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Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories

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Kingdom, should abandon some of their human rights hubris and accept greater economic and social obligations toward workers, and Asian countries need to provide greater respect for free trade unions, democracy, and the rule of law.

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Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories. By Leslie Salzinger. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xi, 217 pp. ISBN 0-520-22494-9, $55.00 (cloth); 0-520-23539-8, $21.95 (paper).

This study counters the still pervasive perception that female workers in the world's export processing industry are inherently passive and obedient and therefore productive. Salzinger dubs this perception of female workers the "transnational trope of productive femininity." Furthermore, Salzinger offers a powerful new model for understanding how gender operates in global production. Rather than explain why export processing employers hire women, as much of the early work on this topic does, this study examines "how gendered meanings emerge . . ., and how profitable gendered subjects are evoked with them" (pp. 25–26)—that is, how the self-perceptions of workers as men and women are shaped in ways that optimize productivity. This shift may partly reflect the fact that Salzinger collected her data in Mexico after men constituted a growing proportion of export processing, or *maquiladora,* workers.

Salzinger uses nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork (1991–93) conducted in Ciudad Juarez—the Mexican border city that claims Mexico's largest concentration of *maquiladora* jobs—to describe a panoply of gender practices on the shop floor. While high-heeled, well-coifed women are the quiescent objects of male supervisory voyeurism at one predominantly female factory ("Panoptimex"), assertive young women hold each other accountable to their team's production goals at another ("Particimex"). At one mixed-sex plant, women adopt male combativeness to gain a productive edge on a shop floor, where the workers' blue smocks and caps mute gender visibility ("Andromex"). At another, distracted women giggle and preen in response to catcalls from their male co-workers ("Anarchomex"). These portraits of shop-floor gender practices highlight gender's malleability and erode the assumption, made by managers and earlier feminist analyses alike, that docile productive female workers come "made to order" (p. 13). While workers at all factories but Anarchomex are highly productive, only at Pantoptimex do female workers conform to the notion of "productive femininity."

Salzinger attributes this wide range of shop-floor gender practices to variation in managers' own gender and national identities. Labor control practices that produce assertive female subjects (at Particimex and Andromex) enable Mexican managers to distance themselves from a macho masculinity marked simultaneously as Mexican and working-class by their foreign counterparts and superiors. Salzinger reveals that *maquiladora* managers are pivotal intermediaries of transnationalism and extends efforts to explore the strategic uses of gender.

This study will be of particular interest to those who wish to disaggregate labor control mechanisms. Salzinger's rich ethnographic account of shop-floor interactions at Panoptimex uncovers "the social processes which produced quiescent women workers" (p. 14). Managers "ogle" workers through the bank of windows surrounding the assembly lines while brazen male supervisors alternately monitor the production quality, hairstyles, and legs of their underlings. At Panoptimex managers control workers "by focusing on who workers are rather than on the work they do" (p. 64). Salzinger's accounts of shop-floor interactions, together with a penetrating rereading of Frederick Taylor's treatise on scientific management, demonstrate that managers invariably shape how workers come to view themselves. Thus, Salzinger illustrates how "the process whereby a subject is created through recognizing her or himself in another's naming, is a primary mechanism of workplace control" (p. 17). Moreover, Salzinger argues that other workers, not just managers, can play an important role in shaping how workers see themselves. Andromex management, for example, stepped aside and allowed conflict over production materials to forge competitive masculinized workers.

Even though the book reveals worker agency in constructing shop-floor gender practices, it contains precious few examples of female work-

ers actually using gender strategically. Instead, male managers and co-workers tend to dominate the "multiple and simultaneous struggles over power and desire" (p. 25) that define gender. Salzinger's research suggests, nonetheless, that gender may be an important basis for labor resistance strategies. As she points out in her conclusion, if labor control strategies are imbued with gendered meanings, then contradicting those gendered meanings could undermine labor control.

Salzinger's research raises questions about the relationship between labor market conditions and the relative importance of gendered labor control mechanisms. Salzinger argues that it was managerial efforts to reconcile the increasingly tight female labor market with the persistent notion of "productive femininity" that produced the widely varying shop-floor gender practices. This suggests that her findings were historically contingent on the *maquiladora* boom in the early 1980s and the concomitant tightened female labor market on Mexico's northern border. In the context of a loose labor market, managers may have relied less on gendered labor control mechanisms to secure docile workers than Salzinger found during the early 1990s. Female workers may have initially been docile not because women were naturally passive and obedient, but rather because all workers in a loose labor market tend to be quiescent. Salzinger could have explored this hypothesis by examining whether Panoptimex managers were able to maintain a quiescent, productive work force in the earlier loose labor market conditions with less reliance on gendered labor control tactics. If they were, then the earlier generation of feminist analysts criticized by Salzinger may have been justified in focusing on hiring as the process whereby gender operated in the global assembly line at the time.

Nonetheless, this engaging study teaches us about labor control mechanisms, what gender has to do with them, and the capacity of gender to acquire both durable and malleable meanings. It will undoubtedly become a favorite in undergraduate gender courses as well as an indispensable reference for serious scholars of gender in the global economy.

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Understanding Poverty. Edited by Sheldon H. Danziger and Robert H. Haveman. Cambridge, Mass.: Russell Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2001. 566 pp. ISBN 0-674-00767-0, $55.00 (cloth); 0-674-00876-6, $24.95 (paper).

Understanding Poverty is the fifth in a series of volumes on poverty in the United States that, starting in 1975, have been published under the auspices of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. Each volume has reviewed trends in poverty up to the current time, and the most recent ones have also contained chapters by leading scholars in the field analyzing different aspects of the poverty problem. This book, like the previous ones in the series, contains much valuable information and is a must-buy for those interested in research on U.S. poverty.

The editors note in their introduction that poverty is currently low on the nation's priority list of problems that need attention, as was true at the time of publication of the previous two volumes (1986 and 1994). As indicated by the book's title, Danziger and Haveman's response to that neglect is to focus explicitly on "understanding" poverty, in contrast to "fighting" or "confronting" it—the concerns of the previous two volumes. Today, two years after publication of the present volume, poverty remains near the bottom of the nation's agenda.

Four of the chapters lay out the central findings. Gary Burtless and Timothy Smeeding chart trends in poverty by several measures, but focusing on three: the official U.S. government poverty definition, and two alternatives that capture some of the recommendations for change made by the National Research Council (Constance F. Citro and Robert T. Michael, *Measuring Poverty: A New Approach* [Washington: National Academy Press, 1995]). By all definitions that can be measured consistently over the entire period, the poverty rate declined drastically in the 1960s and early 1970s, and afterward had either no trend (though with cyclical movements) or a slightly upward trend, depending on the price index used. The official rate stood at 12.7% of persons in 1998. The only factor that has the potential to make a difference is the treatment of medical expenses, which, under some definitions, lowers the poverty rate substantially (but this can be calculated only for a few recent years). The authors emphasize that a major factor in the lack of progress in reducing poverty has been the increasing inequality of income in the United States over the past two or three decades.