



Making Apparent the World-System in the Everyday Challenges of the Apparel Industry

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The global trade, production, and retail of textiles and garments is essentially a world-system subject, both by historical record – significant in the original expansion of the world system over the long 16th century – and for analyses grappling with the contemporary features of the capitalist world economy. By following the continuous reinvention of how garments are produced, the shifting locations of their production, and who determines apparel output and product, one can get a sense of the general transformation of the capitalist world-system.

While many world-systems or globalization volumes carefully detail the macro-processes that are enveloping the globe in apparel and other industries, fewer have been able to demonstrate the nuances of how shifts in the capitalist world-system play out on a daily scale. Although not written from a PEWS perspective, *We Are In This Dance Together* does just this. In a carefully worked ethnography, Plankey-Videla draws readers into the everyday lives and concerns of garment workers in a high-end apparel production facility in the central state of Mexico. Through her gift of sociological storytelling we learn of the strains and pressures placed on workers, but also on factory owners and managers, and unions, as they negotiate to survive the changing landscape of global apparel production.

Although it does not engage directly in world-system frames of analysis – for example, examining Mexican capital’s constraints as an outcome of its semi-peripheral location – the introduction to *We Are In This Dance Together* is probably the most “world-systemy” portion of the book. Plankey-Videla historicizes Mexico’s economic development, particularly the region in which the factory she studies is located, and describes key shifts in global apparel production. She also explores the relationship between Mexico’s economic crisis and the pressures of international lenders on the nation, explaining how the apparel industry seemed to offer an avenue for opening Mexico’s economy and advancing export-led development.

Because the book is essentially about the decision-making processes of workers and factory owners, the outline Plankey-Videla provides at the start of the volume is instructive. It situates the everyday decisions made by the owners of the factory and workers within the broader global economy and Mexico’s place in it. For example, Plankey-Videla makes visible how the judgments of factory owners are not made on a whim, or confined by traditional or parochial practices of production, but are in correspondence with global capital and its “innovations” for increasing profits. She shows how pursuing schemes for growth or efforts to increase a company’s global competitiveness often trip up owners with false hope and failed policies that are shouldered primarily by workers. By describing how the company’s actors struggle to operate globally, and the interorganizational tensions between the firm’s offices, *We Are In This Dance Together* illustrates how the system works and is worked by capital trying to gain from it.

A great example of this is Chapter 3, “From Piecework to Teamwork,” in which Plankey-Videla details the implementation of Japanese-style Just In Time (JIT) production, or modular production, in the apparel factory. The chapter shows the steps the company took to transform from piece rate production, where each worker had opportunities to increase earnings on an individual basis by working more or faster, to modular production in which workers’ economic gains are tied to the success of one’s self-managed team. According to the advice of hired consultants, self-managed teamwork would provide the factory with secure, continuous improvement in terms of the quality and workflow. Convinced, company owners invested heavily in modular production. Plankey-Videla carefully documents the dramatic transformation of production felt by factory workers by incorporating her own experience as an unpaid worker and that of the women who lived the shift from a piece rate to a team-based system.

Generating little in the way of results but increasing tension among workers and departments, modular production was failing. But factory owners were tied to the new production system and could not return to piece rate production. They had also put a good deal of effort towards training and convincing resistant workers of its benefits. Here was a system of production that shop owners were confident would uplift their company’s profile. When it did not, the responsibility for its failure was placed on the workers. Plankey-Videla’s in-depth analysis explores the

incremental and duplicitous steps owners took to limit workers' rights and compensation under the JIT production model as their capital was constrained. Chapter 5, "Lean during Mean Times" is especially powerful and an exceptional articulation of how companies turn on workers when their investments and trajectories don't go according to plan.

Plankey-Videla documents a raft of company owners' actions, including dismantling an entire shift of work, backtracking on agreements made with workers who had relinquished benefits for the company to shore up capital, resorting to underhanded firings, and infringing on union contracts (though, at any rate, the union was not to be a workers' ally). Plankey-Videla argues that with these changes, what started out as JIT production based on teamwork was watered down to "flexible Taylorism."

From a world-systems perspective, more could be made of how easy it is for companies that are large but not transnational to be seduced by the belief that global economic success is just a matter of finding the right formula. For a high end Mexican apparel company this would have required predicting the monumental increase in the size of production lines, the distinct lowering of quality in garment production and in consumption patterns, the empowered position of transnational apparel retailers to determine production, fast fashion consumption, and the centrality of China's colossal factories to each of these trends (Cline 2012).

But articulating the missing knowledge of the company's owners was not Plankey-Videla's goal; instead her principal mission was to document how workers address changes in production and bare the burden of producing for the global capitalist market. She also documents how work lives shaped the identities of Mexican women workers and she accomplishes this with a good deal of success. Plankey-Videla begins by examining how traditional gender ideologies were essential to the shift to JIT production. This included hiring workers based on their compliancy rather than their skills. Collins (2002) in her research on an apparel company as it prepared to relocate operations from the U.S. to Mexico, has highlighted how sewing skills are constructed and reconstructed as natural, lost, or abundant to serve the interests of capital and legitimate company decisions to relocate or slash wages.

We Are In This Dance Together illustrates how the apparel company used gender to coax women workers to accept the fate of the firm as their own. The company assumed, at least at the start of the modular production strategy, the role of "benevolent patriarch" through various measures of corporate welfare, including on-site medical clinics, money for births, scholarships, and providing suits for weddings. The company relied on women's identities as mothers to foment workers' attachment to JIT production by supplying benefits that assisted them in their caretaking work. Yet like Collins (2002), Plankey-Videla found that when benevolent patriarchy did not provide the profits desired, owners easily retracted benevolence.

Through the use of interview data Plankey-Videla presents how workers respond to these changes, assessing the benefits and shortcomings of each model of production. For example, production workers explained that under a piece rate system they were able to increase their earnings by achieving bonuses, or alternatively to stop working when they reached a certain amount. This gave them more freedom to negotiate their personal lives, for example, working more when requiring cash to care for a child or family member, or taking time from work when needing to tend to health matters or personal occasions. Workers also explained that being able to escape for a few minutes behind piles of garments disappeared with JIT or lean production. In addition under JIT production, tensions among workers increased because bonuses were dependent on collective rather than individual output, which inclined workers to police members of their team. Plankey-Videla takes particular note of the contradictory position of team leaders, who have managerial pressures without managerial salaries. But workers noted that the use of team leaders and the reduction of managers under JIT led to a decline in sexual harassment of women employees by male managers whose power was reduced.

The workers were able to weigh the pluses and negatives of each system; they were not easily seduced by the rhetoric of JIT production. Plankey-Videla explains that for most of these women, work was secondary, a means to the end of caretaking for their families. From a feminist and world-systems perspective, the author could have better addressed the role of households in the capitalist world-system, and how women, due to the gendered construction of household responsibilities, attempt to secure the survival of their households regardless of the curveballs global capital throws at them (Wallerstein and Scott 1992). In other words, Plankey-Videla shows how gender operates via the ideological construction of women's identities and their relationship to work, but she does not highlight how gender is part and parcel of the entire world system.

But this is likely beyond the scope of her research. Upon rereading, what I noticed most in *We Are In this Dance Together* is how well Plankey-Videla addresses the way in which workers shifted identities from "mothers who work" to "workers who were mothers" (166) to, later, as they were pressed by inferior work conditions, full blown activists (Karides 2014). Plankey-Videla presents the levels of negotiations the women workers underwent as they turned towards activist pursuits. She relates the process of decision-making sometime from the perspective of individual workers and other times by explaining how groups of workers struggled and determined collectively whether to plan and participate in a protest, or to partake in on the job resistance, or organize an independent union.

The women Plankey-Videla worked with began to organize and engage in various forms of protest, and the major strike that developed from this organizing was an unexpected turn in her research. She not only rises to the occasion, by comparing the strike with a previous one and by

making the development of workers' resistance a centerpiece of the volume, but also by tackling how the company owners and management negotiated protests, redefined jobs, attempted to let go of workers, and eventually relinquished all commitments to JIT. She demonstrates that although capital might have folded and split town with whatever winnings they had left, they also struggled with the constraints of economic survival, which they eventually pressed downwards onto their employees.

I am not sure if it was Plankey-Videla's intention to concentrate on the mound of decisions that needed to be made by workers, managers and owners, and unions in a failing apparel company, but in doing so *We Are In This Dance Together* showcases the everydayness of the capitalist world-system. What is striking is its instability—the relentless negotiations that workers must take to try and secure survival as they worry about their families, or capitulate to logics that are not in their best interest, while managers and owners search like pirates to find the latest strategies presented in business magazines, hoping for their chance to make it on the global stage. By also sharing her struggles in the field and her negotiations, Plankey-Videla makes more vivid how the capitalist world system forces us all to participate in a culture of maneuvering. *We Are In This Dance Together* is a very good read for students of world-systems and can be well used in courses to sketch out how some of the basic concepts of the field inform daily routines of work and enterprise.

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