The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity

Aihwa Ong


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0084-6570%281991%292%3A20%3C279%3ATGALPO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2

*Annual Review of Anthropology* is currently published by Annual Reviews.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/annrevs.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
THE GENDER AND LABOR POLITICS OF POSTMODERNITY

Aihwa Ong
Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720

KEY WORDS: capital accumulation, ethno-ography of work, labor and culture, resistance, female workers in Asia and Mexico

The literature on export-industrialization and the feminization of industrial work challenges theory to catch up with lived realities. Reports from the new frontiers of industrial labor reveal a widening gap between our analytical constructs and workers' actual experiences. This puzzle arises from our limited theoretical grasp of the ingenuity of capitalist operations and the creativity of workers' responses in the late 20th century.

Modernization models of capitalist development (33, 85) predicted an increasing adoption of mass-assembly production (Fordism; see 35:279-318) and the gradual decline of cottage industries in the Third World. Yet, since the early 1970s, mixed systems based on free-trade zones, subcontracting firms, and sweatshops have come to typify industrialization in Asia, Central America, and elsewhere. Lapietz (55) argues that the current mix of mass production, subcontracting, and family-type firms represents a new regime of accumulation worldwide. Since the 1973 world recession, new patterns of "flexible accumulation" (55, 42) have come into play as corporations struggle in an increasingly competitive global arena. Flexible labor regimes, based
primarily on female and minority workers, are now common in the Third World, as well as in poor regions of metropolitan countries.\textsuperscript{1}

Another common assumption about industrialization is that "class consciousness" is the most fundamental category by means of which we are to understand workers' experiences. Furthermore, theorists construct workers' engagements with capitalism in terms both of a core-periphery framework and of other binary models such as metropolitan/ex-colonial formations and hegemonic/despotlic labor regimes (13, 14, 30, 70, 107). Thus, the feminization of the transnational industrial force has also raised expectations that a female working class solidarity in the periphery will grow (22, 24, 26, 88). However, a closer look at ethnographic cases does not indicate the widespread emergence of class and/or feminist consciousness in developing countries. Instead, the range of engagements with capital that such an examination reveals, and the various forms of consciousness reported in the ethnographies, preclude the application of a single analytical rubric.

In this essay I analyze the links between flexible labor regimes and the distinctive labor worlds found in Asia and Mexico. I discuss easily available studies, of uneven ethnographic and methodological quality, conducted between 1970 and 1990. Rather than a homogeneous spread of Fordist production and "despotlic" labor regimes, we find local milieux constituted by the unexpected conjunctures of labor relations and cultural systems, high-tech operations and indigenous values. First, I argue that industrial modes of domination go beyond production relations strictly construed; new techniques operating through the control of social spaces are a distinctive feature of postmodern regimes. Second, workers' struggles and resistances are often not based upon class interests or class solidarity, but comprise individual and even covert acts against various forms of control. The interest defended, or the solidarity built, through such acts are more often linked to kinship and

\textsuperscript{1}Flexible accumulation strategies in the Third World are also applied to particular sites in advanced capitalist countries. The mid-1970s world recession forced capitalists in metropolitan countries to restructure production in the face of rising labor costs and increased competition from developing countries (9). Informal or unregulated economic activities, long associated with Third World peasants, emerged in advanced economies; women, minorities, and immigrants furnished this low-wage labor (16, 37, 90). In the United States, this informalization—decentralized production, unaccounted labor, and earnings—includes the assembly of electronics components, garment sweatshops, and home work (16, 26, 43, 83, 90, 97). This "downgraded" manufacturing sector (90) expanded alongside the service industries and depended on the same supply of native-born and immigrant women. Similarly, in Japan, female workers in Kyushu (called "Silicon Island") increasingly sought employment in electronics and service industries (31). Thus, flexification strategies disregard the traditional boundaries of the global "core-periphery," operating anywhere a peculiar mix of labor arrangements favors profit-maximization. Such radical reorganization of production forms and spaces is sometimes referred to as "post-modern."
gender than to class. To analyze the complex and shifting relations of domination and subordination (and insubordination), I substitute the concept of “cultural struggle” for class struggle. In his historical study of the English working class, Thompson (103) argues that class is a cultural formation. Below, I suggest that the daily practices of workers in defending themselves against various modes of control are also struggles over cultural meanings, values, and goals. These cultural values are shaped, contested, and defended in different domains of power relations. While such conflicts may not necessarily result in structural transformation, the changes they effect in everyday attitudes and norms—or what Williams calls “structures of feeling” (112)—are part of the dynamics of civil society.

FROM WORLD SYSTEM TO FLEXIBLE ACCUMULATION

In the 1960s, developing economies greatly improved conditions for a new round of investments by foreign capital. Earlier attempts at import-substitution had failed, and the United Nations proposed a new plan building on the export functions already characteristic of ex-colonial countries. In addition to raw materials and crops, developing economies could export goods manufactured in “free-trade zones” (FTZs). To attract foreign capital, tax-free privileges in trade were combined with new incentives such as provision of buildings and utilities by the local government, and ease of profit repatriation (105). Export-industrialization seemed to complement the “green revolution” sponsored by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (9, 67).

This two-pronged strategy for developing poor countries was elegantly simple. The commercializing rural economy would supply and feed the labor released for work in the “free-trade zones.” Local governments were enticed by the promise that off-shore industrialization would boost foreign earnings, while solving the problems linked to rapid population growth, namely un- and under-employment. Host governments hoped that the large number of rural male migrants, the group thought to have the greatest potential for political unrest, would be absorbed by the new off-shore industries. Instead, foreign companies investing in the FTZs sought young single women, thus creating a new female industrial force where none had been envisioned (53, 67, 74, 88, 105).

By the 1970s, a network of industrial zones scattered throughout Southeast Asia opened up the region to industrial investments by Japanese transnational

---

2I borrow the phrase “cultural struggle” from Brackette Williams (111), who uses it in the more specific sense of battles over cultural ascendancy and cultural authenticity among different ethnic and class groupings in a nation-state.
companies, to be quickly followed by Western corporations. At about the same time, the implementation of the Maquiladora (assembly plant) program along the US-Mexican Border opened up Mexico to North American firms (27:25–27).

To explain this corporate shift to overseas production scholars relied heavily on Wallerstein's (107) concept of the "modern world-system." He argues that European capitalism historically produced a transnational division of labor ("core, semi-periphery, and periphery") which reflected the degree of capitalist development achieved by each country drawn into global exchange relations. Employing Wallerstein's notion of different labor regimes in the core and periphery (107:99–106), Froehel et al (30) argued that the key principle of the "new international division of labor" was the search for cheap labor by transnational companies. Corporate activities divided the world economy into "core" metropolitan countries, from which most capital originates, and "peripheral" countries where capital can realize its greatest profits.

In recent years, the world-system model has come under criticism for its static and mechanical formulation. Observers note that a complex global economy has been created by the shifting operations of transnational corporations and their articulation with the ambitions of Third World governments (55:23).

Instead of exploiting a single global periphery, corporations tap into different labor pools, contributing to varying employment relations in unevenly developed countries and regions (55:23). Thus, Marxist geographers maintain that FTZs represent a transitional pattern of capital accumulation characterized by great instability and dynamism: "The geography of capitalism is uneven, to be sure; but it is, above all, inconstant" (55:4–5). Following the 1970s world recession, intensified competition in the global arena compelled a new pattern of accumulation marked by flexible strategies. Mixed production systems were located anywhere in the world where optimal production, infrastructural, marketing, and political conditions existed. Such dispersal strategies became a means for the social reorganization of accumulation, pitting capital against capital, and one region of the world against another. Thus the Japanese move into the Pacific Rim area recalls the prewar "Great Co-Prosperity Sphere" strategy whereby Japan sought to make Asia the off-shore base of Japanese capitalist expansion (67, 68, 105). Today, Japan's "globalization" approach uses investment and aid to coordinate what commodities countries in Southeast Asia should produce (11, 115). American and European capital has also entered the arena, but at a lower level of investment and success. To achieve global dominance, Japanese and Western companies bypassed high production costs, labor militancy, and environmental concerns at home by moving to Southeast Asia or Mexico. Such rapid shifts with respect to labor markets and their attendant maneuvers in new financial
markets enhance the flexibility and mobility that allow corporations to exert greater labor control worldwide (42:147).

In off-shore sites corporations seek a peculiar mix of benefits, including tax breaks, low labor costs, and access to markets—benefits that exist already or can be created. Flexible financial operations characterize each level of transaction. Depending on the host country, FTZ benefits include tax incentives, government services, and such features as "total or partial exemption from laws and decrees of the country concerned" (105:1); such advantages are negotiable as economic conditions change. An "inter-enclave, export-import type of transaction" allows transfer pricing (whereby profits are transferred from one site to another), thereby escaping local taxes (67:24–25). This mobility of capital from zone to zone reduces overall costs of production, while it strengthens the bargaining position of corporations vis-à-vis local governments competing for foreign investments. Firms choose countries like Singapore where maximization of profit is ensured not only by cheap labor but also by "nonwage" costs of production such as the general business environment, the advantageous infrastructure, efficiency, and the political environment (59:191). Access to large consumer markets also facilitates quick turnover of capital.

The most important recent experiment in corporate production is its flexible combination of mass assembly and subcontracting systems, of modern firms and home work as linked units dominated by transnational capital. In Southeast Asia and Mexico, export-manufacturing is not confined to FTZs but is increasingly dispersed in subcontracting arrangements that may include part-time work by peasants. In Malaysia, transnational production is carried out mainly in FTZ mass-assembly plants; these highly stratified systems employ hundreds to thousands of workers, about 80% of whom are female operators on the shop floor (74). By contrast, in Hong Kong, the prototypical export-industrial economy, most export production is undertaken by subcontracting family firms, many operating under sweatshop conditions (49; 89:20). Despite its high labor costs relative to other Asian enclaves, Hong Kong is favored by global companies precisely for its peculiar mix of family production units, legislation that ensures a disciplined and tractable labor force, "peaceful industrial relations," infrastructure, and flexibility in meeting market conditions (49, 89). Taiwanese export-industrialization is also based on a majority of small firms and a few FTZ plants (32, 53). In the Philippines, where wages are among the lowest in Asia (54), subcontracting reduces the visibility of transnational firms, enabling them to bypass further political and economic costs. For instance, only a quarter of Filipino garment workers are based in FTZs; the bulk of garment manufacturing depends on a four-tiered subcontracting system that relies mainly on village home-sewers (82). Similarly, Beneria & Roldan (10) report that outside the Mexican maquiladora
zone, home work by housewives is a part of the low level of the segmented labor market; though hidden behind illegalities and mixed forms of production, it is indirectly controlled by industrial capital (10:68, 73–74).

Corporate retrenchment on mixed production systems in off-shore sites has produced an increasingly heterogeneous work force—including children, men, and imported labor. Along the US-Mexican border, recent labor shortage has led maquiladoras to use child and male labor in jobs initially reserved for young women (48, 61, 110). In China, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have spawned home work in villages where women and children in their spare time make electronics gear, toys, and artificial flowers. Even SEZ-based factories illegally employed children as young as 10 to work up to 15 hours a day, at salaries less than half of the $40 paid to workers over 16 (56). Such flexible and varied labor arrangements organized by transnational firms have generated a range of heterogeneous workers, no longer strictly defined by space, age, or sex.

In other words, global firms increasingly come to share the labor pools used by service industries that depend on cheap labor. While FTZ jobs have generated out-migration of rural women throughout Asia (25), low wages and vulnerability to layoff have driven many to moonlight as prostitutes in China, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (3, 5, 7, 40, 54, 73, 79). This overall rise in demand for female labor from poor countries is linked to increasing demands in richer countries for consumer goods and services (81). For instance, Filipino women have been imported as maids into Hong Kong (some 52,000; see 8) and other Southeast Asian countries where local young women have flocked into factories (3). Female migrants from Thailand and Sri Lanka have also sought employment as maids and sex workers in places like the Gulf Emirates, Japan, and West Germany (7, 73, 93). As production capital roams the world seeking more flexible conditions of maximization, its labor needs become intertwined with those of transnational service industries, further blurring the traditional boundaries between different occupational, sectoral, and national groups.

Under postmodern capitalism, this proliferation of diverse work situations has produced a range of work experiences and histories. It challenges theories that assume that the form of worker consciousness in any one locale is significantly shaped by structural categories defined as core/periphery, metropolitan/ex-colonial, First World/Third World formations.

MODES OF REGULATION

Despotic Regimes?

The study of export-industrialization has contributed to the routine characterization of labor regimes in Asia and Mexico as “despotic” and “paternalistic.” This perspective was developed by world-systems theorists
concerned with the political consequences of uneven capitalist development worldwide (13: 14:246). In Burawoy’s formulation, “production politics” varies according to the degree of capitalist development in the core-periphery. He distinguishes between “relations of production” (through which surplus is appropriated and distributed by capital), and “relations in production” (the everyday relations between and among workers and managers) (14:13–15). The particular combination of these production relations is determined by core or periphery location. In advanced capitalist societies, “hegemonic” regimes prevail, with managers striking a balance between coercion and consent in regulating labor. In developing countries, where the state is bent on relative surplus extraction through production, labor control is “despotic,” involving physical violence and often direct state intervention (13, 14:226–35). In Burawoy’s view, core-periphery structural conditions account for differences in the behavior of workers, while the “belief systems’ people carry around in their heads” (i.e. cultural attitudes) are considered irrelevant factors in the formation of class consciousness (13:262; cf 103). The hegemonic/despotoc model thus privileges class as a fundamental dynamic of social change, constructing a working class Other in conflict with capital, while treating as an afterthought the effects of pre-existing aspects of social organization like race, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism (e.g. see 17).

Besides their reductionist tendencies, the labels “despotic” and “paternalistic” have Orientalist overtones. While Burawoy explains “despotic” relations as the outcome of particular state-capital relations, other writers (52, 55:294; 58) suggest a singular set of cultural differences forming industrial systems in non-Western societies. This construction implies an Other who cannot benefit from the emancipatory promise of social change. This usage also implies that despotic and paternalistic conduct is not found in advanced capitalist countries. Furthermore, Burawoy’s argument that “brutal” forms of domination are found in despotic regimes, while coercion and consent prevail in hegemonic metropolitan systems discourages more fine-grained analysis of diverse forms of power relations in newly industrializing countries.

Below, I discuss the various forms of control that enforce and induce compliance, as well as call forth resistance, among women workers at Asian and Mexican industrial sites. The disciplinary schemes include power relations in the workplace and in society at large. In addition to the division of labor, new techniques of power operate through controlling a series of spaces—the body, the shop floor, the state, and the public sphere—defining permissible and impermissible cultural forms in society.

3See Ong (75) for a critique of the objectifying discourse of feminist studies on ‘women and development’ in non-Western societies. For a discussion of Marx’s notion of fetishism and the rendering of working classes, women, and minorities as “the other,” see 42:104.
State Intervention

Burawoy makes the important point that both competition among capitalists worldwide and the struggle between capital and labor in any country have historically been shaped by the state (13; 14:246). He argues that the "colonial/neo-colonial state" facilitates the transfer of surplus to advanced countries, while organizing conditions for production that are attractive to foreign capital. Asianists also stress the role of the state in securing conditions for profitable export-industrialization. They maintain that in the so-called newly industrializing countries (NICs), the outcomes of struggles between the colonial or "authoritarian" state and labor were crucial to the subsequent capitalist expansion (52). State suppression of workers in traditional industries greatly weakened labor movements before large-scale industrialization was undertaken. Anti-communism was a legitimating formula for authoritarian rule in Hong Kong (1920s), South Korea (1940s–1950s), Taiwan (1940s), and Singapore (1960s). Thus, export-oriented industrialization has often required state intervention to weaken labor movements and ensure industrial peace as conditions for the early success of industrialization in these countries (52:65).

Modernization theorists (46, 59) argue that by disciplining labor, the state benefits the business climate and labor markets, producing conditions that will eventually permit an equitable income share for the working population.

A reliance on the "authoritarian state" model would imply that the state's primary role is to secure the material conditions for controlling, punishing, and rewarding the industrial labor force. While I do not wish to reify the state, its agencies and agents are crucial in preparing and regulating society for the disruptions of industrial development. Elsewhere, I have argued that capitalist discipline operates through overlapping networks of power relations in the workplace and the political domain, regulating daily practices, norms, and attitudes that give legitimacy to the unequal relations that sustain capitalism (74:4–5). Similarly Harvey and others (42:123; 55; 102) have maintained that the disciplining of the labor force is an intricate, long-drawn-out process involving a mixture of repression, habituation, co-option, and cooperation within the workplace and throughout society. Modern nation-states routinely regulate social life, promoting certain norms, practices, and identities, while marginalizing others (28, 29). In newly industrializing countries, one state function is to redefine the public spaces in which particular struggles between rural and town folk, between males and females, and among classes take place (see below). In many countries, state policies promoting a female industrial force produce challenges for young women as daughters, workers, and citizens.

Kinship and Gender: Claims on Daughters

Ethnographers of Asian workers in export industries have developed tropes emphasizing the junior status of the women—e.g., "working daughters"
(89), "factory daughters" (113), and "village daughters" (63). Indeed, if we look at the figures for all off-shore industries, women tend to comprise the lower-paid half of the total industrial work force in developing countries. In 1980, over 50% of Hong Kong manufacturing workers were female, compared to 46% in Singapore (1978), 43% in Taiwan (1979), and nearly 40% in Korea. They are concentrated in a few industries: textiles, apparel, electronics, and footwear. Most are considered "secondary workers" by policymakers in the sense that they take lower wages than men in comparable work ranks, and perhaps consider wage work as an interlude before marriage. Thus branded as a secondary labor force, female workers are subjected to low wages, long hours, frequent overtime, little or no prospects for advancement, and generally uncertain employment. In these industries, foremen, technicians, supervisors, and labor contractors are almost all men, while shop floor operators and home workers are almost all young women. Thus, the "daughter" status at home is reproduced in the workplace, generating tensions between new feelings of personal freedom on the one hand, and the claims of family and society on the other.

For instance, Salaff notes that in the Hong Kong working class, parents viewed daughters as "poor long-term investments," and working daughters saw themselves paying back their natal families for giving them life and nurture before they left home (89:35). After marriage, these women helped to pay domestic expenses in return for increased influence in family matters (89:259). In a Chinese Taiwan case, Kung observes that women working in FTZs fulfilled and expanded "traditional roles/expectations of daughters" (53:xiv). It was a question of repaying parents the cost of bringing up a "useless" daughter—a child lost to the natal family after marriage (53:xv–xvii). Working daughters did not gain power, but because they helped to pay household expenses, mothers praised them for being more "filial" than sons, whose education was often paid for with their sisters' earnings (53:xv–xvii). Both writers view the Chinese family as an exchange system. The daughters' strength expended in wage work repaid the gift of life. In return for their "filial" conduct, Hong Kong daughters received economic support from their families (89:256). In Taiwan, working daughters were unwilling to challenge the distribution of domestic power because they viewed their families as their only source of affection and security (53:125). Thus, in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, the claims of the Chinese family on its members' labor, having as their ultimate goal ascent of the class ladder, serve to enforce workers' compliance with the demands of industrial employment, while at the same time they diminish class-based solidarity.

Socialist China adopted export-industrialization as part of its "four modernizations" in 1979. Andors (5) did preliminary research at the Shenzhen SEZ, where most of the industries—textiles, electronics, toys and tourism—were operated by Hong Kong subcontracting firms. Women, mainly single
and under 35 years old, comprised 70% of the work force. They were recruited by a special labor contracting agency from rural home units that received compensation for releasing them. Although claimed to be among the best-paid workers in China, they were easily exploited by the contracting service and by factories that routinely demanded overtime. Separated from their families, working women did enjoy such new freedoms as living in singles' dormitories, having more buying power, and postponing marriage. These personal choices, including premarital sex, were already available to working women in Hong Kong and Taiwan, in recognition of their filial contribution to the family economy (89:266). Nevertheless, in socialist and capitalist Chinese communities, young working women did not attain social equality with men at home or in society at large.

Southeast Asian cases also indicate that industrial employment produced a break in customary practices that confined unmarried girls to the home. However, bilateral kinship organization and cultural norms exerted fewer claims on daughters than did the patrilineal Chinese system. The influx of factory jobs meant that young women had the opportunity to help households in a declining farm economy, or to escape from unbearable family situations (1-4, 7, 25, 62, 74, 76, 81, 82, 113, 114, 118; 63). For the first time, village girls had the chance to go away to work, to handle their own money, save for higher education, and choose their own husbands (e.g. 74:191-92), enjoying greater freedom from family claims than Chinese female workers. Wolf (114) mentions that young girls in Central Java eagerly sought wage work, often against their parents' wishes. Many kept their earnings for themselves and felt a sense of improved status (see also 62). In Malaysia, the earnings of village daughters helped furnish their parents' houses and improve daily consumption; the women themselves had discretionary income and could save for their weddings (2, 74:125-28).

These changes in the working daughter's status, with its mix of (and tension between) family obligations and growing personal autonomy, must modify sweeping assertions that pre-existing East and Southeast Asian "patriarchy" (20; 42:294; 58) alone is to blame for the construction of unequal industrial relations. Access to wages did gain young Asian women some personal forms of freedom, weakening customary family claims to varying degrees. In the Chinese cases, wage employment has allowed daughters to demonstrate how "filial" they can be, and thus to be considered "worthier" than before. In Southeast Asia, the unprecedented influx of young working women into public spaces produced a social backlash, generating demands for the regulation of female conduct (see below).

The Sexual Division of Labor and Taylorism

Some scholars claim modern industrial organizations in Asian societies are rarely "paternalistic"; any "vestiges of kin relations" are dissolved in the
workplace (89:3–4). In contrast, others assert that harsh and personal forms of control are features of peripheral Fordist systems (13, 42:192, 294:58). However, the ethnographies suggest that the labor politics are neither exclusively despotic nor anti-paternalistic but involve different disciplinary schemes institutionalized by local capitalist and cultural practices.

In Asia, the division of labor introduced by transnational firms separates managers and workers along lines of nationality, race, gender, and age. Central activities like research and finance are controlled by experts in the metropolitan headquarters, while the low-skilled and labor-intensive production processes employ young, poorly trained women in the off-shore sites (70, 72; see also 12:Ch. 4). For instance, Japanese industries based in Malaysia are headed by male Japanese managers and engineers. Malaysian Chinese and Indian men fill the mid-level professional ranks, while shop floor operators are mainly composed of young Malay women of rural origin (74:Ch. 7). This institutionalization of race, gender, and age inequalities in industrial enterprises is reflected by daily practices. Elson & Pearson (22) argue that the dialectic of gender and capital has the tendency to "intensify, decompose, and recompose" existing gender hierarchies, thereby incorporating gender inequalities in modern work relations. In Hong Kong, subcontracting agents simply rely on parental pressures at home to make the "girls" work for long hours and low wages (89:22–23). In contrast, Malaysia-based Japanese firms absorb Malay notions of male superiority into a "Pan Asian" philosophy that emphasizes the moral authority of the Japanese management, and of the managers, supervisors, and foremen over nubile female operators. Corporate discourse on the "Asian family" defines workers as "children" who should "obey their parents" (i.e. supervisors) in the factory (74:163, 170–78). Thus, despite claims that capitalism has destroyed traditional patriarchy (58, 89), these examples show that the industrial labor relations articulating with local norms often elaborate and reinvent principles of male and racial superiority (22, 73, 108).

Such gender and race-based forms of domination help make "scientific management" (or Taylorism; see 101) an even more formidable apparatus for extracting surplus value. The essence of Fordist production, Taylorism is based on "time-motion" techniques that dictate precisely how each task is to be performed in order to obtain the highest level of productivity within a strict time economy (see 12:Ch. 4). The fragmentation of skills into simple procedures and the stripping away of individual judgment (separation of conception and execution) are intended by the system to treat workers as appendages of the machine.

In Spivak's view, such particular collisions between local forms of "patriarchy" and transnational capitalism have made the subproletariat woman "the paradigmatic subject" of the international division of labor (94:29).
Factory Regulations: The Gaze and the Body

Foucault (28, 29) reminds us that some forms of modern power cannot be attributed directly to the reproduction of capitalist relations and labor power. He maintains that specific technologies of knowledge and power, associated with institutions like the prison, clinic, and school, produce discursive practices that enforce social regulation through establishing "the norm." In multinational enterprises, Taylorism is complemented by surveillance techniques that operate through the control of space.

Thus, it would be a mistake to think of scientific management as solely a process of technical detail-level control. It specifies exact bodily posture and requires tedious repetition of the same finger, eye, and limb movements, often for hours on end at the assembly line (74:164–67; see also 27:128; 89:101), a form of body discipline especially intolerable to neophyte factory women. In many enterprises, continual surveillance enforced the worker's compliance with the relentless Taylorist procedures (74:159). At a Malaysia-based microchip firm, male supervisors pressured female workers assembling thousands of components to achieve 100% efficiency; even trips to the locker-room were penalized. A Japanese director was pleased to note that the production rate of Malay workers exceeded that of Japanese ones at the corporate home base (74:162–63). In another plant, operators working under the strict eye of foremen were reported to almost double their daily output, especially when their efforts were sweetened by incremental cash allowances (74:166).

Other forms of spatial control include the deployment of workers on the shop floor in relative isolation from each other but under the constant surveillance of foremen, an arrangement that induces self-monitoring (74: Ch. 7; cf 60). Factory women often felt they had few places left to hide; some complained of being spied upon in their locker-rooms (79). Furthermore, even unions were used to watch over workers. A Japanese factory based in Malaysia set up an in-house union to operate as a "grievance procedure system," or, in the words of a union leader, to act "as a watchdog, for both sides" (74:172–73).

Foucault notes that knowledge-power ultimately fastens on sex, making the body the ultimate site at which all strategies of control and resistance are registered (29:103). Ethnographic findings reveal that disciplinary practices frequently define the industrial presentation and workings of the body. Malay workers felt that the "tight work discipline" extended to regulation of clothing and footwear—policies that bodily constrained them (68:168). Japanese corporate policies in Malaysia defined Malay workers as "wards" under the

---

3 Metropolitan capitalism in places like California routinely uses electronics surveillance, an even more relentless form of control, in both industrial and office settings.
moral custody of factory managers. By focusing on the young women’s virginal status, the management capitalized on Malay fears about their daughters’ vulnerability (79). Other techniques of control more closely monitored workers’ bodies. In mass assembly factories from South Korea to Mexico, operators were subjected to humiliating innuendos about menstruation, and were required to request permission to use the toilet (6, 27, 38, 54, 79). In the Shenzhen SEZ, the normally quiescent workers went on strike in a toy factory after a pregnant woman, prevented from resting, fainted (56:47). Controlling the space of the worker’s body is related to a wider corporate perception of women’s “nature.”

While Taylorism as a management policy aims to minimize the possibilities of resistance, by reducing workers to tools, disciplinary procedures seek to induce “docile bodies” (28) without resorting to “brutal” forms of control in the workday life. However, electronics workers from Taiwan to Sri Lanka complain of the detail work that literally wears away at the “instruments of production”—for instance, eyes fitted to microscopes (7, 53, 72, 74). Indeed, neophyte workers, whose sensibilities were shaped by peasant and/or pre-industrial cultures, often challenge the work process for its dehumanizing effects and accompanying forms of social control. Instead of opposing capital as an abstract entity, factory women’s daily struggles against corporate policies—over body discipline, pressures for high productivity, and surveillance—aim to push back the varied norms and forms of domination (27, 61, 74, 79, 80; see below).

A mode of social regulation often ignored in our analysis of labor regimes and their effects on workers is the production of cultural discourses. Although Foucault does not see a necessary connection between discursive practices and the systematic domination of capitalism, Marxists maintain that as part of cultural production, images and discourses have a material basis in the symbolic reproduction of capitalism (42, 44, 112). There is much evidence that transnational capitalism has produced, along with microchips, discourses that naturalize the subordination of women in industrial enterprises.

Early in their operations, transnational companies explained their preferences for Third World female workers by producing a language defining them as “low grade” (meaning unskilled) and “docile.” Bureaucrats in developing countries were quick to appeal to biology to woo foreign investments while gaining acceptance at home for the creation of a female industrial force. A Malaysian government brochure promoted “the oriental girl” as blessed with nimble fingers and thus “qualified by nature and inheritance” to contribute to assembly production (74:152, 73; see also 22, 38, 57). Elsewhere (75), I have discussed how industrial discourses “disassemble” the female worker into eyes and fingers adapted for assembly work, at the same time reassembling other parts of their bodies according to commodified sexual images.
Factories also pointed to other "natural" attributes of their female work force. A Japanese manager claimed that factories prefer "fresh female labor [that] after some training, is highly efficient" (74:153). Similarly, a manager in Cuidad Juarez on the Mexican border said he preferred women who were "unspoiled"—that is, young and inexperienced: "Women such as these are easier to shape to our requirements" (26:117). In Taiwan, factories sought young women from the remote areas said to "have a higher capacity for eating bitterness" (53:63). This language of essentialism and commodification creates an image of dull-witted work animals that can be trained for hard, tedious work. By implication, such a cultural (or is it a natural?) Other provides justification for the low wages offered.

Corporate practices also promoted a sexual image of Third World women workers. American firms in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia encouraged extracurricular activities that stress consumerism, dating, and beauty competition (38). New sexual images, elaborated through make-up classes and newsletters, induce the consumption of commodities (e.g. Clairol toiletries) made available in company stores. Such emphasis on Western images of sex appeal engendered a desire for goods that working women could satisfy only by increasing their commitment to wage work (38, 53, 79, 89).

Social Regulation: Women in Public Spaces

Throughout industrializing Asia and Mexico, the emergence of large female industrial forces has occasioned negative public commentary on the conduct of female workers. Douglas observes that persons in an interstitial position are often symbolized as dangerous and filthy, since they suggest a poorly articulated social system (21:120–24, 142–47; see also 95). As new workers, young women engage in activities that violate traditional boundaries (spatial, economic, social, and political) in public life, forcing a redefinition of the social order. Thus, states attempting to shape a new moral consensus on industrial development have found it necessary to regulate the activities of female workers along clearly marked gender lines, defining what is culturally appropriate and what is not.

In Malaysia, the influx of young rural women into industrial sites was widely considered as the cause of moral decadence in Malay-Muslim society. While the state promoted female industrial employment, the government-controlled media criticized factory women, citing their Westernized outfits, footloose behavior, and reputation as "micro-devils" and "bad women" (2, 4, 38, 57, 79). Islamic revivalists opposing industrial development viewed factory women, many of whom have deferred marriage, as would-be infidels indulging in the pleasures of consumer society. Malay working women were thus perceived as an Other invading (male) public spaces; while they were
permitted to work, their social activities had to be curtailed. Religious leaders urged repentance, rejection of consumerism, and the embrace of a new sexual asceticism for young women (78, 79). Transnational companies that held religious classes in the workplace and monitored the behavior of workers were applauded by the religious authorities (79). Each vying to be more “Islamic” than the other, the state and revivalist movement competed in enforcing a moral discipline on working women in public life. By controlling female images and regulating their activities, this particular constitution of civil society makes it, like the FTZ, a place where women are free to work, but only under the male authority. Similarly, in West Java, Mather (62) reports that the “Islamic patriarchy” allied itself with factory managers to control the movement of workers between home and workplace. In Buddhist Thailand, rural women were pushed into wage work by cultural notions of a daughter’s duty and the crime of ingratitude. While politicians warned that officials should not be “morally fastidious” and prohibit sexual entertainment, working women were accused of moral laxity (40:132–33; 63). These examples show that state encouragement of female industrial employment was paralleled by increased surveillance of their multiple “transgressions” (see 95), as viewed by dominant groups in society. While the conditions differ in each country, the widespread stigmatization of working women came to define public spheres where female productive activities were deemed necessary but their civil rights were not.

In contrast to the polarities noted above (e.g. virgin/whore, purity/immorality) that were used to regulate working women elsewhere, Chinese society in Taiwan evaluated such women according to a mind/body model (cf 87). As we have seen, mass-assembly work divided mental from physical labor to an extreme, making workers vulnerable to the Chinese cultural preference for mental over manual labor. Female industrial workers suffered from “damaged” identities (34), mainly because of the “low” nature of their work. Factory girls complained of being looked down upon by society because of their low-status job, which “does not give a person any face” (53:156–57). In complaints to Kung, they were especially bitter about being deprived of higher education (the “penalty” of daughters) that would open the route to higher status (53:158–59). Doubly marginalized as daughters and as factory hands, these women were obstructed from attaining the education that would shield them from the social contempt attached to their jobs. Thus, in Taiwanese society, moral regulation marginalized factory women mainly because of their low occupational (class) rank, but also because of their sex.

Along the Mexican border, cross-racial constructions of workers’ activities and identities appear to be a major part of social regulation (see 86). In Cuidad Juarez, Fernandez-Kelly reports the development of a “factory harem mental-
ity.” Although young women might have used their charms to attract suitors before, they were now encouraged to use sex as a bait and payment for access to jobs (26:129). A news article on Nogales notes a popular image of the Border Program as a place of sexual conquest where everyday talk included “innuendos about maquiladora managers who fornicate their way down assembly lines or companies that provide stud services as incentives” (110:39). An American manager in Nogales joked: “Imagine if we could harness sexual energy. When someone here has sex, the news travels... like electricity through a printed circuit” (110:31). Noting that “the only fun [female workers] ever have is love,” he said that in the previous month, 10% of his workers had been pregnant.⁶

If the dominant discourse portrayed female operators as sexually wanton, implying that they were not such good workers, men were seen as emasculated by maquila work. In the early phases, most maquilas employed single women, but by 1983, more and more factories had turned to men and children under 14 years old (48, 61). In Nogales, American managers dealt with male workers by exploiting their sense of machismo. One said he tried to raise productivity by appealing to “the Mexican’s pride” and “need to save face in front of others” (110:39). In Ciudad Juarez, Lugo (61) also observed the corporate manipulation of machismo to humiliate men who could not keep up with female workers. The factory men’s sex talk and word games disclosed their sense of having been socially reduced (and thus becoming more woman-like). By accepting dominant images of male weakness, they unwittingly reproduced the very cultural categories now used to prod them to higher levels of productivity. The larger cultural significance of such corporate discourses is that maquila men are socially devalued for working in female-identified jobs.

The race/sex typing of workers (3) becomes most elaborated in situations where female workers participate in manufacturing and in service industries based overseas. In Sri Lanka, the post-1977 development pattern led to the simultaneous growth of FTZ industries, prostitution, and the export of servants and brides (7). In the process, the control of women shifted from male relatives to “alien male authorities—the factory supervisor, the employment agent, the government bureaucrat, the Western tourist, the Arab employer, or

⁶On a brief 1989 fieldtrip to Nogales, Mexico, I visited American factories, shantytowns, and service centers. Female workers and social workers reported that sexual harassment was a common occurrence in what they called “the maquila culture.” A rape crisis center noted that the frequency of rapes of women and children was “alarmingly high.” Aborted fetuses were sometimes found in maquila toilets. Rapists included factory supervisors, household members, and the police. Compared to the Malaysian situation, with which I am more familiar, sexual violence seemed a major force in the Border Program. The contrasting situations show the specific historical and cultural patterning of industrial regimes.
the Japanese farmer [who imports a bride]" (7:79). Sri Lankans alarmed at
this mass entry of daughters into wage labor at home and abroad branded
women workers with a sexual stigma (7:69). These workers thus join the
mobile female labor force epitomized by Filipino women—as imported
maids, nurses, mail-order brides, and entertainers in Asia and Europe (3,
24). Such transnational formation of working relations may allow workers to
escape social regulation in their home country temporarily, but it exposes
them to other forms of domination abroad. They become migrant workers
with few legal rights.

Ethnographies of working women in various locales encourage us to in-
vestigate the kinds of power such women are subjected to both at the
workplace and in the wider society. In each locale, different modes of
industrial and social domination promote certain cultural forms and identities,
while undermining or suppressing others. In each case, the particular mix of
production systems, state policies, and cultural forces both limit and enable
workers' struggles (97:223; 84), a topic to which we now turn.

CULTURAL STRUGGLES

The variety of industrial situations linked to flexible accumulation raises anew
questions about workers' responses to capitalist transformation. Indigenous
experiences of colonialism and capitalism are frequently assessed in terms of
the concept of "class consciousness"—i.e., degree of recognition of class
interests, organized action against capital, and even the goal of structural
redistribution of power in society. Although anthropologists have avoided a
generic concept of class consciousness in discussing Third World experi-
ences, scholars like Mintz (64:193; see also 45) would nevertheless consider
unions and political parties as minimal evidence of the presence of "pro-
etarians" in the Caribbean. In her important book, Nash (69:320–30) seeks in
pre-Columbian rituals the class solidarity of Bolivian miners, but she then
evaluates their consciousness according to strict Marxist criteria of class
identity and union activity. By insisting on a single measure of class agency,
we risk diluting the political significance of cultural resistances in encounters
with capitalism.

7 The importation of prostitutes and brides into regions being opened up for capitalist develop-
ment, whether in colonial Southeast Asia or in California during the "gold rush," is the historical
antecedent to these contemporary linkages between capital and women from poor countries.
8 See Mintz (64:187–95) for a succinct summary of basic assumptions about the classic type of
class consciousness (cf 69:321, 325). Drawing a rigid distinction between "class-in-itself" (in the
objective sense) and "class-for-itself" (when it develops collective interests) sometimes blinds
analysis to the presence of class consciousness when the supposedly requisite behavior is absent.
A related tendency is to see the political importance of Third World workers in globalist terms. Vincent (106:232–62) notes that among the laboring poor in colonial Uganda, the sense of "no-classness" was a condition of their "subaltern" position in transnational capitalism. Comaroff analyzes the religious imagery of worker-peasants in South Africa as "simultaneously unique and yet one instance of a very general class of social movement" (15:194) that is "part of the second global culture" (15:254). Thus, anthropologists describe (and celebrate) the varied expressions of class/ethnic/religious consciousness in subaltern groups (i.e. the politically dominated), but often feel compelled to construct these struggles in the universalist terms of emergent collective consciousness. In a cautionary note, Spivak argues that the arena of the subaltern's consciousness is situational and uneven, and the subaltern's subjectivity is locally shaped and delimited (94:16–17).

Feminists influenced by the world-systems model also predict the emergence of solidarity among the transnational female labor force in developing economies (22, 24, 26, 88). In recent years, such feminist elaboration of a utopian discourse as an alternative to modernist, patriarchal narratives has itself come under criticism (41, 65, 66, 76, 94). These feminist critics argue that acknowledging the plurality of subject positions and self-representations puts us in a better position to understand different social realities. Without relying on totalizing "First" or "Third" World frameworks, a theory about the variable "subject-constitution" of subaltern women must link individual consciousness to the local workings of international capital (94:29).

Indeed, the ethnographic evidence on factory women in flexible labor systems indicates that they rarely construct their identities or organize themselves in terms of collective or global interests. Although demonstrations of female workers have been widely reported in Asia and Central America (3, 6, 7, 26, 36, 38, 50, 56, 74; M. B. Mills, unpublished), they tended to be wildcat strikes in individual firms. Union activities, especially in Asian FTZs, are controlled through company unions, or are otherwise severely limited (12, 57). What we do find are attempts to escape from or live with industrial systems without losing one's sense of human dignity.

Worker consciousness and subject-constitution. I would argue, must be investigated in contexts shaped by the intersection of state agencies, the local workings of capital, and already configured local power/culture realms (84). Instead of direct labor-capital confrontations, we discover workers' resistances in their oppositional tactics, embodied desires, and alternative interpretations and images. What seems key in their emerging consciousness is an awareness of how their status as daughter/young woman is linked to domination by family, industry, and society. In manipulating, contesting, or rejecting these claims, working women reassert and remake their identities and communities in ways important for social life.
Accommodation and Personal Mobility

At some industrial sites, factory women seemed overwhelmed by the needs of their families, a concern that restrains their capacity to participate in sustained social action. Industrialization in Mexico has generated a heterogeneous female working population variously employed in different labor systems. According to Fernandez-Kelly, workers in Cuidad Juarez included single women (17–25 years old) as well as older women who have been widowed, divorced, or separated from men. Female-headed households may have dependents (children, fathers, husbands, and boyfriends) who were unemployed or underemployed (26:48–50). Since the border area is a transit point for US-bound, predominantly male migrants, many single women are compelled to seek wage work in the maquila. Companies prefer young, single, and childless women; older women with children can find work only in garment factories, where work conditions are worse (26:49–51; see also 104:98). Working women often fall back on exchange networks that help them adjust to economic uncertainty as they enter and leave this unstable labor market (26:153–177). Others augment their wages by working as prostitutes or slipping across the border on weekends to work as maids (26:142–50; 110).

Beneria & Roldan (10) note that among home workers in Mexico City, young, single, and married “semi-prole” women routinely labored in and were discharged from various capitalist enterprises. They argue that this flexibility afforded by the informal economy produced sub-proletarianization among women, in contrast to more regular proletarianization of men (10:102–3). Since capital constantly creates and destroys job opportunities, the work conditions do not foster collective class or even gender consciousness. Although home workers are aware of oppression, “a configuration of ideological, economic and coercive mechanisms support[s] oppressive marital contracts.” Women, because of limited resources, “could not renegotiate” their situations (10:160–161). Even in the absence of rebellion, each woman’s awareness of her exploitation occasions reassessment of her status.9

In Taiwan, female workers unhappy with their jobs are in a better position to escape industrial employment. Kung reports that many feared reprimand, and were either resigned to the job conditions or planning to leave soon (53:106–7). They displayed not the classic type of class consciousness but acute consciousness of having to adjust to a low status (53:165). In their view, the company environment fostered manipulative behavior between superiors and inferiors as well as among workers themselves, thus sowing doubts and

9After their factories were destroyed in the 1987 earthquake, garment workers in Mexico City formed the first female workers’ union, mainly to help members and their families. See Kammer & Tolin (47) for a report on company unions, and Staehle (96) and Young (117) for problems in organizing maquila workers.
distrust about dealing effectively with conflicts (53:156–61). As in FTZs based elsewhere (26, 74, 89), women in Taiwan were reluctant to take leadership roles because of a sense of betraying the interests of the rank and file. The most common expression of discontent was a high rate of turnover, which further undermined community spirit. Besides, contrary to Western feminist expectations, most working daughters did not seek more equal relations at home and would gladly trade their “bitter” independence for the security of the college student who has a family to look after her needs (53:166–68). Thus, although initially family pressures denied daughters higher education and pushed them into factory employment, factory daughters developed a sense of self-direction through seeking better qualifications and jobs. In other words, they hoped eventually to evade production politics (and family claims) not by resisting control at work but by “graduating” from industrial employment altogether.

In mainland China, too, what was initially regarded as an opportunity has come to produce a sense of entrapment. Export-industrialization in Kwangtung has increased class differentiation to the extent that few factory women wanted to marry local men because marriage would add to their work burden (5). Some hoped to achieve upward and geographical mobility by marrying Hong Kong tourists or entering Hong Kong prostitution rings (5:37–38). The potential stigma of being a prostitute seemed to them preferable to the status of a factory worker. Whether family or individually inspired, aspirations for upward mobility both conditioned the women’s consciousness of their bitter fate and strengthened their resolve to escape it (cf. 113:27). For many, the goal was not to stay and challenge the industrial system, but, like their Taiwanese sisters, to use factory jobs as a steppingstone to more lucrative employment elsewhere. Attaining such personal mobility also weakens family control over one’s life. A sense of subjective rights began to replace traditional authority over one’s fate.

Bodily Truths and Contested Categories

In other cases, workers trapped in industrial enterprises frequently contest hegemonic representations of their situations. Factory women untutored in ideologies are capable of making alternative interpretations based on their own visceral experiences and cultural traditions. By thus challenging dominant discourse, they expand the space of political struggle in their everyday lives.

A few ethnographic accounts provide descriptions of women challenging dominant images of their purported “freedom” as factory workers. In Taiwan, female workers spoke of being shut up all day and wasting the “spring” of their youth, a bitter contrast to pre-factory days when the period before marriage seemed carefree (53:164–65). This sense of imprisonment is also
felt by factory women in Malaysia who, released from the custody of their parents and widely accused of “unrestrained” conduct, felt “shackled” in the factory (79). An operator noted that her coworkers were ignorant of the wider industrial situation, “working as if they were imprisoned...like a frog beneath the coconut shell” (74:197). The theme of entrapment extends to their experience of work discipline. Malay women rejected corporate expressions of welfare concern, claiming that the management treated them as things, not human beings (74:167). Many found the relentless drive for higher productivity and disregard for worker fatigue intolerable. They also complained of bodily deprivations (aches and burns, insufficient sleep, skipped menstruation) that registered the grip of industrial discipline. More assertive workers tried to enforce traditional morality, demanding human empathy (timbang rasa) and justice from their foremen (74:167; 201–2). They sold their labor but not their right to human consideration.

Workers in Taiwan also contested categories and practices that treat them as extensions of machines. Seeing themselves as “mere assemblers,” factory women did not expect their views to count for much. However, in their everyday conversations, they denounced workplace conditions in moral terms. Instead of using the language of class or sexual oppression, they posed questions of “how to be a person” (53:89). Foremen were described as “mean,” “overly strict,” “slippery,” and “putting on airs” (53:94–98). Workers were therefore suspicious of perceived attempts to manipulate their emotions—i.e. foremen who chatted up workers, who took “pleasure” in ordering them around, and who made a habit of patting them on the shoulder (53:94–98). The refusal of such gestures echoes a Hong Kong worker who scornfully denounced implicit expectations that to get a slight pay raise one should “pat the horse’s rump” (i.e. curry favor; 89:103). Like their Malaysian counterparts, these women wished to be treated with greater personal consideration, but they feared attempts to prime the pump. They complained that the companies did not allow for the development of human feelings (kan-ching) in the workplace, promoting instead opportunistic and impersonal behavior (53:98, 159–61). According to their cultural expectations, factory work was dehumanizing.

In mainland China, the introduction of capitalist methods of production in Hangzhou silk factories has produced similar policies for controlling female workers. In the discourse of economic reform, management emphasized higher productivity and the gendering of differences between manual labor (defined as women’s work) and technical and mental labor (considered men’s work). Using terms that echo corporate discourses in Southeast Asia, women were said to have nimble fingers but to lack the intellectual and leadership capabilities of men. Rofel (87) reports that although women workers subscribed to the sexual division of labor, they also used such gender images to subvert new pressures for higher productivity. They routinely cited family and
female reasons for taking time off work. Using the same categories management uses has allowed workers to negotiate some work conditions, but they also thereby reproduce aspects of the larger culture, reinforcing the sense that women are inherently less productive than men (87:246–48).

The above examples indicate that dominant images of women workers—as footloose consumers, instruments of production, and the weaker sex—are contested or used by factory women to their own advantage. On the one hand, Malay and Taiwanese women felt factory work deprived them of their youth and of the kinds of pleasures and protection promised by local cultures. On the other, the shock of factory work led them to demand moral consideration and fairness. In different cultural idioms, these neophyte workers expressed a view of industrial work as an assault on the body as well as on the moral value of human beings (cf 23, 102, 109). By contesting hegemonic categories of human worth, factory women attempted "to seize language for their own purposes," engaging in "symbolic struggles over social position, identity and self-determination" (84:46–47). They thus found voices to validate their actual experiences, breaking the flow of meanings imposed on them, and thus directly defining their own lives.

Cultural Resistance: Tactics and Movements

In his notion of "everyday forms of resistance," Scott maintains that the oppositional practices of Malay peasants flourish precisely because they are outside hegemonic relations (92:335–36). This ethnographic observation is itself doubtful (e.g. see 74), and many would question a theoretical construction of subjects as external to power relations (29, 35, 39, 98, 112). As Foucault has argued, disciplinary technologies call forth counter-strategies within shifting fields of power (29:95). While Foucault emphasizes resistant tactics within discourse, De Certeau (19) identifies nonverbal ruses that proliferate in the interstices of a system of domination. This layer of moral resistance is derived from the basic, practical consciousness of subjects; and though often lacking an articulated awareness of its own, it can disrupt and subvert the established order, as we shall see below.

Reports on maquila production politics have been sparse, but despite their difficult employment situation and domestic responsibilities, Mexican workers do challenge industrial discipline. Fernandez-Kelly (26) and Lugo (61) provide accounts of female and male workers manipulating dominant sexual images to their own advantage, earning short-term reprieves or gains in the workplace. Others briefly mention a form of covert resistance called tortuosidad whereby workers worked "at a turtle's pace" in response to speed-up

10Rosfield (43) identifies a similar tactic among immigrant workers in "the Silicon Valley," California. She reports that workers exploit the management's racist/sexist logic—such as the "lazy" Chicana or "China doll" stereotypes—so as to gain excuses for avoiding or easing work requirements.
pressures (80, 117). These scattered acts of resistance, sometimes not even recognized owing to management’s view of “lazy” workers, did not collectively challenge the status quo, but they opposed the prevailing hegemonic interests.

My study of Malay factory women in Kuala Langat, Malaysia (74), indicates a range of resistance tactics that silently negotiated the contours of daily work relations. The Malay feminine ideal constrains young women from directly confronting their social superiors, yet female workers often resorted to isolated nonverbal acts to gain a symbolic and physical space despite contrary factory rules. Tactics to fool the system and lessen work demands included frequent absences from the shop floor, ostensibly to attend to “female” problems or to perform obligatory Islamic prayers (74, 79). At the workbench, operators sometimes feigned ignorance of the technical details of work, thus frustrating attempts to raise productivity rates. Even more hidden ruses were the destruction of microchips and jamming of machines; in both cases, the management was often unpleasantly surprised and unable to trace the culprits (74:210–13).

Subversion also takes the more startling form of spirit attacks on female workers, events that transfigure normal factory routines. Spirit possession is a complex phenomenon in Malay culture, but its repeated eruptions in modern factories can be partly accounted for in terms of work relations (1, 77). A worker attacked by a spirit wails, runs about creating havoc, struggles violently, and screams obscenities against restraining supervisors. In some cases (77;74:205), the possessed exclaimed, “I am not to be blamed!” “Go away!” “I will kill you, let me go!” The effect on production was immediate. Other workers soon became infected, creating such a disturbance that a shutdown proved necessary, and the “hysterical women” were sent home.

Possession episodes were the inarticulate expression of individual anguish, transferred to the public sphere. The contortions of afflicted workers spoke of the ills experienced in the social body (77, 100). Some possession victims reported visions of fearsome old men at the workbench, spirits haunting bathrooms, or devils lurking in the microscopes. These “signs and symptoms” (100) of possession, though complexly motivated, constituted “a cryptic language of protest” (91) and social disease. Their vivid imagery defined the factory premises as a spiritually polluted place. To avoid attacks, young women had to be “spiritually vigilant” against fear and violation (74:207–9). Possession discourse thus contested the management’s view of “mass hysteria” as caused by female physical weaknesses. Like other oppositional tactics, spirit attacks are not capable of identifying the common adversary but indirectly expressed the interests of others in a similar predicament.11 The

11Strathern (98) has argued that the question of agency goes beyond the independent actions of individuals, focusing on the interests “in terms of which they act.” Their aims are neither “necessarily . . . independently conceived” (98:22) nor, in my view, fully conscious.
surreptitious foot-dragging, Luddite tactics, and possession rites count among the “polymorphous maneuvers and mobilities” (19:8) that, linking a basic sense of moral freedom, aesthetic creation, and practical action, have surprising effects on power relations, while managing to elude repression.

In contrast to Malay factory women, their South Korean counterparts are among the most militant in Asia, confronting a state more repressive of labor than other industrializing countries (6, 17, 50, 99). The growth of collective consciousness among South Korean female workers is also fostered by their relative social and geographical isolation. The Anglophone literature gives only tantalizing glimpses of the South Korean female workers’ movements—“underground” struggles that while protracted and culturally elaborated tend not to be accessible to outsiders.

In South Korea, the dramatic performance of the economy has relied heavily on unskilled female labor, paid half the wages of comparable male workers (99:128). In 1969, a ban on strikes in foreign-invested firms was followed by the breakup of unions in the mid-1970s, through the New Community Factory Movement. In two large industrial estates, Oh (71) found most factories violated the Labor Standard Act by insisting on overtime and depriving workers of holidays and medical leaves. The work was arduous; textile workers, who routinely worked night shifts, put in an average of 10.5 hours per day but were paid “below sustenance wages” (71:192–93). Layoffs were not a bargaining option because of labor shortages. Companies therefore relied on “crude forms of control” by inventing rules requiring 20-hour workdays (17:211).

Most female workers were single migrants from remote areas, who were thus cut off from family support (81). Socially isolated in the industrial estates, most of the female workers were under 25 years old, and many were adolescents. They were employed for an average of three years, and many had begun to stay on after marriage (71:191). Although most were “working daughters” supplementing family income, about 11% were primary income earners in their families. They lived in housing near the industrial zones where they could share stories and common circumstances on a daily basis. This led to the creation of a female class solidarity, further strengthened by women’s wide experiences across different industries, and by their involvement in labor disputes (17). Furthermore, the large population and the expanding South Korean economy generated intense job competition between women and men. As a category, men were upgraded to more lucrative jobs, discarding “lower” ones to women (81). Most female workers desired wages at least equal to those of men, and wages were the main focus of their struggle (71). These factors refute the suggestion that because of “patriarchal family structures” Korean workers are relatively quiescent (19). In fact, labor disputes involving female workers have sharply increased since the mid-1970s but they have been underreported by the state (17:220).
In the late 1970s, when the national economy surpassed the “developing country” level, the Dong-II Textile Company was engaged in a major labor dispute (71:186). Women workers rejected representatives of a puppet union led by men (6). The factory women determined that they could not depend on support from male union organizers, nor could they rely on sympathetic middle-class women to lead them. Female workers began to organize and develop their own leadership. They told Kim (50) that they no longer needed students to awaken their consciousness: The time had come for “real laborers” to take care of themselves. In another context, Christian leaders were advised that they should leave after helping female workers to organize themselves (99).

Female workers, organized into different groups, have developed a whole repertoire of tactics and images expressing their struggles. In the Dong-II Textile Company strike, women protested “miserable work conditions,” poor food, imposed silence among coworkers, and prohibition from going to the toilets (6). They developed an anti-capitalist ideology that focused on “recover[ing] our human rights.” At the climax of their struggle against the company union, women on a hunger strike faced off against police by stripping and singing union songs (6:235). The women were brutally beaten, and 72 were arrested. When the strikers presented their case to the regional union leader, he asked, “What sort of women are you, who prefer the labor movement to marriage?” (6:237). Because they chose to struggle as workers, women were apparently perceived as acting outside cultural traditions of femininity. Some of the women involved in this labor action were raped (99:133–34).

Thus, while male superiors tried to domesticate female protesters by using traditional forms of male control, the women workers drew on local and imported religious traditions for inspiration. Building resistance out of their daily suffering, workers found in shamanism a vital tradition for interpreting historical tragedies (51), while Christianity offered new concepts to articulate their oppression and the possibilities for change. Sun (99) argues that the goal of Korean feminist theology was to promote the full humanity of women by struggling to transform a society in which development depended on women’s labor but disregarded improving women’s status. Working women were said to be suspicious of bourgeois women’s assertions that women would be liberated through work, when their work conditions were, “for the most part, exploitative and dehumanizing” (99:129). Instead of adopting bourgeois feminism, many female workers turned to Christianity. Some reported experiencing God’s presence in their lives; their experiences led them to construct a new conception of power based on gender solidarity and human dignity. Sun observes that:

[The women workers] cannot afford to see themselves as helpless victims: their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. They combine
their strengths to survive and often assume responsibility for others in their struggle, sometimes even sacrificing their security—the safety of their bodies. By recognizeing that the exercise of their power is an act of resistance, they reject both the dominant group's definition of them as powerless and dispensable, and the ideology of sexism which teaches that women are powerless and easily victimized (99:132).

South Korean female workers' struggles culminated in battles that extend beyond the workplace. They led to the emergence of a separate female labor movement in the 1987 mass labor struggle, the largest in Korean history (50). The conflict began with male workers at the Hyundai plant demanding "democratic labor unions." Women in the Masan FTZ were also inspired to strike; as a result, factory wages were raised from $4 to $7 a day in 1988 (see also 116). To a greater extent than the other cases, these South Korean worker movements have led to social changes, producing a new sense of effectiveness in the female workers, and posing questions about their gender identity and cultural community.

CONCLUSION

As I write this, the world speeds ahead. Corporations are retreating from off-shore manufacturing in developing countries where growing labor strife and rising wages since 1988, in addition to the declining US dollar, have increased production costs (116). More and more, Western companies are preferring sites in metropolitan countries where market access is optimal and ever increasing pools of immigrants and refugees supply the cheap labor (see 17, 43). Indeed, such changes in capital-labor engagements underlines the need for theoretical flexibility on our part. I have suggested an alternative to the conventional framing of working-class experiences as a trajectory from the development of class consciousness to class struggle to structural change. Instead, I propose that we conceive of workers' experiences as cultural struggles—that is, workers struggle against new and varied forms of domination, and seek new ways of grappling with social realities. Such cultural resistance and production engender a new sense of self and community, potentially challenging the constitution of civil society.

Williams uses the phrase "structure of feeling" to describe such an emergent and fluid sensibility, a kind of "practical consciousness" derived from actively lived and felt relationships (112:132). A structure of feeling does not equate with an articulated formal system (ideology), shaped as it is by "a living and interrelating continuity," together with all its tensions (112:132). Above, I described the constitution of such "structures of feeling" in the context of class and other hegemonic forms of domination.

In different ethnographic contexts, institutions like the state, kinship, gender, and religion, as well as industrial enterprises, play important roles in constituting workers' activities and consciousness. Through their complex
accommodations and resistances, the female workers under discussion here gained a sense of their particular oppressions and interests, but also achieved some degree of effectiveness and self-worth. Although such structures of feeling do not necessarily have significant political effects, they constitute a change in the everyday attitudes and practices of workers.

In negating hegemonic definitions daily, factory women came to explore new concepts of self, female status, and human worth. While many tactics of resistances were individual, and even covert, other forms of protest in the public sphere compelled a modification or renegotiation of power relations. In Kwantung and in Taiwan, factory daughters developed a sense of personal rights, while in South Korea, female workers learned to be sovereign subjects, acting as self-determining agents of social change. The latter have gone furthest in developing culturally new notions of human worth and individual rights, and in organizing resistance. They rejected traditional constructions of their status and selectively adopted foreign categories to articulate their own goals, as individuals and collectively. They have realized, to a greater extent than many female workers elsewhere, the liberating potential of the new structure of feeling. They achieved the voices to question the place of women in the economy, and to demand democratic practices in civil society. In viewing their silences, subterfuges, interpretations, and goals as “cultural struggle,” we are merely acknowledging the role of subaltern women in making local histories, in their own ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the following scholars: Allan Pred for guiding me through the geography of capital accumulation; Brackette Williams for her penetrating insights into racial and sexual exploitation; John Gumpezz for explicating narrative forms; Scott Guggenheim for his trenchant remarks and refreshing perspective, and Carol Smith for her cautionary comments.

Literature Cited


72. Ong, A. 1983. Global industries and Malay peasants in Peninsular Malaysia. See Ref. 64, pp. 426-41
84. Pred, A. 1990. In other worlds: fragmented and integrated observations on gendered languages, gendered spaces and local transformation. Antipode 22(1):33-52
114. Wolf, D. 1990. Linking women’s labor with the global economy: factory workers and their families in rural Java. See Ref. 43, pp. 25–47