The Global Assembly Line in the New Millennium

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More than 20 years ago, as part of my dissertation research, I sat behind a sewing machine at a Mexican maquiladora in Ciudad Juarez. That border city was the cradle of outsourcing in the region for American companies aiming to reduce production costs and improve their competitive edge in the world market. For approximately two months I sewed biases around the cuff openings of men’s shirts for such well known American companies as Billy the Kid, Devon, and Sears Roebuck. My wage was nine times smaller than the minimum wage of $1.90 paid to workers in the neighboring city of El Paso, Texas, one of the most depressed in the United States, but still more expensive from the point of view of employers than its Mexican counterpart, just 15 minutes across the international line. The year was 1978 and Ciudad Juarez was experiencing a boom resulting from a new trend in globalization. Women were becoming the new face of the international proletariat (Fernández-Kelly 1983).
At the beginning of the 21st century economic integration on a world scale continues unabated and two features are striking:

(a) In the 1970s and subsequent years, the trend was towards the relocation of low-skilled manufacturing operations to points in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. By the late 1990s, the current had engulfed professional occupations as evidenced by the rapid movement of engineering and software development jobs from the United States to India. Changes in the character and status of the operations being moved overseas has renewed interest and given sudden visibility to outsourcing. Yet it is still low-skilled workers who have experienced the larger impact of the process;

(b) Contrary to early predictions, globalization has not been, for the most part, an engine for development in less developed countries. Instead, the trend has paralleled rapid increases in inequality and the persistence of poverty in places like Mexico. Rates of inequality have also grown in advanced industrial nations like the U.S. even as unionization rates have plummeted to unprecedented levels. Disconcerting, in light of those phenomena, at both ends of the geo-political spectrum has been the absence of viable workers’ movements aimed at curtailing some of the noxious effects of economic internationalization.

The four books under consideration here represent a welcome addition to the study of women and globalization. Together they provide an overview of the extent to which current economic trends are affecting working women and their families in various locations, the reasons behind the limited success of
grassroots movements in export-processing zones, and the theoretical significance of gender in the expansion of global capitalism.

Pun Ngai’s *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* offers the latest iteration in a long series of studies about export-processing zones. Her work is best appreciated with an eye on Mexico’s experience. Between 1970 and 1993, *maquiladoras* expanded rapidly to become the world’s largest program in export-oriented manufacturing and Mexico’s second most important source of revenue, trailing only after oil production. By the end of the 1990s more than one million workers nationwide were employed in *maquiladoras*. Electronics and apparel dominated that sector but, starting in the 1980s, complex electronics and auto-transport equipment grew rapidly, partly as a result of the peso devaluation. That transformation also brought about the increased employment of men, especially young internal migrants fleeing small agricultural towns in search of better fortune.

It was also in the 1980s that Mexico faced a new and mighty competitor: China, a vast and populous country undergoing economic reform and offering investors even more attractive conditions for investment. The opening of the special economic zone of Shenzhen in 1981 augured a new era that led by the virtual disappearance of garment *maquiladoras* in Mexico by the 1990s. Situated in close proximity to Hong Kong, Shenzhen became, according to author Pun Ngai, a main factor behind China’s new role as the world’s largest sweatshop. In the 1970s, approximately 30,000 people had resided in the area where Shenzhen was built and two thirds of them were employed. Fifteen years later,
the population had surpassed four million and most residents held jobs in manufacturing. That employment and population boom echoed similar developments that had taken place in a smaller scale in Mexico only two decades earlier—a striking testimony to the capacity of capital to cross international borders in search of optimal conditions for production. In the late 1970s wages paid to *maquiladora* workers in Mexican border cities were approximately nine times smaller than those paid to their American counterparts. In the 1990s, Chinese wages were but a fraction of those paid in Mexico even after repeated devaluations of that nation’s currency.

On the basis of analytical frameworks advanced first by Foucault (1988), Touraine (1987), and Thompson (1963), Ngai focuses on the emergence of a new identity, that of the dagongmei (working girls), young women from the Chinese countryside who flow into China’s Shenzhen district searching dreams of freedom and excitement before returning to their villages to become wives. The dagonmei and their male counterparts, the dagongzai, do not emerge as members of a new urban proletariat forged by globalization but as an itinerant workforce whose labor is not recognized in class terms. Dagonmei and dagongzai are different from and subaltern to the gongren, the labor aristocracy created during the Chinese Revolution under the leadership of Mao Zedung. Central to Ngai’s work is the realization that global economic integration is giving way to new historical subjects with characteristics that deviate significantly from older equivalents. Objectively, the Dagongmei are members of an international
proletariat. Nevertheless, gender, age, and rural provenance render them invisible in class terms.

Eloquently written, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, offers an innovative analysis of ambiguous identities fastened by what Foucault calls “techniques of labor appropriation”—acute supervision, repetitive operations, temporality of employment, and long working hours—but also spatial displacement. During the reform period that followed Mao’s revolution, the hukou housing system became part of rigid government policies that tie individuals to the villages where they were born. As a result, most young women who migrate to the special economic zone in search of opportunity never become part of that location; they are merely the providers of cheap and replaceable labor. According to Ngai, temporality means that the labor of the rural population is needed for global production but not its survival in the city once that labor ceases to be necessary. As a result, many of the trends foreshadowed in other parts of the world have acquired even harsher dimensions in China.

The ordeal of the dagongmei does not end with low wages, severe working conditions, and temporality of employment. Their spatial displacement is also tied to forms of discrimination, subtle as well as crude. Because they come from rural villages and are recognizable by their accent and dress, young working women are treated with contempt by urban dwellers. They are permanent outsiders. Their exclusion has major consequences with respect to self-definition. While workers from Mao’s era were portrayed as the front end of the proletariat,
in the reform period dagongmei and dagonzai are portrayed as lazy peasants, unable to conform to the rhythms of industrial capitalism. Although their labor has been critical to the expansion of Chinese manufacturing, prejudice engulfs the image of young factory workers. The contradiction is only apparent—it is their despised status that makes those workers desirable from the point of view of employers. A devalued image also makes young men and women complicit in their own subordination, neutralizing any capacity for political action.

Pun Ngai is at her best when delving beyond the surface to recount working women’s attempt to impose meaning on a depreciated existence. Like young factory workers everywhere they laugh, yearn for romance outside patriarchal constraints, and hope to find prosperity through accident or good fortune. Poignant and enlightening is the author’s effort to understand how women contest the brutal impositions of paid labor. Dagongmei typically work 12 hours and share cramped quarters with other workers in dormitories provided by employers. Under those circumstances, and lacking the means to constitute themselves into a political force, women fall back on the afflictions of the body to signal their discontent.

Particularly useful is Ngai’s attempt at understanding the dreams and screams of Chinese working women who, paralyzed by their spatial dislocation and lowly social position, use their feminized bodies as weapons to oppose speed-ups and work intensification. Menstrual and back pain, fainting, and other similar responses are part of the daily routine in Shenzhen factories. Such manifestations reinforce sexualized stereotypes but they also reflect the
appropriation of negative portrayals for subversive ends. Pun Ngai is right when identifying such expressions as a ‘minor genre of resistance.’ *Made in China* is both a denunciation of the continuing abuses surrounding globalized production and a passionate celebration of the capacity of women to overcome them.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate Pun Ngai’s *Made in China* is in counterpoint to Jennifer Bickham Mendez’s, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras*; an examination of women’s employment in Nicaraguan assembly plants during and after the Sandinista Revolution. The book provides a comprehensive account of the birth and development of a small grassroots organization, the Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, “Maria Elena Cuadra” (MEC), which was created in 1994 as an independent entity emerging from the Sandinista Workers’ Central, the largest trade union confederation in Nicaragua. MEC’s objectives were to improve working conditions, create opportunities for unemployed women, reduce domestic violence and promote reproductive health. Although small, MEC rapidly scored many successes gaining the attention of world development organizations and women’s advocates in advanced industrial countries.

*From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras* is written on the basis of ethnographic research and the author’s personal involvement over the course of a decade; it is therefore a historical chronicle, an investigation into the operations of a unique women’s organization, and a personal testimony. The book is particularly interesting in what it shows not only about women attempting to organize but also about the pitfalls encountered in the route towards
effectiveness. MEC’s founders were apt at using their position as mothers, workers, neighbors and advocates to draw attention to social inequities. They came into visibility pretty much as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina had appeared in an earlier period—women tied to the restraints of femininity but seeking vindication for egregious offenses. The Argentinean mothers, walking pensively and resigned around a central Buenos Aires square in protestation for the disappearance of their children, constituted a force strong enough to paralyze their country’s dictatorial government and galvanize the world’s attention. Devotion to family was transformed into a revolutionary force. Similar, although in a smaller scale, the instance recounted by Bickham Mendez entails the journey of women led by concerns over the conditions surrounding their families and neighbors. As demonstrated by both cases such commitments are fraught with political potential. In less than 10 years MEC attracted a multitude of followers and became the cornerstone of a promising popular movement.

By contrast to the Chinese dagongmei, limited in their capacity for mobilization by temporality, marginal status, and spatial displacement, MEC women were able to organize largely because they belonged in long standing social networks tied to fixed spaces. As parents, neighborhood dwellers, and union members they possessed the means to constitute themselves into an organized force and were in a better position than their Chinese counterparts to spur actions requiring solidarity. Because they worked on behalf of gender but also class, they drew working men facing many of the difficulties confronted by
their female counterparts. Given its wide appeal it is not surprising that MEC attracted international attention.

Paradoxically, it was notoriety and success that may have put a halt on the movement’s capacity to fulfill its original vision. By the end of the 20th century, the organization had entered into alliances with a good number of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with agendas of their own. On the one hand, such partnerships had a salutary effect because external demands provided focus and discipline to what had originally been a loosely connected group of concerned individuals. Yet the presence of external actors also meant that MEC had to direct more effort at securing material and human resources for specific projects. As in other cases recounted elsewhere (Shefner 2006), grant-writing and evaluation mechanisms had a dampening effect on the vitality of the organization.

The unfolding of events recounted by Bickham Mendez is reminiscent of Mexico’s Movimiento Urbano Popular (MUP) as described by its most accomplished chronicler, Juan Manuel Ramírez Saíz (2006). Throughout the 1980s MUP dazzled observers with its capacity to rally workers. Nearly one million people acted in unison to obtain subsidized housing and other benefits from the Mexican government. By the 1990s, however, the movement was but a trickle of what had been an awe-inspiring river. Decline followed the decision on the part of MUP leaders to enter alliances with official parties. MUP’s involvement in partisan politics was originally seen as a means to secure human and material resources and augment constituencies. Nevertheless, the logic of
and procedural restraints imposed by political parties made it virtually impossible for the movement’s leaders to dedicate time and energy to mobilization. In like vein, Nicaragua’s MEC saw its efforts retarded by the need to meet the demands of external supporters whose admirable intentions were nonetheless in contradiction to the demands of grassroots organizing.

A comparison of the Chinese and Nicaraguan situations as described by Ngai and Bickham Mendez leads to two significant conclusions. First, the creation of organizations and movements with clearly articulated demands has been made even more difficult by globalized production. In the Chinese example, temporality of employment and spatial displacement act as major barriers to the emergence of working class identities. In the Nicaraguan and Mexican instances, the presence of external supporters or involvement in partisan politics can also mitigate against the creation of viable organizations. Divisions of class and gender further dilute the possibilities for unification.

Second, contrary to expectations non-governmental organizations may be exacerbating in some cases the difficulties that working women face in their attempts to mobilize effectively. This brings to mind work by Robinson (1996) who sees NGOs as part of a new political project to neutralize workers’ demands. That possibility is filled with irony. Non-governmental organizations burst into view as attempts to redress the omissions of national governments and market advocates, the first often more interested in political expediency than in the equitable distribution of resources, and the second more focused on the realization of profit than on the reduction of inequalities. Inspired by noble
intentions, NGOs gave civil society a fresh face, promoting, among other things, the expansion of health and educational services, credit associations, housing, and political participation among women and men in less developed countries. Their work is a testimony to the capacity for collaboration among people separated not only by international borders but also by class, race and gender. If there ever was a potential for true ‘sisterhood’ it dwells within NGOs.

The problem, however, is that in many cases, NGOs are also the bearers of ideologies that dampen the efforts of community-based groups. In a recent study about the role of NGOs in a Mexican barrio, Shefner (2006) documents the extent to which neighborhood residents come to see their external sponsors more as a source of supplementary income than as a motor for resistance and justice-oriented action. NGOs in Mexico have been staunch supporters of democratic change but they have been less effective in backing redistributive initiatives. The result is the co-existence of political improvements in the midst of growing social and economic disparities. The Mexican case parallels that described by Bickham-Mendez in Nicaragua. Once required to play by political and bureaucratic rules, organizations like MEC shift from struggle to a form of dependence that evokes the one experienced by impoverished people in American inner cities, for whom welfare agencies are a means to tap into scarce assets withheld by the larger society.

The effects of globalization are not experienced solely by popular classes in less developed countries; they are also felt in advanced industrial countries where new waves of immigration are the outcome of integration into the world
economy. In *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City’s Garment Industry*, Margaret M. Chin weaves an extensive and thoughtful narrative relevant to the subject. Drawing from earlier works, she retells the story of an industry and a city, which are coterminous with the ascent of industrialization, urbanization, and migration in the U.S. New York stands alone as the epitome of the manufacturing emporia that forged the American Dream. At the turn of the 20th century, more than half of those residing in that city were foreign-born.

Polish, Italian and Jewish women (and men) crowded tenements where sewing machines never ceased to hum—while some workers slept, others sewed in the same rooms driven by personal dreams of enrichment and the demands of investors. By 1950, New York was a major center for U.S. manufacturing and apparel production was its anchor, accounting for 32.8 percent of manufacturing employment. With its masses of foreign-born workers, New York rose to become one of the world’s top producers of apparel.

European migration brought more than cheap labor to the burgeoning city. Jewish immigrants, in particular, became adept at organizing in demand of higher wages and better working conditions. Their success took form in the spectacular rise of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU). By mid-century a new influx of Puerto Rican women filled the spaces left vacant by prospering Italians and Jews. Success, however, gave way to new troubles. Companies eager to reduce production costs began to relocate operations first to other American cities like Los Angeles and then to foreign locations. By 1996, apparel production in New York had slipped to only 7.9 percent of manufacturing
employment and 2.2 percent of total employment citywide. In 1995 the ILGWU fused with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) to form UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employment), a new organization that was as much a manifestation of workers’ solidarity as a witness to the rapid decline of syndicalism.

Yet the shrinking of apparel manufacture in New York City entailed a surprising twist: the production of women’s clothing, particularly garments created by specialty designers, grew rapidly in the last two decades of the 20th century. As Saskia Sassen (1999) has helpfully noted, the vacuums left behind by certain kinds of production were occupied by unique types of assembly that required flexibility in organization and labor usage. Such new demands were ideally suited to the entrepreneurial capacities and employment potential of immigrants. It is in that respect that Chin’s study makes its most significant contribution.

Sewing Women offers the only systematic analysis of the differences and similarities between Chinese and Korean garment manufacturers in New York. Chin’s study illustrates the advantages of the comparative method. Chinese operations, she notes, have existed in New York City for nearly a century. As a result, they rely on a workforce with deep roots in China Town’s ethnic enclave. Bound by commonalities of language, nationality and history, Chinese employers depend on reciprocal relations with workers, often incurring obligations that detract from their profits. For example, Chinese women employed by co-ethnics work longer hours than others in equivalent jobs but are allowed more flexibility in
the way they divide their time. That enables them to begin work for pay early in
the morning, shop for groceries and welcome children from school in the
afternoon, and return to paid employment in the evening after domestic chores
have been attended to.

Another major incentive for paid work among Chinese women in New York
is the provision of health-care benefits attached to their unionized status. Men in
their families often work for cash in the informal economy and, as a result, do not
belong in unions. Among Chinese women, however, syndicalism does not
translate into higher wages. In fact, they earn lower wages that other workers
employed in similar kinds of jobs. Chin observes that embeddedness in tight
social networks offer Chinese women and their employers some practical
advantages but it does not translate into better wages or a clear class identity.
Their situation is different in many ways from that of the dagongmei related by
Pun Ngai but the outcome is oddly similar.

A striking contrast is presented by Korean-owned shops which have
proliferated in New York since the 1980s in response to the new needs of the
garment industry. Korean entrepreneurs do not hire co-ethnics or Chinese
workers—whom they see as slower and less nimble—but Hispanics, mostly
Mexican and Ecuadorian. Most of those workers are illegal aliens and, therefore,
do not belong in unions. Yet they earn higher wages than their Chinese
counterparts and tend to display a greater facility in adjusting to market
demands. The lack of ethnic ties with employers gives them freedom to pursue
other jobs solely on the basis of cost-benefit calculations. They epitomize in a
minor way the idealized *homo economicus* put forth by neoclassical economists. On the other hand, lacking the social protection derived from a shared heritage with their employers Hispanic workers are more expendable and easier to replace than their Chinese counterparts. Neither case exhibits the features present in an earlier era that led to mobilization and the constitution of a social class with distinct interests or consciousness. As in the cases discussed by Ngai, Bickham Mendez and others, Margaret Chin’s important study points in the direction of atomization among workers divided by nationality, immigrant background, ethnicity, race, and gender.

We are left with the despairing realization that both in advanced and less developed countries increased economic integration has not paralleled the unification of workers with similar positions across international borders. Instead, the tendency seems to be towards the preservation of national identities and the fragmentation of labor forces along increasingly more narrow criteria. That this continues to occur even as anti-sweatshop movements and anti-globalization campaigns capture the world’s attention remains a puzzle yet to be unraveled by research and theory.

Perhaps the best bet for a better understanding of the events considered here lie in the efforts of authors like Durcilla K. Barker and Susan F. Feiner whose new book, *Liberating Economics: Feminist Perspectives on Families, Work, and Globalization* arrives like a breath of fresh air to remind us of the vitality that can infuse the study of gender. Pitched to a new generation of scholars, the book is bereft of the afflictions often present in earlier works by
other authors—humorlessness, impenetrable prose, and dogmatism. Briskly written and filled with insight, *Liberating Economics* revisits known territory while at the same time ushering in themes that should be of continuing interest in the years to come. Paramount among them is the re-valorization of domestic work.

Barker and Feiner begin with a helpful discussion of definitions. On the premise that human needs expand continuously while the means to meet them grow in limited ways, a long line of neoclassical writers have defined economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources. Rooted in that understanding is a particular ideology and vision of human nature suited to the logic of capitalism, one among other productive systems. Scarcity, imply the authors of *Liberating Economics*, is not a 'natural' imperative but the result of historical arrangements. With an eye on the situated character of economics, and borrowing from work by Julie Nelson (1996), Barker and Feiner recast economics as “the study of provisioning.” The choice is fraught with possibilities for empirical research and political action. A focus on provisioning alters our perception of social life as crude competition in pursuit of survival and in favor of a nuanced interpretation in which forces like empathy, mutuality, and reciprocity are as important as the market or, better phrased, fundamental constituents of market arrangements just as economic sociologists have argued.

From a political point of view, an emphasis on provisioning enables us to envision movements that will draw strength from the valorization of what the authors call “caring work,” that is, energy expenditure on behalf of dependent populations like children, the aged, the physically afflicted, and the impoverished.
Because much of that caring work takes place within the confines of the household, the stress on provisioning entails considerable promise when added to more conventional types of mobilization that center attention on the workplace and other public arenas. Those efforts require that housework be recognized as part of the economic system, a point eloquently made by second-wave feminists for at least two decades but worth remembering in the age of globalization.

Barker and Feiner follow those helpful reflections with historical sketches of the gender division of labor, the role of women’s work in state building, and the persistence of poverty and inequality in the wake of neo-liberalism. Every chapter contains worthwhile information that may be read as an independent contribution but which also builds into a coherent volume. As a whole, Liberating Economics represents the latest and possibly the most nimble account of the relationship between gender and globalization.

Especially deserving of mention is the book’s condensation of data about poverty in the New Millennium. As shown by Barker and Feiner, and other authors, the dissemination of neo-liberal economic policies has coincided with two paradoxical results—one is the accelerated production of a limitless amount of goods and services, the consequent expansion of markets throughout the world, and the improvement of macro-economic indicators in many advanced and less developed countries. Another outcome, however, is the growth of social inequalities within and across countries, and the persistence of abject poverty in many locations.
Barker and Feiner remind us that, at a time when advanced technology and multitudinous commodities increase the quality of life and the possibility of pleasure for many, “almost a half of the world’s population, 2.8 billion people, live on less than $2.00 a day, and 1.2 billion of them in even more abysmal poverty, surviving—barely—on less than $1.00 per day” (98). Most poor people throughout the planet are women and children. It is true that blunt statistical figures do not reveal the capacity of impoverished people to extract benefits from non-monetary assets embedded in their communities and families but even if we slashed the existing data by half, the stubborn persistence of poverty gives testimony to the limitations of the economic system. Open to debate is whether poverty is all the more resilient in areas of the world, like Africa, where globalization has scarcely penetrated.

Heightened levels of inequality brought about by globalizing trends have been linked to rises in crime. Over the last three decades, a new international division of labor has paralleled the growth of sex tourism and the traffic of women and children for sexual purposes. The drug trade, catering primarily to the demands of affluent populations in advanced industrial countries, is emblematic of the same process. In Latin America, in cities like México, Rio de Janeiro, Bogotá, and even Buenos Aires, the development of new ‘gated’ residential areas bears witness to the dangerous gulf separating popular and wealthy classes. The recent shift to the left in Latin American politics is seen by some as a logical response to the failures of neo-liberal policies implemented throughout the region within the last decade and a half.
Yet again, the shift from a manufacturing-based economy to one dependent on services and advanced technology has had divided effects in countries like the United States. Echoing earlier authors, Barker and Feiner recall that the disappearance of millions of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. had a disproportionate and negative impact upon the working class. Especially affected were African Americans, who had been the last to gain access to unionized employment and the first to be dismissed when companies relocated to foreign locations. The rapid decline of union membership considered by Margaret Chin in Sewing Women was more than a local phenomenon; it affected people throughout the nation. And it was largely as a consequence of that trend that more women than ever entered the labor force. Ironically, it was during the same period that second-wave feminism came to maturity. Yet most women vying for jobs did so guided less by a desire for emancipation than by concern over maintaining adequate standards of living for themselves and their families. In that respect—and despite their comparative prosperity—American women bear a striking resemblance to their counterparts in China, Nicaragua, or Mexico. Despite class and national background their interests are also similar to the Hispanic and Chinese immigrants described by Chin. Despite such commonalities, national background and race continue to fragment gender and class consciousness.

The four books reviewed here should inspire new research and theoretical thinking on the tortured relationship between gender and economics. They are a timely reminder that feminist scholarship has a role to play in analysis but also a
responsibility to forge new avenues for popular mobilization across international borders.

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