workplaces in Canada. The case studies of the garment industry and of the nursing profession are based in Ontario. The province of Ontario has historically played a very significant role vis à vis the development of capitalism in the country; it has been part of an industrial heartland, and immigrants and people of colour, men and women alike, have played crucial roles in that developmental process. Demographically, about 60 per cent of immigrants settle in Ontario and most concentrate around Metropolitan Toronto. This region also has a significant proportion of people of colour in Canada. Linguistically, at least 60 per cent of the population of Toronto is of non-English or non-French background. Therefore, issues of diversity and "difference" have been part of the daily experiences, struggles and discourses of the populations in this region.

It is particularly timely to do a class, race and gender analysis of workplaces today as a number of local, national and international events have revealed the inter-relatedness of the rise of racism, sexism and classism within the "right-wing backlash." Internationally, the fall of the transitional socialist countries of Eastern Europe has discredited Marxist perspectives in many circles. In the post-NAFTA era, capital has become more and more flexible in crossing national boundaries, while at the same time nationalism in the form of "ethnic pride" and "ethnic cleansing" seems to be sweeping many societies. In Canada, the Reform Party has provided a political mouthpiece for anti-immigrant hysteria. In Ontario, a vigorously conservative government has undone overnight whatever

gains were made by the working class, women, and people of colour. In fact, it is now the poor, people of colour, women, and children who are scapegoats for the recession and who are further victimized in public in racist, sexist, and anti-poor discourses. These forces of conservatism are counteracted by popular organizing by women's associations, anti-racist coalitions, anti-poverty activists and the First Nations. This is the context in which this book was written.

I begin with an assumption of workplaces being located within a capitalist political economy where class relations and class struggle fundamentally shape the everyday lived relations of human beings. These lived relations are also shaped and mediated by racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. It is difficult and pointless to identify the determinant relations in workplaces as there is a web of relationships based on class, gender, race, age, nationality and other socially constructed variables which are all inter-related and mutually reinforcing. I will discuss the rise of modern-day racism in the context of colonialism and slavery and the connections to the search for profit and cheap labour.

Capitalist establishments have particular historical tendencies, based on the profit motives of entrepreneurs. This requires minimizing costs. There are various ways in which capitalist workplaces and those in control accomplish this, depending on the nature of the industry and the socio-political context. Racism and sexism are handmaidens to this endeavour. Chapter one will elaborate on my theoretical framework. Following this, chapter two will discuss some of the daily manifestations of racism in workplaces. A case study of the garment industry is presented in chapter three and another on the nursing profession in chapter four. Finally, this book will conclude by providing information on the ways in which racism in paid workplaces has been resisted collectively and institutionally.

Marxist Approach to the Labour Process

The approach of this book is Marxist, feminist and anti-racist. A Marxist approach entails a historical look of society, of social events, relationships or phenomena in order to lay bare underlying dynamics and tendencies which are at the root of everyday and "everynight"[1] realities. The determinant sphere of life according to the Marxist paradigm is in the production and reproduction of material existence, that is in the production of

subsistence.[2] I want to extend this concept further by confirming what Burawoy[3] has said. People are not only producing things but also relations and ideas about those relations. Such ideas form part of the work environment and in most instances, reinforce social relations. However, they can be also contradictory in situations of worker resistance when workers articulate ideas that are contrary to dominant social relations.

One example of how workers reproduce hegemonic ideas can be found in garment industries. While the workers produce garments at the factories they are simultaneously confirming notions about women's roles as opposed to men's roles or what workers of Chinese heritage "are good at" for example, as opposed to Black workers, and so on. Managers and owners also take part in this process of reproducing ideas by consciously or unconsciously organizing particular divisions of labour based on racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes.

In the production of their means of subsistence, including ideas, people enter into relations with one another as individuals, as members of social classes and part of defined communities. The particular class relations in which people work are created by the nature in which surplus produced by workers – i.e., that part of the produce which is beyond what one needs for survival – is appropriated by the powerful class(es). Social power is the ability to affect other people's life chances through one's control over social resources, including human resources, and through one's position of privilege within the social hierarchies of racism, gender and class.

One of the inherent features of class societies is that of class struggle given that different classes and communities have various and opposing interests and aspirations. Thus, in capitalist societies, there is continuous struggle between the powerful classes and communities and those with less power and privilege. This has a profound impact on the organization of workplaces, including the selection of technologies, divisions of labour, choice of individual workers and, of course, on social relations overall. It also affects the balance of power between those with or without social power. Thus, to maintain an edge on power over workers and certain communities of workers, such as people of colour and women, owners and managers have evolved a variety of managerial techniques. Of course, even these techniques are conditioned by social relations and class struggle. Modes of control have proved to be more effective when they are established by a consensus of workers as opposed to coercion. Despite

managerial techniques aimed at reducing class resistance, the coercion continues and takes different forms.[4]

Richard Edwards[5] has conducted a historical survey of the "control" methods or "management styles" that have been utilized in American workplaces from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. These range from personal, direct, and often coercive approaches, (e.g., physical and other forms of threats by management) to "technical" approaches which rely on technological innovation for control (e.g., mechanical monitoring systems and Taylorism), and finally to "bureaucratic" approaches which rule by impersonal laws (e.g., workers are obligated to satisfy standardized job descriptions, maintain company protocol, follow set career ladders and, follow accepted collective agreements).

Herman[6] has extended the discussion on control modes by connecting them to various industrial sectors. There are two modes of control in his analysis – dominative/coercive and hegemonic. The first is usually found in smaller, less mechanized establishments and the latter in larger, bureaucratic establishments. Hegemonic control modes are maintained by encouraging consensus among workers, for example by human relations' approaches and Quality of Work Life projects.

Anti-Racist, Feminist Critiques

The problem with much of the Marxist discussions of labour processes and of paid work is that the working class is seen as a faceless, monolithic abstraction. This conception does not explain the different and contradictory experiences and responses of workers on the basis of such socially-defined features as gender and race. Their location within class relations as well as their experiences within similar positions are fundamentally conditioned by such features.

Canada is an advanced capitalist society where the owners and managers of business enterprises are the most powerful classes and those who do not own or control within these enterprises have less power. The development of capitalism in Canada and the complexities of its class structure is beyond the scope of this book and therefore will not be discussed here. However, what will be highlighted is that racism and gender are intrinsically woven into social relations, so that we begin to see workers, managers and owners as gendered and raced in addition to being classed.

Perhaps the most recent formal recognition of systemic discrimination

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in employment is contained in the Act to Provide for Employment Equity for Aboriginal People, People with Disabilities, Members of Racial Minorities and Women which became law in Ontario on September 1, 1994 under a New Democratic Party (NDP) government. The Preamble to the Bill recognized that the "target" communities experience higher rates of unemployment and more discrimination in job searches, in retaining employment and in being promoted. Therefore, these communities are under-represented in senior and management positions and over-represented in positions with low pay and little upward mobility. The lack of employment equity was recognized as being present in both the public and private sectors in Ontario.

The Canadian corporate elite is predominantly made up of White males. The boards of directors of Canada's major banks are predominantly White. Most corporations practice racial discrimination in hiring employees with collaboration from recruitment agencies.[7] Henry and Ginzberg's[8] study also documented that people of colour are under-represented in the trade and education/administration sectors and over-represented in the personal, health and welfare sectors. They are also under-represented in senior management and sales occupations and over-represented in general labour occupations. According to a 1990 report[9], only 4.1 per cent of executive positions in the Ontario Public Service were people of colour even though 11.8 per cent of all employees were from that community.

Workers are relegated to various positions within the division of labour in the same establishment and also between different sectors, depending on their sex and race. For instance, studies by Porter, Pineo and Mackie[10] concluded that peoples of colour, including Native Peoples, Asian and Black Canadians, were in subordinate positions in the occupational hierarchy.

Certain occupations have a minimal number of people of colour, such as in fire departments[11]. A 1985 McMaster University survey of 20 Canadian newspaper companies revealed that only 2 per cent of their employees were people of colour.[12] Metro Toronto Police which has had an employment equity program in place for several years had only 6 per cent people of colour on staff in 1990 in a metropolitan area with an estimated 20 per cent of its population being people of colour.[13] People of colour make up only 3.7 per cent of workers in the federal government.[14]