



Engaging with Dr. Plankey-Videla's *We Are in This Dance Together: Gender, Power, and Globalization at a Mexican Garment Firm*

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Dr. Plankey-Videla provides a complex and thorough study of a Mexican global factory that reorganized to manufacture consent but instead manufactured militancy. In particular, she is able to capture how macro-level forces such as the global economy, dynamics of neoliberalism that promote the hiring of women as a presumably docile workforce, and labor control from the nation-state impact micro-level dynamics such as firm innovations in work arrangements, workers' economic compensation, gender wage inequality, internal conflicts among laborers, as well as labor strikes. Dr. Plankey-Videla is able to establish these multifaceted connections between macro- and micro-level processes by using a feminist ethnographic approach that involved complete immersion in her study site by laboring on the industrial sewing line and participating in strikes right along with the firm's workers.

Theoretically, Dr. Plankey-Videla interjected feminist theories into structural labor processes to not only explain hegemony on the shop floor, but also to show how workers interject their own subjectivities into the workplace. Through such a framework she was able to capture the changes that an internationally renowned firm underwent to transition from the traditional piece work system to an innovative reorganization of work arrangements involving

team-based production. Such reorganization was designed to respond to international markets and increase efficiency. It is in such a context that the predominately female workforce organized a strike of the firm after management decreased their wages in order to compete with lower labor costs in China and Central America and in response to a slump in sales in the U.S. market.

Plankey-Videla's (2012) *We Are in This Dance Together* both ignites the readers' sociological imagination and raises some methodological questions. Following are some of the questions concerning the methodology and theoretical concepts and debates that are stimulated by this book. In regards to methodology, the author draws on rich data sources. Specifically, she used a triangulation of methods, including nine months of participant observation, 98 semi-structured/unstructured interviews with 68 individuals (workers and managers), archival research, and statistical analysis. Dr. Plankey-Videla, despite her privilege as a middle-class Chilean-American Latina, established rapport with the workers and gained an insider status, particularly vis-a-vis a core group of about three dozen employees. At the same time, her middle-class background also allowed her to establish rapport with management. Did the workers ever perceive the rapport that Dr. Plankey-Videla had with management as a conflict of interest? Were they ever concerned that she might be on the "wrong side" of the labor struggle? Also, how, if at all, might the "core group" of respondents (N = 38) (those with whom the author had the most frequent and in-depth interactions) differ from the other respondents (N= 68 total) whom the author also interviewed? How did focusing on the core group of laborers shape the outcomes of this study?

Dr. Plankey-Videla describes what she calls a "motherist work culture" in which women built a collective dual identity wherein they sought to be recognized as both mothers and workers. Such motherist work culture was implemented on the shop floor and thus among female team leaders and the females who labored under them in their work crews. Does this type of work arrangement and motherist work culture foster maternalism within the factory? Research on domestic work has found that females hired by females can deploy maternalistic behaviors and attitudes that resemble mother-daughter relationships, wherein the employer is positioned as a knowledgeable mother and the female employee in a subservient position is treated like a naïve daughter in need of guidance (e.g. Rollins 1987).

The switch to team-based production from a more traditional work organization also involved a transformation in the payment system, which had been pegged to piece rates. Arguably there is more potential for exploitation under the piece rate compensation system wherein workers are paid according to their productivity; increases in production speed correspond to higher wages. The piece rate system in Moctezuma, the Mexican firm in this study, is rather complicated— particularly the congestion in the production flow process where

bundles of clothes rapidly went from one station to the next in carts. Under such a system did the workers know how much they were owed for a day's work?

While the analysis of gender is central to this book, I wonder how race or culture interlock with gender to shape labor conditions in Moctezuma. In Chin's (1998) *Sewing Women* she compares two groups of garment workers—a Latina/o workforce in a non-union jobsite where the owners are Korean, and a Chinese workforce employed in a unionized shop in which the owners and management are also Chinese. Ironically Chin found that the Latina/o immigrant workers in the non-union, Korean-owned shop had better working conditions because a combination of paternalistic attitudes on the part of management and a sense of cultural obligation on the part of the co-ethnic workers created an exploitive work environment in the Chinese-owned factory. How did the fact that owners, managers, and workers shared a Mexican culture and ethnicity shape the working conditions at Moctezuma?

Dr. Plankey-Videla's analysis raises a question that is of interest across many sub-fields in sociology: how do agency and exploitation coexist? Does resistance only emerge as a reaction to oppression? The author draws insights from structuralist and relational camps in order to understand the relationship between structure and agency. Throughout the book we see examples of managerial abuse exacerbating worker resistance, but also times when women enact agency while consenting to managerial controls.

We Are in This Dance Together provides a valuable analytical and theoretical contribution to the study of world systems, labor, social movements, and gender. Dr. Plankey-Videla addresses these themes via an analysis that expands our understanding of how globalization matters—for example, neoliberal reforms that shape corporate behavior, the garment industry as one of the sectors targeted for growth by the state, and the precarious nature of global integration from a Third World perspective.

References

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