



Still Dancing Together:

Women's Workers' Mobilization, State Action and Global Capital

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I appreciate the opportunity this symposium offers to revisit *We Are in This Dance Together*, and to rethink some of the book's insights from a world systems perspective. As a feminist ethnographer, my goal was to understand women workers' lives and how they participated in shaping their own futures as active agents. Being immersed in the shop floor, flooded with daily experiences, conversations, and observations, I focused on social relations of power at the shop floor and state institutional levels rather than the world system. Global power dynamics, however, were palpable on the shop floor. This forum allows me to revisit Moctezuma, examine how the apparel industry and state policy have changed since my time there in ways that provide new opportunities and constraints for workers, and reflect on questions and insights provided by the essayists.

Examining Women's Agency in the Age of Globalization

Fourteen years after the strike, a tattered red and black flag still hangs on the shuttered factory gates of Moctezuma. In Mexico, unfair dismissals are channeled through local and federal labor

tribunals comprised in equal numbers by employer, state, and (official) union representatives. In Moctezuma's case, labor tribunals were so incompetent and corrupt that a circuit judge took over a key case in 2004 and decided in the workers' favor. However, foot-dragging by the bankruptcy mediator means that 935 mostly-female Moctezuma workers have *still* not received legally-mandated compensation for wages and benefits for work performed well over a decade ago. One hundred and eighty women workers, who opted out of state mechanisms for adjudicating labor disputes by hiring a private lawyer and suing the owner directly, received only a third of what was legally owed to them in compensation. Faced with such daunting odds and long-lasting state obstruction, hundreds of women workers, together with supporters from other social movements, marched from the factory to the downtown offices of the federal conciliation and arbitration board on July 29th of this year. They closed down the city's main avenues and forced the labor tribunal to cancel all proceedings that day, demanding payment and protesting corruption in the state's handling of the case. What can a global ethnography say about the constraints and possibilities for women's mobilization under globalization? I will come back to this at the end of the essay after noting the complex and contradictory ways that social, political, and global dynamics are instantiated in one place.

The Mexican Apparel Industry, State Institutions and Global Governance

Continued flooding of the domestic market by contraband Asian imports and increased competition from China for a sluggish U.S. import market still recovering from economic recession continue to hamper the Mexican apparel sector. Most of the issues highlighted in the book persist, and have perhaps even worsened since it was published in 2012. Credit is still expensive and difficult to obtain, with no state development funds available to the sector until December 2014, when an emergency package of close to US\$31 million was pledged to small and medium-sized firms to combat unfair competition from imported mislabeled products and locally-made contraband products sold in informal markets (INEGI 2013). A further US\$37 million was destined to incentivize innovation in design and production methods with the goal of strengthening links with global firms. Additionally, in 2011 the Servicio de Administración Tributaria, akin to the IRS, instituted a registry of all importers to combat illegal transshipments and misvalued imports from Asia, and Bancomext, the Mexican Development Bank, entered into partnerships with U.S. investors to set up hi-tech industrial parks to attract foreign direct investment in aviation and medical instruments (Notimex 2014; Ruiz Mondragón 2015).

While Mexican policymakers focus on attracting FDI and negotiating free trade agreements, including the Transpacific Trade Partnership, there is a continued delinking of national suppliers from large export firms in the apparel sector. Meager efforts, such as the abovementioned credit

package, will not solve weaknesses highlighted in the book—mainly a lack of stable credit and development policies that favor the importation of raw materials rather than encouraging backward linkages among Mexican firms and upgrading of local suppliers. State policies are focused on creating the conditions for large national and transnational firms to accumulate capital, not on strengthening productive activities that provide living wages for the working class.

My research at Moctezuma, however, also suggests that skilled and well-paid workers are key to successful value-added production in the garment industry. Managers relied on women workers' ingenuity, skill, and effort to meet increasingly unreasonable demands from global buyers. Coercion and rupture of the social contract with workers caused the end of a mutually beneficial relationship. Managers never again reached desired production and quality levels once they lost workers' consent. Indeed, it was the replacement of skilled (and organized) women workers with never-before-employed young female workers, and the concomitant drop in quality and volume that dealt the death knell for the factory.

Recent labor legislation, at face value, improves the institutional context for the working class to mobilize in defense of labor rights. Supreme Court decisions in 2008 and 2012 require a secret vote in union elections, which must take place in a neutral space and with an updated list of employed workers (Maquiladora Solidarity Network 2014). Armed with this legislation, the independent union would have more easily won election and thus dislodged the illegitimate company union that operated for years at Moctezuma. A democratically-elected union, however, would still have to register with a local conciliation and arbitration board that continues to systematically protect employers' interests over those of workers.

Another recent development, the much-debated 2012 labor law reform responds to global pressures by following the European model of flexicurity, combining enhanced flexibility in employment relations with greater worker security. Changes in three main areas are relevant to Moctezuma: ratcheting up worker protections, flexibilizing employment relations, and focusing on improved productivity (Bensusán and Alcalde 2013; Sánchez Castañeda 2014). Changes made to the Federal Labor Law introduce the International Labor Organization's language of decent or dignified work as a right for all. More specifically, reforms prohibit all forms of discrimination in workplaces and uphold collective bargaining rights, freedom of association, and the right to strike while prohibiting employer interference in union matters. Importantly, recurring probationary contracts, such as the ones that were at the root of the 1972 strike at Moctezuma, are banned. Instead employers must provide a written contract that includes benefits. If the terms of the contract are not respected, a worker has the right to demand a permanent contract from a labor tribunal. Changes to the labor code also include important new protections for women, such as a formal statement of the equality of male and female workers in

labor matters; the prohibition of sexual harassment and employer practices requiring proof of non-pregnancy for employment and promotion, and dismissal due to pregnancy or care responsibilities; improved protections for maternity leave; and, for the first time, a guarantee of five days of paternity leave for fathers.

While the 2012 reforms delivered some advances for labor, it also resulted in tradeoffs, most notably in the ways that employment relations are made more flexible. Contract employment is allowed if the work in question is not available continuously (although temporary workers are to be paid at the same rate and with prorated pension benefits equivalent to those of regular workers), new reasons for dismissal with just cause were added, and lost wages in case of unjust dismissal were limited to a year. Although fines for wrongful dismissals increased significantly, employer obligations towards workers decreased, and it has become easier to fire workers. National employment statistics already identify trends of longer working hours for less pay (CEREAL 2015).

Labor law reforms also implement key elements of high-performance work systems. New positions or vacancies will be filled by taking educational attainment, training, and skill into greater account than before, de-emphasizing seniority and union participation as had been previously mandated. Importantly, reforms state that workers can be asked to do work other than that specified in their contract. Moreover, firms with over 50 employees must establish Mixed Commissions for Training and Productivity, made up in equal number of workers and managers, which will assure productivity benchmarks are reached and deal with worker objections over changed work rules. As in the case of Moctezuma, labor reforms have the potential of transforming workers into worker-managers without an increase in their wage.

One of the most important reforms as it relates to the garment industry and labor conditions is the regulation of outsourcing. Outsourcing will require a written contract between firms, where the outsourcing firm must verify that the subcontractor has the means to fulfill all of its legal obligations to workers, including wages, benefits, and a safe work environment. If the subcontracting firm does not meet legal obligations, workers have the right to compel the outsourcing company to cover said obligations. However, details about which firm would be responsible for providing which benefits, whether international firms would also be affected, and how compliance is to be verified, were left ambiguous in the new laws. The labor reform also streamlined minor labor tribunals' processes, such as requiring professional certification for some positions, adding a meeting to adjudicate evidence, and requiring all members of the board to be present for final judgments, but the rigged tri-partite tribunal system remains intact (Bensusán and Alcalde 2013). Given that labor tribunals are charged with protecting new worker rights and regulations on outsourcing, their composition and the lack of alternatives means that workers may still find it difficult to contest labor abuses.

Although some provisions of the labor reform inspire hope, institutional barriers to genuine worker representation remain strong. Weak state oversight, employer-biased composition of labor boards, and lack of democracy and transparency in unions persist. In fact, 80-90% of collective bargaining agreements are protection contracts similar to the one signed at Moctezuma (Maquiladora Solidarity Network 2014). Taken together, these elements forecast lopsided application of the law benefiting capital accumulation rather than workers.

Reflecting on recent developments, several lessons can be drawn on the global governance of the apparel industry. While Moctezuma was not a fly-by-night sweatshop, I was surprised at how quickly supposedly enlightened managers turned on workers. Labor conditions at the end did not differ much from sweatshops. Marina Karides is correct to note that once the company sunk its capital into becoming a lean producer in direct response to global buyers' pressures, there was no turning back. Yet managers' being out of control did not cause the factory's demise. Global brand auditors' repeated visits to the shop floor assured that industry best practices and codes of conduct were followed reasonably well, which Locke and colleagues (2007) indicate is key to avoiding labor violations. Closer collaboration with state actors, such as labor inspectors, as suggested by Shrank and Piore (2006) would also not have been very helpful, given the make-up of labor tribunals and the ministry of the economy, which govern the industry.

Building upon the new Mexican regulation of outsourcing, I find Anner, Bair, and Blasi's (2013) proposal for joint liability agreements between buyers, contractors and unions the most hopeful. Inspired by the promise of the Bangladesh Accord on Building and Fire Safety, consumer movements such as United Students Against Sweatshops, Global Framework Agreements, and the history of early 20th century jobber agreements, they advocate for joint liability in global supply chains as a way to reign in the most powerful actors that set prices in the industry—global buyers. Joint liability would entail contractually enforceable collective bargaining agreements between buyers, contractors, and unions, as workers' representatives, to assure pricing practices that are sufficient to cover living wages and safety upgrades to factories, while at the same time building sustainability through long-term relations among the three parties.

Joint liability agreements are toothless, however, without highly engaged social movements and independent media to pressure states, firms, and unions to end the race to the bottom. Key provisions of the Mexican labor reform provide tools for workers to defend their rights, but reforms are meaningless if workers do not know about them, or cannot access mechanisms to have their voices heard, their complaints redressed, and delinquent employers fined. More egalitarian transnational networks that respect voices from communities and workers in the South are needed to strengthen local worker movements and keep state actors accountable, to translate lofty rights written on paper into concrete practices that improve labor conditions and

wages for all.

So, returning to the question Lorena Murga poignantly asks in her commentary, is Mexico doomed to be a source of cheap labor? The present is bleak. In the case of Moctezuma, skills honed on the shop floor did not translate into better labor market opportunities, since workers were systematically blacklisted after the strike. However, building on insights from Collins' (2003) excellent global ethnography and my own experience, the state exists in a contested terrain, embedded in both global economic relations as well as global, national, and local social and political movements. As *We Are in This Dance* demonstrates, collective worker contestations of power transform women's understanding of their own agency, even when the collective movements seemingly fail. I do believe there is hope that recent changes in the labor law open new spaces for local and transnational contestation and the opportunity to build stronger global governance mechanisms through ties between workers and activists in the global South and global North.

What Would A World Systems Analysis Look Like?

The title of the book, *We Are In This Dance Together*, are words spoken by one of the leaders when she declared the workers on strike. The words resonated with me at that moment and still encapsulate the lessons of Moctezuma at multiple levels: for the strike to succeed, workers had to understand their collective gender and class interests were antagonistic to the empty promises made by the owners and state agents; and for workers in the Global South to see the fruits of their struggles in the form of dignified work, workers and activists in the Global North would have to raise their voices and march their feet in unison.

Moctezuma's demise underscores how the never-ending profit-maximizing logic of capitalism instantiates local social relations. Lead firms at the top of the commodity chain exert their power to extract increasingly larger profits from contractors by dictating production methods and colluding with state actors to shape employment conditions to lower labor costs. But the case of Moctezuma also shows how women and men create meaning out of everyday experiences on the shop floor, recognizing their power and exercising it, albeit to discouraging collective results. Given the ethnographic methods and my emotional connection with the women workers, I focused on the latter.

Although *We Are In This Dance Together* argues that global forces—such as changing trade regulations, global financial crises, power dynamics in global commodity chains, increased immigration, and local social movements that used media to build global networks—impacted the lives of women workers at Moctezuma, the theoretical conversation in the book was with sociologists of work on the contradictory processes of firm-level industrial upgrading. The

theoretical questions that guided the study when I began research shaped the focus on work organization. As such, the book's critique centered on the precarious promise of development through firm-level industrial upgrading rather than a critique of the capitalist world system. As Karides and Bair rightly point out in their essays, this de-emphasizes the way global capitalism was imbricated in most social relations, and thus prevented a richer conversation with world systems and gender scholars.

Specifically, Karides notes that a fuller engagement with Smith and Wallerstein's (1984) concept of households as constitutive of the capitalist world system would have been profitable. While I did not use the language of world systems, I theorized women workers as historically-situated subjects, and gender as simultaneously operating in the institutions of family, workplace, labor market, nation state and global economy in ways similar to Scott and Wallerstein. My objective was to further a structural approach that was sensitive to relational and discursive practices. Yet Bair and Karides are correct to note that because the empirical chapters more narrowly focus on how gender was embedded in social relations on the shop floor and was marshaled by managers and workers in different and contingent ways, the larger, more constitutive character of gender was relegated to the literature review and the opportunity to engage in a fuller debate with feminist research on gender and globalization was missed.

While I cannot do justice in this space to the debates and my position within them, there are a few key interventions I would make. First, while Moctezuma and its insertion into the global economy was different than most transnational assembly plants at the heart of gender studies of the global economy, it also shared important similarities, such as seeking out raced and classed bodies to exploit as cheap labor. Second, drawing from excellent global ethnographies, I would emphasize the important role played by the state in mediating and shaping the ways in which capital touches down in local spaces, and how the work that capital does in those spaces, is, in turn, shaped by such mediation. Third, in contraposition to post-structural accounts where managers are ultimately responsible for creating female subjectivity and therefore disposability through discursive practices (Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006), which obfuscate labor's agency, I would argue that discursive practices are a site of contestation where women workers' agency is particularly relevant and materially consequential. Therefore, a meso-level theoretical framework that is both structural and relational most successfully explains the continuities and breaks in the way global capital instantiates local social relations and how women workers fight back, and in so doing, reshape global dynamics.

In *We Are in This Dance Together* specifically, I used the concept of gender ideology to historically situate women workers, contrasting their supposed roles in the institutions of the household and workplace during the expansionist period of the 1960s-70s and the crisis at the turn of the 21st century. My goal was to destabilize the view of women—often held by managers,

and at times by workers themselves—as naturally best suited for reproductive labor and repetitive, unskilled work. I argued that women’s experience on the shop floor made evident the contradicting constructions of workers as docile subservient mothers and daughters who “helped” their families with supplemental income *and* self-assured, knowledgeable team members. Faced with increasing managerial abuse as the company struggled to cut costs, mounting contradictions emboldened women workers to act on their own behalf not only as mothers (or potential mothers), but primarily as women workers who are valuable both in the household and workplace.

Restated as an intersectional proposition, women workers possessed multiple intersecting identities, most notably gender, age, class, and racial/ethnic identities. Gender and age had been dominant before the strike, channeling younger (usually single) women’s actions towards education, and older (often mothers’) energies to benefit their individual families. Resistance, in response to Cristina Morales’ query, tended to be at the individual level. Contradictions on the shop floor led women to define their situation as unjust and exploitative, crystalizing a classed and gendered identity that underscored how they shared a collective interest that was antagonistic to capital’s interest. Age and family roles were no longer divisive, but rather were reinterpreted and marshaled discursively against management. It was not that workers’ consciousness suddenly awoke, but rather that as different social, political and economic conditions developed, women’s self-definition shifted, leading to distinct types of agentic responses.

While racial/ethnic inequalities were imbricated in the location strategies of the original Italian company that founded Moctezuma in the 1950s, and in the later outsourcing of apparel production to rural towns in the 2000s, racial/ ethnic difference was not a significant axis of power on the shop floor. In other words, differences existed on the shop floor, with women with darker skin and indigenous backgrounds being lowest in the social hierarchy (and typically occupying lower class status in Mexico), but they did not affect social relations in major ways. Most women were mestizo, although I did observe that a few light-skinned women received a bit more unwanted attention from managers. Since I was sensitive to issues of racial/ethnic stratification, I noted Irene’s social isolation (as Murga noted) with particular interest. In the end it dawned on me that her being ostracized before the strike made it easier for her to depart from shop floor norms of solidarity during the strike. This is an old insight from the Human Relations School.

Managers tended to be lighter skinned than most workers, which together with their professional attire, cemented their higher-class status on the shop floor. There was one notable exception. Belinda, the affable HR manager, was significantly darker than other managers, and even than most workers. Not coincidentally perhaps, she had the best rapport with workers,

remaining uncharacteristically friendly during the strike. While these cases of racial/ethnic differences among workers and managers were of interest and for the most part described in the book, I did not witness systematic inequalities based on race/ethnicity of the sort that would allow me to include such issues in the analysis.

In her commentary, Morales asks whether I observed maternalistic bonds between workers with different positions (e.g. a team leader and members of her team), similar to those that exist between domestic workers and their female employers. Given that women workers tended to have similar power locations, I did not. However some maternalistic bonds did materialize between team leaders and female advisors (Moctezuma's term for supervisors under modular production, where supervisors held less power and could only offer direction to teams if it was directly requested). As described in the book, faced with unrealistic individual productivity expectations in addition to team responsibilities, team leaders acquiesced to advisors' reassertion of their power over teams. Another realm where such maternalistic relations occurred was in the research process. Several workers in both teams that I worked with took a maternal attitude towards me. While I possessed class and racial privilege, as a garment worker I was on the bottom of the social hierarchy. I *was* naïve, unknowledgeable and unskilled. Therefore, I did not feel demeaned, but rather thankful that workers looked out for me.

Methodological Dances

Based on nine months of participant observation, *We Are In This Dance Together* utilizes semi-structured interviews to better understand insights developed through the experience of working on the shop floor, innumerable formal and informal conversations with fellow workers and managers, and reading of the scholarly literature. In that sense the interview protocol was driven by theory and observation. The 38 core workers interviewed were members of the two teams I worked in, plus a few from nearby teams that I got to know well. That is, we shared experiences such as coordinating daily production meetings, rushing to get an order out, and voting on which workers were to be awarded permits allowing them to be temporarily absent from the shop floor. Semi-structured interviews asked about those shared experiences, in addition to previous employment, whether they were present for the reorganization of the shop floor, length and quality of training, experiences with piece rate and teamwork, and experiences with management under each system.

Semi-structured interviews complemented and informed the "data" from participant observation to be able to systematically recount and analyze the constraints and opportunities offered by piece rate and teamwork, as well as the meanings workers assigned these systems, without having had experienced both myself. It was in this way that I learned from several

women workers the complicated way in which management priced each item and operation under piece rate, as well as the ability that women developed in ascertaining the skill level and time needed to produce a particular garment, in order to contest underpricing. Through my mother's contact in the community, I also sought out and interviewed 6 additional women who had only worked at Moctezuma under the piece rate system in the 1970s, to compare their recollections with those of my core workers and to better understand the 1972 strike. (These 6 interviews were more informal and were not included as part of the 38 semi-structured interviews conducted for the book). The remaining interviews were with 27 managers and 3 top government policymakers, delving into their perspectives on organizational change. However, I did construct a database of 1,046 worker files made available by the Human Resources department at Moctezuma to triangulate and verify the information gleaned from workers' semi-structured interviews, finding no statistical differences between the two groups.

Morales and Murga ask a more difficult question. How did I deal with the emotional labor required in doing feminist ethnography? What advice do I have for junior scholars? That is an article in itself, but I will make a few quick observations. Elsewhere I have detailed how securing consent required under the IRB protocol is extremely problematic when the field is a political minefield, with shifting alliances and growing antagonisms between actors/subjects (Plankey-Videla 2012). The most difficult moment for me was deciding to end participant observation, not because I had reached a level of saturation, but because my presence created severe rifts among workers. As a feminist ethnographer, the larger social justice cause was more important than my dissertation. Although I was able to withdraw from the shop floor without any negative repercussions for the research project, it was a period of great stress and uncertainty. My advice for junior scholars is, keep your perspective but also reflect on how your insider status affects your analysis.

Another piece of advice: be strategic. I knew the workers' voices were the most important to me, theoretically and personally. However, I accessed the factory through management. Workers were predictably suspicious of me as a gringa approved by management to ask lots of questions; they did not know which side I was on. To counteract this, I asked to begin training and working on the shop floor right away, in the hopes this would weaken my identification with management as much as possible. I also introduced myself to everyone I could and answered their questions as honestly as possible. I earned their trust by working by their side. In this dialogical process, women workers interpreted my dissertation as doing an unpaid internship to earn a degree, and accepted me as a coworker.

A third suggestion: Own your critical reflexive stance, but don't let that restrict your academic goals. Reflexive writing practices are not the norm in the larger discipline of sociology. You will be criticized. Do what you can to shore up your claims and move forward.

The knowledge that I had ‘gone native,’ that I had become more of a participant than an observer when I joined workers in the strike as an activist, pressed me to find ways to triangulate the study, interviewing more workers and managers, as well as asking to see worker files and creating a database of media coverage of the labor dispute. I wanted to speak authoritatively. Acknowledging my biases made my work stronger not weaker, and allowed me to speak to the larger discipline, not just those who would be predisposed to listen to my insights.

Finally, to weather the emotional ups and downs, existential doubts, and methodological issues, have a support structure and a mechanism of constructive criticism. I had that in my partner, also a sociologist, who was caring for our small child while I was on the shop floor. I also made unexpectedly close friendships with a few women workers who have been a continual source of inspiration. Research is rarely an individual accomplishment. *We Are In This Dance Together* was truly a partnership.

The essays in this symposium have raised important questions and provided me the opportunity to revisit the methods and conclusions of my work. I thank the contributors for making my analysis clearer. Their comments also affirm that studying power in the world system from the bottom up has great academic value. We all hope that our scholarship has relevance beyond academic circles. As Smitha Radhakrishnan so eloquently articulates, *We Are In This Dance Together* can also be used in the classroom to ignite students’ sociological imagination and inspire students to make connections between inequality and struggle in the Global South, and power, privilege and struggle in the Global North. Students’ questions and analysis would make my coworkers so happy and proud. It was of utmost importance to them that their labor, their sacrifices, and their struggles not be forgotten, and that these have meaning. They absolutely do.

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