



Putting Organizational Transformation and Workplace Dynamics in Global Context

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We Are in This Dance Together is first and foremost a powerful workplace ethnography that captures the challenges confronting employees in a Mexican garment firm called Moctezuma. But readers who approach it from a world-system perspective are likely to be impressed by another dimension of the book, which is the effort its author makes to connect changes experienced on a local shopfloor with broader geographical shifts and organizational transformations occurring in the global apparel industry. While Plankey-Videla's main achievement is to provide a richly textured account of working life at Moctezuma, she also provides a sense of the macro context in which her site is nested.

At one level, *We Are in This Dance Together* belongs among the many excellent volumes that have explored the incorporation of women's labor into the global assembly line, as industrial production has shifted from the global North to the global South. As the quintessential labor-intensive, "starter" industry, garment manufacturing has figured prominently in studies of economic restructuring in developing countries. The first generation of such studies sought either to underscore the gendered dimension of the new international division of labor (Elson and

Pearson 1981) or to examine the implications of wage work for newly proletarianized women and their households (Fernandez-Kelly 1983). Later, scholars became more interested in asking how gendered discourses and practices vary in offshore production, either across industries (Caraway 2007), countries (Lee 1998) or even individual workplaces (Salzinger 2003).

We Are in This Dance Together, however, largely defies what I have described elsewhere as a shift in this literature, from an emphasis on the feminization of manufacturing as a defining feature of globalization to an appreciation of the diverse and contingent ways in which gender comes to matter for export-oriented production (Bair 2010). For the most part, Plankey-Videla manages to attend both to the structural, macro social forces that are at play on the shopfloor at Moctezuma and to the lived realities that shape how social actors respond to the specific dilemmas they encounter. On the one hand, the author knows that the global economy is the stage on which this dance is taking place, but her focus is on the dancers—that is, the women workers at the center of the book. The author’s main objective, and one at which she succeeds admirably, is showing that these dancers are also choreographers, and the steps they devise are rooted in their understanding of themselves, their relationships with each other and with management, and their awareness and assessment of the opportunities available to them in a particular time and place.

The time and place of Plankey-Videla’s analysis is central Mexico in the late 1990s-early 2000s. This period coincides with the apogee and subsequent decline of what was a remarkable expansion in Mexico’s export-oriented apparel industry, following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. At the time, clothing exports to the U.S. from Asian countries were still constrained by quotas, and the duty- and quota-free access to the U.S. market that the NAFTA granted Mexico’s qualifying exports fueled rapid growth in employment and production volumes. In 2000, the year that Plankey-Videla began her research at Moctezuma, Mexico was the world’s largest supplier of clothing to the United States, which imported \$8.7 billion of garments from its southern neighbor. The very next year, however, Mexico’s apparel industry entered a protracted period of decline. China first supplanted Mexico as the leading garment exporter to the U.S. in 2001—a position that became more entrenched after the elimination of quotas in 2005. Between 2000 and 2010, Mexico’s apparel exports to the United States plummeted 57% to \$3.7 billion, while over the same period China’s exports expanded 276% to reach \$31.9 billion.

From this perspective, Moctezuma’s failing fortunes were representative of a broader trend in Mexico’s manufacturing sector at the turn of the millennium, as the country lost jobs in export-oriented, labor-intensive sectors to China (Gallagher and Porzacanski 2010; Schwartzman 2014). But when Plankey-Videla arrived to conduct her dissertation fieldwork there, there was reason to think that Moctezuma might buck this trend. For one, Moctezuma was not a NAFTA-era

maquiladora set up to take advantage of U.S. market access. The company's history dates back to 1951, when an Italian textile company began producing cashmere fabric in Mexico. In the 1960s, the company decided to forward integrate its Mexican operations from textiles into apparel, producing men's suits for the local market. This apparel division would later become Moctezuma. As a company created during Mexico's decades-long period of import-substitution industrialization, Moctezuma benefitted from a protected national market, but in the mid-1980s it expanded its operations and began exporting to Europe and the United States. In 1993, with NAFTA on the horizon, Moctezuma was purchased by a Mexican industrial group. Although the new owners had no experience in textile or apparel production, Moctezuma was a well-established company, and one that was considered to be expertly positioned to take advantage of increasing export opportunities, having already established itself as a pioneer in foreign markets.

In this spirit of optimism, Moctezuma's new owners contracted an international consultancy to advise the firm on how to become more competitive. The recommendation: jettison the old model of production—a piece rate system based on individual productivity in completing specific tasks—for an ostensibly superior, team-based system of modular production, based on the just-in-time principles pioneered by Japanese manufacturers. When initially implemented in the mid-1990s, modular production appeared to have the intended results of streamlining the production process, increasing efficiency, and improving the quality of the final product. But because the new system replaced individual piece rates with team-based performance bonuses, it also generated novel tensions among workers. Similarly, although the philosophy of lean production is to give all workers greater accountability for, and ownership of, the production process, the appointment of “team leaders” at Moctezuma, who were positioned uncomfortably between management and workers, further heightened tensions on the shop floor.

The simmering dissatisfaction of the predominantly female workforce reached a boiling point right around the time that Plankey-Videla joined the production line. In the introductory chapter to her book, she explains how she chose Moctezuma as a fieldsite for dissertation research. She gained access to the firm via family contacts, and consequently enjoyed considerable freedom of access over the course of her nine-month period of participant observation. Although Plankey-Videla initially set out to study questions relating to industrial upgrading and worker turnover in export industries, her time at Moctezuma coincided with an upsurge of labor unrest at the factory. The groundwork for this unrest may have been laid by the shift from piece rate to modular production, but its trigger was a series of managerial decisions taken in response to a worsening economic outlook. Chief among these was the elimination of collective production bonuses, which had been put in place after the shift to modular manufacturing as something of a replacement for the bonuses that incentivized efficiency under the old piece rate system. This was regarded by workers as a betrayal of an implicit agreement between labor and management;

although workers had accepted and adapted to organizational change, the withdrawal of these incentives meant that they were now being asked to do more for less.

At the same time, the shift to modular production had, as intended, left Moctezuma's employees feeling more empowered. This sense of empowerment extended beyond the production process, however, as workers began to articulate the connection between the fulfillment of their maternal responsibilities at home and their recognition as wage earners at work. The emergence of this "motherist" identity further fueled labor militancy, as Plankey-Videla explains: "The enhanced autonomy of self-managed teams promoted solidarity rooted in women's collective identity as mothers, and this created shop floor communication and decision-making mechanisms. At Moctezuma, women used the tools of self-management to make decisions not only about production, but also about their rights as mothers. Only when women workers perceived themselves and their work differently did they use these tools to organize a strike": (2012: 13).

Plankey-Videla also explains that the workers' collective response to organizational changes on the shop floor was shaped by developments occurring beyond the factory gates. These included democratization and the election of a new governor, who hailed from an opposition party that the workers believed (wrongly, as it turned out) would be more sympathetic to their plight; increased opportunities for migration to the United States as an alternative to factory employment; and, greater exposure to the idea that global competition between Mexico and other countries was driving a race to the bottom that hurt workers, as well as increased awareness of the possibility of collective resistance to this trend (2012: 14-15). The culmination of these factors was a short-lived strike in March 2001 in which Plankey-Videla herself participated. By the time Plankey-Videla recounts the details of the strike in chapter 5, it is obvious that her initial interests in the isomorphic process of firm-level upgrading and the implications of organizational change for workers (topics she has nevertheless ably addressed elsewhere—see Plankey-Videla 2005) had been reoriented by developments on the ground. The primary theme of *We Are in This Dance Together* is the theme of collective mobilization, and the book's primary contribution is in elucidating the complex, multi-level conditions under which labor militancy emerges among women workers.

The odds against the workers who walked out of Moctezuma on that spring afternoon in 2001 were long, as they knew. One challenge that they did not fully anticipate, however, was the state government's staunch support of capital against labor. This alliance extended beyond the immediate aftermath of the strike; it continued to frustrate workers' efforts to achieve justice during a lengthy legal battle with the firm, which extended years after the company initiated bankruptcy proceedings in late 2001. Furthermore, Moctezuma's workers found themselves locked in struggle not just with their employer and the state, but also with their own union, which

quickly signed a new contract with management just days into the strike. Although workers had neither consented to nor approved of the agreement, it had the effect of rendering any further work actions illegal, thus exposing strikers to the threat of dismissal. Given the absence of any resolution to the workers' grievances, periodic resistance at Moctezuma followed even after the majority of workers went back in, as did repression of this unrest. In this context of protracted conflict and low morale among workers and management, Moctezuma's business outlook grew even bleaker, with the company declaring itself insolvent and ceasing to pay workers' wages in May 2002.

While Plankey-Videla's focus is on the myriad obstacles confronting workers at Moctezuma, it is worth noting the skill she herself displays in navigating a number of challenges in what proved to be a fast-changing research landscape. Although somewhat orthogonal to her initial interest, Plankey-Videla recognized the unique research opportunity that the labor conflict at Moctezuma created, and she was nimble enough to reorient her project accordingly. Alongside flexibility, the author also displayed commendable judgment when, concluding that her presence on the shopfloor had become a distraction during the difficult and restive months following the strike, she decided to cease the participant-observation portion of her study.

Plankey-Videla continued her research via other methods, however, including via follow-up conversations with workers, including for several years after her return from the field. She draws on this research in a concluding chapter where she considers what legacy the mobilization at the now shuttered plant had for the workers who participated in it. On the one hand, she finds that many workers have been downwardly mobile, failing to find jobs that offer wages or benefits on par with those once offered by Moctezuma. In this sense, the fate of garment workers in Mexico is not unlike that of their counterparts in other countries, from the United States to Hong Kong, who are often ill-equipped to find comparable employment opportunities when apparel production shifts to lower-cost locations. At the same time, Plankey-Videla is at pains not to discount the importance of the struggle in the biographies of the women who waged it, arguing that, for some, the experience was a pivotal and empowering moment that continues to fuel their activism more than a decade later.

There is much to admire about this book, even beyond the careful and insightful interpretation of rich, abundant primary data. For example, Plankey-Videla succinctly but skillfully sketches the broad contours of 20th century Mexican political economy and explains its relevance to the case of Moctezuma. She covers a great deal of substantive but also historical ground, recounting the causes and consequences of a strike at the factory in 1972 as a kind of foreshadowing of the central event at the heart of her own analysis. But, as I noted in an earlier review (Bair 2014), if I were to criticize any aspect of the book, it is Plankey-Videla's failure to dig more deeply into how her findings advance the literature on globalization, gender and work

that I referred to earlier. The closest she comes is in chapter 2, where she draws expertly on previous studies of the global apparel industry to highlight the gendered construction of sewing jobs by (mostly male) managers, the politics of the piece rate system, and the implications of both for women garment workers. But Plankey-Videla treats this discussion largely as a literature review before pivoting to her own data, and when she does turn to her research at Moctezuma, she presents her findings as essentially a confirmation of the earlier work. I would have welcomed a more detailed engagement with this body of scholarship—one that would have cast into relief some of the theoretical (and political) debates and tensions that animate it. Even more, I would have liked to see Plankey-Videla more clearly stake out her position within this conversation. But to be clear, while I hope to hear more from the author about these questions in the future, *We Are in This Dance Together* stands on its own terms as a model of engaged and reflexive global ethnography.

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