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Determing the Value of Labor Power: Workers in Sri Lanka's Export Garment Industry

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DETERMINING THE VALUE OF LABOR POWER:

Workers in Sri Lanka's Export Garment Industry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

by

Devaka Ramesh Gunawardena

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

DETERMINING THE VALUE OF LABOR POWER:

Workers in Sri Lanka's Export Garment Industry

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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Professor Akhil Gupta, Chair

This dissertation is about the reconfiguration of the export garment industry from the perspective of its nearly 300,000 workers in Sri Lanka. Since 1977, Sri Lanka's economy has liberalized, which involves the ongoing privatization of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), cuts to universal welfare, and an emphasis on attracting foreign investment. The state has created thirteen Export Processing Zone (EPZs), mostly along the southwestern coast, to provide opportunities for investors, including tax concessions. Suppliers, especially Sri Lankan-owned Multinational Corporations (MNCs), have consolidated into enterprises worth hundreds of millions of dollars that benefit from tax and trade policy. In addition, Sri Lanka's continued integration into the global market has led to further cuts to public services, including declining government revenue as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Because other small Southern countries attempting to industrialize face similar challenges, I group these changes under the rubric of export capitalism.

To analyze the impact of export capitalism, I produce an ethnographic account of Sri Lankan export garment workers' lives. I completed ethnographic research among workers, managers, unionists, residents living near EPZs, government officials, and others, over a 26-month period, from July 2014 to December 2016. I track people's routines, movements, and critiques across a range of sites, including rural villages, factories inside and outside EPZs, boarding houses near the Katunayake EPZ, located north of the capital Colombo, and union offices. I argue that export garment workers embody the tension between their twin identities as *workers*—narrowly-defined economic agents receiving a wage—and members of the *working class*—a broad political constituency. Export garment workers experience wage repression and the intensification of work in vertically-integrated enterprises, including those owned by Sri Lankan MNCs. They also critique the retreat of public services, demanding more from the Sri Lankan welfare state.

Interpreting workers' experiences, I concentrate on the *unrealized demands* implied by the appropriation of the value that they produce. These demands are not realized either in their wages or the public services that they receive. I argue that workers attempt to manage constraints by relying on each other. Tensions within community, in places such as the boarding houses and villages in which many workers live, in turn reproduce the contradictions of export capitalism. I conclude my dissertation by looking at the ways in which unionists on the ground attempt to recruit workers. The question—as implied by a rapidly expanding literature on the practice of unionism in the global South—is how Sri Lanka's labor movement is being reshaped by a labor force, often gendered as female, that works in export industries such as garments. Accordingly, my dissertation approaches theoretical debate about the representation of the working class from the ethnographic perspective of the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's export garment workers.

The dissertation of Devaka Ramesh Gunawardena is approved.

Michael Mann

Sherry B. Ortner

Akhil Gupta, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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INTRODUCTION

"If the owner of labour-power works today, tomorrow he [sic] *must again be able to repeat the same process in the same conditions as regards health and strength. His means of subsistence must therefore be sufficient to maintain him in his normal state as a labouring individual. His natural wants, such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing, vary according to the climatic and other physical conditions of his country. On the other hand, the number and extent of his so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development, and depend therefore to a great extent on the degree of civilisation of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort in which, the class of free labourers has been formed. In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labour-power a historical and moral element."*

-Karl Marx (1990), *Capital, Volume I*

Export Capitalism from the Perspective of Labor

When I began my research in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone (EPZ), located on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka, just north of the capital of Colombo, I spent a lot of time talking to an organizer from a small trade union. His name was Wimal. Although Wimal previously held positions in various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), he had not worked with a trade union before he took up his job as an organizer, about a year before I met him.

At the drop-in center located next to a *kadee* (small shop), Wimal often complained that workers were not interested in joining the union. He mentioned challenges, such as workers' lack of interest in the union, in addition to the high turnover in the factories. He thought that the union could offer classes for vocational skills to attract workers. Despite this strategy, however, he struggled to recruit people. As I spoke to Wimal in the small office furnished with plastic chairs and a single, slowly-oscillating fan, it became clear what the real problem was: he was unsure of his goal as an under-resourced organizer in an under-staffed office.

It may appear strange to argue that a union organizer did not know effective ways in which to recruit people into the union. Wimal's disorientation, however, was an expression of

the decline not only of the labor movement, but the political parties of the left that gave it direction. As Lenin argued, trade unionism is framed by a political agenda. Lenin's goal was relatively straightforward: communism.

Long after the Cold War had ended, however, a similar confidence in political vision was lacking among organizers like Wimal. On the other hand, having arrived in Sri Lanka from the US, I was aware of the mounting opposition to the established order in the global North. After the housing crash that caused the Great Recession of 2008, people began to express their frustration with budget cuts to social welfare, reflected in what politicians and scholars have called austerity. Although the anti-austerity campaigns had many currents, from the explicitly anti-capitalist to moderately social democratic, the target was becoming clearer.

By the time I began my research, Sri Lanka and many other countries in the global South were facing similar problems to those in the North. The process is often referred to as structural adjustment, mandated by global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Despite the drastic reduction in global growth and the increase of debt though, a full-blown crisis had yet to draw organizers' attention to a problem of equal scale. In the North, austerity and its condensation of many different problems led to a direct attack on the failings of neoliberal capitalism, from deindustrialization to wealth inequality. From the perspective of scholars and activists in the global South, however, they appeared to lack an equally comprehensive target. As I spoke to Wimal and to the workers he was trying to organize, it became apparent that the problem was the neoliberal model that had been driving the integration of countries such as Sri Lanka into the global economy: export capitalism.

The concept of neoliberalism has dominated academic conversations (for an overview, see Ferguson 2010). Different experiences in the global North and South reflect its role in

intensifying inequality at the heart of the global system. While elites in the global North binged on finance until the entire structure crashed, a pivotal event has not occurred in the global South despite the equally compelling portrait of inequality that could be drawn. Authors writing from the perspective of the global South struggle to name a comprehensive problem. In my dissertation, I argue that an ideology also dominates policy in many smaller Southern countries, albeit one that appears as common sense: *the need to produce goods for export to share in global growth*.

This story is coming undone, and perhaps with it the global trade order that underpinned it. Many hesitate to think of what comes next, from increasing geopolitical conflict to the rise of the far right. Still, uncertainty forces us to ask, what is at stake from the perspective of Southern factory workers? In the case of workers in the Katunayake EPZ, not only had they not experienced the supposed benefits of export capitalism, they had very specific criticisms located in their long experience of impoverishment. They had not enjoyed the benefits of economic growth, long before the Great Recession occurred. The broad range of workers' criticisms led me to ask, *why were those people who were supposed to benefit from jobs created by export capitalism critical of it?*

During my research in the Katunayake EPZ, I had a mass of ethnographic data drawn from workers' experiences, but I did not have an interpretive framework. When I began fieldwork, I planned to study urban development projects that had begun in Colombo after the end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil separatists in 2009. I shifted my focus after meeting Wimal through an English class for workers taught by local activists. Upon my return to the US, I turned to labor studies to understand workers' evolving role in capitalism.

Labor studies has its roots in the experience of Northern workers. At the height of the post-World War II boom, authors such as Braverman (1998), developed a critical stance toward capitalism, despite the supposed benefits of mass consumption. Authors questioned capital's constant drive for profitability, which they argued generated negative outcomes such as rote work. The encompassing perspective of the capitalist system appeared to drop out of scholarly debate, at least temporarily, after the economic crisis of the 1970s. Instead, managers promoted "lean manufacturing" as a potential solution. Lean has been criticized for creating more stress for workers (Parker and Slaughter 1990; Price 1994). It has also involved concepts such as teamwork and participation, resulting in the downsizing of companies.

Authors such as Moody (1997) and Silver (2003), writing at the height of confidence in neoliberal capitalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, identified problematic trends in lean manufacturing. They noted the consolidation of corporate power. So long as the "economy" held up, however, many scholars shifted their sights to the plight of Southern workers to identify a new vanguard that could take the fight to global capitalism.[1] In the aftermath of the Great Recession, authors are switching back, re-examining the causes leading to the crisis in the North.

There are many factors. The crisis, though, has been overdetermined by the decline of the labor movement. Even economists at dominant institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are beginning to recognize that the assault on organized labor paved the way for many of the challenges that we see today, especially increasing inequality. Ethnographies and ethnographically-informed theory have painted vulnerable pictures of the effects of the crisis on

[1] As Moody (1997) argues: "What is called for is not some centrally coordinated campaign, but a world-wide movement for shorter work time led by the unions with the greatest leverage, those in the TNCs [Transnational Corporations] and the public sector, while drawing in and supporting weaker elements in the national economies" (284).

diverse constituencies, including laid-off workers and indebted students (Berlant 2011; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Walley 2013).

In contrast, the crisis of the 1970s that created the initial opportunity for the global assault on the welfare state brought a wave of optimism about the potential for Southern countries to increase their share of global growth. The fact that some did, predominantly among East Asian countries, has led to debates about the characteristics of the "East Asian miracle" (Amsden 1994; Balassa 1989; Chibber 2006; Haggard 1990).

Nevertheless, authors generally seem to recognize that Northern Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have benefited more than workers of Southern countries themselves (Cooney 2001; Frobel, et al. 1981). Because the problem is often framed as an issue of global inequality, however, we risk ignoring the fine-grained national differences that contextualize statistics; especially the rise of Southern MNCs. Since the Great Recession, scholars and activists point to the ways in which populations in the North reassert their rights vis-à-vis Northern elites (Della Porta 2015).

In this dissertation, I try to specify the nature of conflict from the perspective of the South by analyzing the case of Sri Lanka. I look at attempts to analyze the relationship between export garment workers and the working class as it represents the challenges of the Sri Lankan state's embrace of export capitalism. Scholars have attempted to articulate the relationship between formal and informal workers (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014). The latter has taken increasing precedence in studies of labor in the global South (see Breman 2013; Sanyal 2007). As Mezzadri (2008) argues, "the informal economy and its regulatory mechanisms are increasingly incorporated into neo-liberal global production structures" (605). In contrast, in my dissertation,

I focus on the ways in which the challenges of export garment workers in vertically-integrated enterprises owned by Sri Lankan MNCs reflect those of the working class in general.

By adopting export garment workers' perspective, I identify the ways in which export capitalism has reshaped Sri Lanka. Like austerity, export capitalism may be generalized across the vastly unequal world we encounter. To analyze it though, I have chosen an ethnographic example that illustrates the concrete ways in which it operates in one country. In the case of export garment workers in EPZs such as Katunayake, they confronted wage repression and the intensification of work, in addition to the retreat of public services.

Although labor studies offers a paradigm for analyzing the impact of capitalism on workers, the challenge among scholars has been to identify the connection between workers' lives in the workplace and at home. As Webster, et al. (2009) acknowledge:

> What has been missing from the study of labor in the global economy is the impact of global restructuring on the non-working life of workers. The reconfiguration of the employment relationship—through the growing casualization of work, downsizing and retrenchment—impacts directly on workers' households and the communities of which they are part…Labor studies should not be an analysis of the workplace only; we need to examine workers as a totality, workers in society. (x)

Workers in Sri Lanka's export garment industry may moonlight as trishaw drivers. Women who perform reproductive work are also part of the staff of a modern, Sri Lankan MNC. The question I faced was, how do I connect the different aspects of their lives, crossing back-and-forth between the formal and informal economy, to write my analysis?

Searching for a model, I returned to Karl Marx's work to identify the connections between workers' complaints. My inquiry meant revisiting an allegedly totalizing perspective, which had been abandoned in the name of pluralistic identities such as gender and ethnicity (Arruzza 2013). My return to Marx, however, is not to argue necessarily for a "class-first"

approach, but to interpret his categories ethnographically to make sense of my own experiences interacting with workers.

Based on the quote from Marx at the beginning of this dissertation, I noticed that what he wrote about what workers need to survive appeared to contradict his main argument in *Capital*, that labor itself is the measure of value. Marx argues that capital appropriates surplus value produced by workers. In the case of how the value of labor power is determined, it becomes a tautology if it is made equivalent with what workers produce.[2]

Marx seemed to acknowledge this ambiguity in the quote about the value represented by the wage workers earned. I recorded people's critiques of their everyday living conditions that wages were supposed to cover. When I went back to Marx I realized that there was an implicit gap opened by his analysis. Although capital appropriates surplus value, from the workers' perspective, this process generates *unrealized demands* that are not fulfilled under the current ownership and distribution of wealth.[3]

In addition to the limits of the wage, I also realized that Marx had not addressed public services, which became universal through decades of workers' struggle in Northern and, later, Southern countries. In my own analysis then, I went a step further. I took into consideration the post facto redistribution of wealth, most often in the form of taxation for public services.[4]

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[2] As Lier (2007) argues:

> Although workers sell their labour power as a commodity, workers themselves are not real commodities. They are sentient and social beings, and products of a society they themselves have been instrumental in creating. Because they have the capacity to work, and can (or are forced to) sell their labour power as a commodity, labour can be seen as a *pseudo-commodity* (Castree et al. 2004; Hudson 2001). (815)

[3] I include here expectations the system itself creates, returning to Marx's quote that beyond natural needs, there are those associated with the historical development of each era which become needs, not simply wants. I thank Akhil Gupta for helping me clarify this point.

[4] In recent years, scholars have posed the distinction as the question of exploitation versus commodification, and its inheritance from the competing traditions of Marx and Polanyi. See Burawoy (2010)

Even when workers' wages and the services they access are added up at both ends, however, it does not theoretically approximate the value that is appropriated by capital. Conversely, I also realized, a political program that attempts to challenge export capitalism to answer their demands must necessarily confront the tension between their twin identities as *economic agents*, workers demanding higher wages, and a *political constituency*, the working class demanding better public services.

Having uncovered this distinction, I returned to the literature on social transformation in the global South. I realized that it contained an unnecessary division: between studies of export workers, often located in the garment industry and focused on the transnational implications of their struggle, and the poor, who work outside of the formal economy but who may receive state support.

By considering the lives of Sri Lankan export garment workers from the perspective of their twin positions as workers and members of the working class, I argue that we clarify the ways in which changes on the shop floor and cutbacks to public services are overdetermined by the current phase of export capitalism in Sri Lanka, which reinforces the divide between haves and have nots. My dissertation does not argue whether a new political movement will or will not emerge, or when the next crisis will occur. Instead, I point to the implications of inequality as they are realized in export garments workers' experiences.

In addition, in my dissertation, I also look at the contradictory gendered and ethnic dimensions of the community on which workers depend for survival. Because I lived in a boarding house near the Katunayake EPZ, I realized there were links between workers that appear to have gone unnoticed by organizers such as Wimal. On the other hand, unions could organize on this basis to distill workers' demands for a new order.

Ultimately, I see my dissertation as a starting point for further inquiry into workers' everyday experiences in export capitalism, to grasp the scope of challenges that they face. The South may yet face the same crisis as North, or rather, a different response to the same problem. In either case, the Sri Lankan export garment workers I spoke to pointed out myriad flaws under the current system. It is up to us as researchers to ask how these complaints reveal unrealized demands generated by capitalism, and how organizers such as Wimal negotiate this process on a historically and nationally specific basis.

Literature Review: Securing Profitability

Any study of workers, whether in the global North or global South must inevitably engage the boom in labor studies that occurred at the height of mass assembly production after World War II. As Braverman (1998) argued, workers in Northern countries had become part of a machine. Braverman was critical of the potential "deskilling" that would occur as workers became part of mass assembly. As he memorably put it, "If Taylorism does not exist as a separate school today, that is because, apart from the bad odor of the name, it is no longer the property of a faction, since its fundamental teachings have become the bedrock of all work design" (Braverman 1998: 87). Braverman argued that a class of salaried managers took increasing control over the labor process, resulting in a new hierarchy. Braverman saw the potential though in poorly-paid clerical workers (384), who might remain critical of the system. He envisioned that these workers could become the basis for a mass movement that could challenge capitalism.

Throughout the post-World War II period leading up to the economic crisis of the 1970s, authors often argue that labor was incorporated into capitalism, both on the shop floor, via collective bargaining, and socially, via the broadening of the welfare state. As Burawoy (1985)

argues, “Through the concessions and higher living standards associated with an advanced capitalist economy, the interests of capital and labour are concretely coordinated” (28). Struggles during the Great Depression led to the establishment of a contract between capital and labor. Institutions such as the National Labor Relations Board in the US were supposed to realize common interests. Davies (1990) notes that:

> Consent is manufactured as these rules operate to protect management’s prerogative to fashion and direct the labor process by both imposing constraints on managerial discretion and endowing workers with rights and obligations. Collective bargaining thus represents the institutionalization of a created common interest between capital and labor, resting on a common precondition of profitability. (394)

The last line though is key. Davies hints at the core conflict between capital and labor, even in the context of collective bargaining and the expansion of the welfare state: securing capital’s profit. Ultimately, capital had the final say over the direction of the system. Its basic goal remained profit at the cost of the worker.

As a result, authors studying the labor process at the height of mass assembly have contextualized labor’s gains during the period after World War II. Although the average workers’ wages increased, they paradoxically appeared to have less and less say over the conditions of their work. Braverman’s “deskilling” hypothesis highlighted this process. He argued that workers had become cogs in a machine. Edwards (1980) builds on this claim:

> The explanation I advance is straightforward: hierarchy at work exists and persists because it is profitable. Employers are able to increase their profits when they have greater control over the labor process. However, this profitability does not in general result from greater efficiency (as that term is usually understood), and it certainly cannot be easily identified with the greater good of society. (viii)

Even at the height of post-World War II prosperity then, labor studies authors remained concerned about the domination of capital. They recognized that the labor movement may have

achieved gains within the system. These gains, however, were untenable if organized labor did not transcend the system itself.

What were the effects of organized labor's integration into the system? The predominance of collective bargaining meant that unions disciplined their members to keep the industrial peace so that capital could make its profit. Focusing on the collective bargaining system, authors identified the fact that the emphasis on rules and procedure eliminated substantive discussion over the merits of the system. As Burawoy (1985) puts it: "The hegemonic regimes which established themselves after the Second World War, such as the one at Allied, undermined labour's strength on the shopfloor and led to its present vulnerability" (143).

Many authors in labor process studies saw it as their role to question the basis on which peace between capital and labor was secured. Specifically, Braverman (1998) argues that the Industrial Relations literature that emerged during the Great Depression explained away workers' difficulties because of inherently exploitative relations (141). It promoted a conflict-free, Durkheimian view of industrial harmony. Similarly, Thompson (1997) argues that without recognizing the whip of profit, "restriction of output simply appears alongside lack of motivation, difficulties of communication and conflict between groups as pathologies departing from the norm of harmony" (23).

Labor studies scholars offered a radical diagnosis of the system at the apparent height of the compromise between capital and labor. Eventually, however, profitability was imperiled in the 1970s when, due to tightening economic conditions, even the modest gains achieved by labor came under attack. Capital launched a counter-attack. It reasserted itself vis-à-vis what Harvey (2007) refers to as the "class project" of neoliberalism. In a classic work anticipating the advent of lean manufacturing's popularity across the globe, Piore and Sabel (1986) explained the crisis

of mass production that led to the reversion to craft production. The problems that lean was designed to solve, from multiple sourcing to maintaining smaller inventories, Piore and Sabel argued, were generated by the fluctuation of demand and exchange rate instability (201). In addition, they cited proximate events such as the oil shock.

Although labor studies scholars originally anticipated the consolidation of capitalism—Braverman's major work (1998) is, after all, entitled *Labor and Monopoly Capital*—crisis led to fragmentation and breakdown. In this context, capital adopted new management theories. If we take labor studies core methodological insight, however, we can see that these new techniques were not simply designed to improve "efficiency," but also to take advantage of the crisis to impose stricter conditions on labor. The attack was manifest not only on the contract between capital and labor, but in the process of production itself, as described in the next section. Because the labor movement had been incorporated into a collective bargaining system, however, organized labor found it difficult to mobilize against management's latest assault in the form of lean manufacturing.

Literature Review: Reconfiguring Production

Lean manufacturing originated in Japan. According to Moody (1997), it was "developed to cope with a capital shortage caused by the devastation of World War Two. It was made possible by the repression of organized labor that occurred in the early 1950s" (85). Initially, management researchers focused on production shortages that resulted in lean taking hold. "Just-In-Time" (JIT) delivery was designed for small batch production. Later, more critical authors such as Moody, however, focused on lean as the product of a class struggle. Dohse, et al. (1985) argues:

> In the course of this conflict Japanese firms succeeded, especially in the automobile industry (Toyota in 1950, Nissan in 1953), in destroying the militant postwar unions that

> had an industry-wide orientation and in firing union representatives. The Japanese automobile industries were thus able to prevent from the outset the development of a strong labor-union movement, to particularize the interest representation of the employees into plant or company unions, and to limit considerably the scope of labor union demands. (134)

Because Japanese management had greater control, it could implement new techniques such as sped-up work times and a seniority-based promotion system, without having to negotiate with workers organized by skilled trades. Several decades later, flexibility would be imposed similarly on workers in other Northern countries.

Nevertheless, Piore and Sabel (1986) argued that lean contained creative aspects that could potentially invigorate mass assembly production. Piore and Sabel identified lean's origin in nationally-specific craft traditions, not just Japan. Whereas labor studies' authors such as Braverman saw mass assembly production as the logical endpoint of capitalism, Piore and Sabel argued that, "An economy's propensity to react to the 1970s crisis by adopting the craft paradigm was clearly related to the way it had previously adopted mass production…In doing so, some economies conserved more elements of the alternative craft production than others" (222).

Accordingly, Piore and Sabel paid less attention to the repression of labor in the Japanese example. Instead, they identified Japan's craft traditions as one example of the way in which "residual barriers to wholesale Americanization served to guide local efforts at economic survival" (222). Piore and Sabel tended to be more optimistic about the breakdown of the mass assembly line. They promoted the potential for lean to strengthen mass production by reincorporating craft principles.[5]

[5] Piore and Sabel (1986) remained hopeful that lean could be incorporated into a new social arrangement:

> But it is conceivable that flexible specialization [which favors capital, though workers participate] and mass production [which favors New Deal-style bargaining for labor, but regimented work] could be combined in a unified international economy. In this system, the old mass-production industries might migrate to the underdeveloped world, leaving behind in the industrialized world the high-tech industries and the

Lean also entailed a new vocabulary of flexibility, teamwork, and participation. Management researchers identified this language as an improvement on work practices that would strengthen relations between capital and labor (Kenney and Florida 1993). In contrast to the cogs-in-the-machine approach described by Braverman, lean envisioned using workers' "intellectual capacities for the goal of production" (Dohse, et al. 1985: 124). On the other hand, as Dohse and others argue, lean is "not an alternative to Taylorism but rather a solution to its classic problem of the resistance of the workers to placing their knowledge of production in the service of rationalization" (128; also see Price 1994: 88).

This style of analysis identifies the novel aspects of lean rhetoric but ultimately reinforces previous labor studies authors' suspicion of capital's domination of the labor process. Parker and Slaughter (1990) refer to lean as "management-by-stress," because lean pushes workers to their mental and physical limits. Price (1994) also notes the fact that workers' decision-making is limited to minor aspects of production. Management continues to determine the goals. Still, authors such as Sayer (1986) were reluctant to dismiss lean's rhetoric of participation out of hand. Sayer, for example, argues that possibilities lean contained could be appropriated for labor's own benefit. More recently, this more ambivalent view is backed up by Vallas's (2003) on the ground study of the implementation of lean at several factories. Vallas argues that workers organized into teams turned management-devised units into tools of solidarity.

Still, although we acknowledge diverging viewpoints about the re-appropriation of lean rhetoric, the current academic consensus rests on the basic recognition that lean intensifies

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> traditional dispersed conglomerations in machine tools, garments, footwear, textiles, and the like—all revitalized through the fusion of traditional skills and high technology. (279)

They identified "worldwide prosperity and a transnational welfare state" as goals.

work.[6] Moreover, it had bigger effects on the entire economy. Moody (1997) argues that lean production did not lead to increased investment in production. Rather, it led to downsizing. As he puts it: "If this flexibility is combined with functional flexibility, speed-up and job loading, which is itself constantly increased through management-by-stress, it is evident that a firm's employment will shrink not only with cyclical market declines, but more or less continuously over time even if the market holds up or expands" (100).

Downsizing occurred in the macro-economic context in which financial capital became hegemonic in the global North. Financial capitalists sold companies and engaged in mergers and acquisitions to beef up value for shareholders. Walley's (2013) ethnography of industrial decline in the US Midwest paints a stark picture:

> As the years progressed, these kinds of bare-knuckle tactics would become familiar ones as America's corporate landscape was transformed. An age had dawned in which mergers and acquisitions were cynically used to milk companies of profits and to increase short-term stock values, regardless of the destructive, even cannibalistic, impact on the acquired companies. (66)

Although it took several decades, eventually the cracks in the shareholder story led to economic breakdown during the Great Recession of 2008. Like the crisis of the 1970s that created an opportunity for the right's attack, the Great Recession has inspired vigorous debate about its causes and factors. Having reviewed lean in this section, we can identify it as a major cause for changes in production that resulted in downsizing, the erosion of workers' bargaining power, the stagnation of wages, and, ultimately, the shift to debt-driven forms of consumption (Streeck 2011).

[6] I acknowledge here that this process does not necessarily determine workers' own subjective and varying experience of the fulfilling or degrading aspects of their work. I thank Akhil Gupta for helping me clarify this point.

In popular and occasionally academic rhetoric, however, analysis of lean manufacturing and its effect on the economy has tended to be ignored in favor of hyper-visible processes such as offshoring production to other countries. In the following sections, I will discuss the extent to which this process was realized in the geopolitical relationships and trade agreements enforced by US hegemony in Latin America and East Asia. In general, though, I place more emphasis on lean as opposed to offshoring because it is a less visible process and therefore merits more scrutiny.

The claim that capital mobility—as opposed to lean manufacturing's articulation with financialization—is responsible for workers' plight threatens to become rhetoric, rather than informing analysis. Instead, I see its significance is based on its political effect on working class organization, rather than its supposed pervasiveness (also see Lier 2007: 818). The threat of plant closure epitomizes the regime that Burawoy (1985) refers to as "hegemonic despotism." If the post-World War II period up until the 1970s was defined by a hegemonic regime in which workers consented to capital's control of the labor process for rising wages, hegemonic despotism according to Burawoy "is the 'rational' tyranny of capital mobility over the collective worker" (150). This style of analysis enables us to identify the range of weapons available to capital. By adopting Burawoy's perspective, for example, we can move beyond the assumption that workers in the North and South are intrinsically opposed to each other because manufacturing Southern workers allegedly "take away" production from the North.[7]

[7] This view appears to be occasionally implied by Silver (2003: 11) and Herod (2001: 35), among other authors in labor studies. We could also argue, however, that their framing of the political demand for protectionism is because their analyses incorporate the perceptions and biases of rhetoric about the problems facing Northern workers. Herod (2001) offers an analytical way to reconcile these issues:

> For example, workers who are relatively geographically immobile owing to kinship ties or perhaps the inability to sell their homes in a depressed regional economy may feel the need to engage in local boosterism to encourage investment in their communities in much the same way as do local capitalists

Combined with lean manufacturing, the threat of plant closure has diminished Northern workers' bargaining power. Silver (2003) sees this point as the beginning of a new epoch in which workers must rebuild their associational power, given the decline of industries such as auto and steel in which they had greater leverage because of their structural power. As she puts it:

> This structural weakness has placed a renewed premium on the importance of associational power. Indeed, the organizing environment faced by workers in the early twenty-first century in certain respects has more in common with that faced by nineteenth-century textile workers than twentieth-century automobile workers. (123)

The renewed importance of the labor movement has become central to the anti-austerity campaigns. Because workers must organize in precarious contexts, their situation begins to parallel the long-standing situation of many Southern workers.

The challenge according to authors such as Moody (2017) is identifying areas where workers have a degree of leverage. Newer work in Northern labor studies focuses on the relationship between workers in logistics and services and older industries such as manufacturing. The debate turns on the question of whether an intrinsic precarity currently dominates employment, and whether it can be overcome (Breman 2013; Moody 2016; Standing 2014). Having reviewed labor studies origins, I argue that ultimately this question returns us to the political strategy adopted by workers' movements (see Panitch 1986). Because capitalism is driven by profit, it remains imperative to identify the relationship between changing groups of workers and the representation of the working class in general. As we will see, despite the range

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> whose sunk costs preclude them from relocating from one place to another when a particular locale begins to experience economic hard times. (34)

of historical and geographic differences, what is methodologically true for the North is just as true for the South.

Literature Review: Class Inequality under Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI)

If work in the global North is becoming precarious, workers in the global South have observed these challenges for an even longer period. Still, the political target in the North has strengthened to the point that anti-austerity candidates are witnessing relatively greater electoral success; regardless of whether they have the capacity to break with the neoliberal order. Before turning to the contemporary debate in the South, I look at the trajectory of industrialization to understand the changing class dynamics that frame current challenges. Unlike the North, which had managed to incorporate more and more people into permanent employment after World War II, many Southern countries struggle with relatively lower levels of investment.

The major policy plank after many countries gained independence from European powers after World War II was the attempt to invest in local production and create domestic markets under the policy of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). Authors looking back on these attempts are often critical. As Balassa (1989) puts it:

> To begin with, while the infant industry argument calls for temporary protection until industries become internationally competitive, in both groups of countries protection was regarded as permanent. Also, in all the countries concerned, there was a tendency towards what a Latin American economist aptly described as 'import substitution at any cost.' (95)

Coming from a background in neoclassical economics, Balassa thought import substitution interfered with the efficiency of the market. He downplayed, however, the explicitly collective goal of development by which this strategy was often framed.

Sklair (2011) is more ambivalent about the replacement of ISI with Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI), discussed in the next section. He concurs, however, with Balassa on the difficulty of creating strong domestic markets:

> Many [Southern countries] adopted First World industrialization strategies rather uncritically, trying to build iron and steel, textile, engineering industries, and so on, with little regard for economies of scale or international competitiveness. These industries were bound to be highly inefficient because they were rarely integrated into system of rational backward and forward linkages, and they tended to rely on a captive domestic market, highly protected from outside competition. (3)

Although Balassa and Sklair point to the inefficiency generated by ISI, we also observe that it benefited some classes more than others. On the one hand, in Sri Lanka, for example, the state subsidized a local class of entrepreneurs in industries producing light goods.[8] On the other hand, workers continued to earn low wages. I argue that authors critical of ISI often invert the issue by starting from the point of view of the market, rather than the creation of a mass basis for consumer demand by deepening processes of redistribution.

ISI did not eliminate class struggle. The capitalist class, for all the anti-imperialist rhetoric of its political leadership, did not give up control of production. For many Southern states, the emphasis on import substitution did not necessarily mean overcoming capitalism. As a result, a "national bourgeoisie" was the implied beneficiary of the development strategy. It used the opportunity to increase its own wealth at the cost of public finances. I do not overlook ISI's modest gains, as ISI was often tied to the creation of welfare institutions like healthcare and education in places such as Sri Lanka. Despite its flaws, ISI tended to create a relatively broader social basis for gains. In the long run though, the classes that enjoyed the most benefits would

[8] As Herring (1987) puts it, "Indigenous entrepreneurs seemed more drawn to the plantation economy and import-export trade than to risky long term industrial development; the state took up the slack" (326).

eventually become the targets of a political campaign to win them over to the neoliberal export model.[9]

At the same time, ISI also excluded many among the poor. Looking back, Harris and Scully (2015) argue that: "Internally, state-led attempts at rapid proletarianization lessened the ability of self-provisioning households to subsidize their own reproduction…'Informalized' labor forces were thus a main outcome as individuals migrated out of rural communities and entered urban labor markets without incorporation into the formal wage sector" (421-422). They further note that low wages led to a "lack of effective demand."

To address the new class dynamics generated by ISI, authors turned to concepts such as the "semi-proletariat" to argue that large masses of the poor in Southern countries would not necessarily be incorporated into the process of industrialization.[10] Veltmeyer (1983) writes: "The large mass of dispossessed peasants, together with all those who combine subsistence/petty commodity production with seasonal or casual wage labor, are more correctly placed into the *semiproletariat*" (209). Authors such as Berger and Piore (1980) argued that those excluded from industrialization were not simply remnants that would be incorporated into the modern economy. Instead, they argued, those who had not become formal workers anticipated an alternative path toward development in the global South (Berger and Piore 1980: 5).

[9] Dunham and Kelegama (1997) argue that sustaining liberalization efforts in the late 1980s in Sri Lanka required winning over local entrepreneurs:

> [Premadasa] was preoccupied with what Waterbury (1989) has referred to as "coalition building," incorporating the rural poor. an urban underclass, and a new politically created (largely Sinhalese) business class into the party structure. Many of the latter were not particularly committed to a market economy, but their support was considered to be necessary. (185)

[10] Similarly, McGee (1973) refers to the "proto-proletariat" (141).

In his classic early 20th century formulation, Lenin argued that a relatively small proletariat had to lead the peasantry in economically backwards Russia. Although they did not see the consolidation of the proletariat as a predetermined outcome, critical authors writing about ISI also pointed to the potentially liberationist role of new classes, such as migrants living on the urban periphery. In the context of struggles by immigrant workers, Cohen, et al. (1980) argue, "While capitalism has divided workers, other forms of struggle set the stage for a universal critique of capitalism" (22). The semi-proletariat, however, was also considered "super-exploited" (Veltmeyer 1983).[11] The implication was that it lacked the class strength of the industrial proletariat.

The debates about ISI identified a range of issues, from the sustainability of tariff barriers and subsidies used by Southern countries, to class struggles. Accordingly, the shift to economic liberalization was not the predetermined outcome of the economic crisis of the 1970s. Instead, as Foster-Carter (1978) notes, the challenge for theorists was framing class alliances as part of the political strategy of the left. Because progressive leaders in Southern countries often identified allies in the national bourgeoisie, they ignored the class divisions engendered by continued commitment to the capitalist system. Foster-Carter argues that Salvador Allende's decision to soften his attitude toward local capitalists, for example, enabled the coup in Chile in 1973. To the extent that authors such as Balassa frame the challenges of ISI as an objective economic problem, we ignore these conflicts. As Foster-Carter (1978) puts it in the case of Allende, however, "like bad medicine, bad theory can kill" (52).

[11] Veltmeyer (1983) defines super-exploitation as "a set of complex mechanisms for the extraction of surplus value under conditions of *superexploitation*—the forcible reduction of wages below the value of labor power" (215).

Literature Review: Differentiating Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI)

ISI engendered tensions and contradictions that were compounded by the economic crisis of the 1970s. In places such as Sri Lanka, the balance of payments—using plantation exports to pay for imports such as heavy industrial equipment to produce light goods—came under pressure. Terms of trade declined (Herring 1987). The right saw an opportunity to attack. Global institutions shifted from previous support for ISI to emphasis on economic liberalization to attract capital from abroad. Given that this policy is the dominant approach today, we often see EOI's victory as inevitable. The advent of EOI, however, was subject to critique by early authors. Even before the consequences could be fully known, authors anticipated rhetoric about the "new international division of labor" would bring little benefit for workers in countries in both the core and periphery. As Frobel and others (1981) argue:

> This vast industrial reserve army of extremely cheap labor feeds a process of industrialization which can be observed in many contemporary developing countries. But this process of industrialization rarely absorbs any significant proportion of the local labor-force. It is oriented to production for export, as the purchasing power of the mass of the local population is too low to constitute an effective demand on the local market for the products of the country's own industry. (5)

Based on this reading, we can see that EOI reproduced many of the same challenges as ISI. Early debates on EOI grasped contradictions of the new order, even if later authors often look at the replacement of ISI by EOI as a foregone conclusion.

First, however, we must grapple with what EOI could achieve according to its proponents. Balassa (1989) saw the potential in EOI to open economies and take advantage of the global market:

> Apart from expanding the volume of trade, then, the pursuit of appropriate policies by developed and by developing countries would permit shifts in the pattern of international specialization in response to the changing structure of comparative advantage in countries at different levels of industrial development. As a result, the efficiency of resource

> allocation would improve, and rates of economic growth accelerate, with benefits to all concerned. (24)

With several decades of examples behind us, we can see that Balassa overlooked geopolitical and class dynamics. Excluding China, many East Asian countries that would later be identified as EOI success stories were shielded by the US security apparatus. In addition, Chibber (2006) argues that Japan's dominant position in the region enabled countries such as South Korea to take advantage of its market networks.

Despite the centrality of geopolitical circumstances, policy makers often assume that countries shaped by US hegemony had intrinsically successful features. Accordingly, authors have attempted to identify what enabled the "East Asian miracle," such as long-term development policies that involved a state-corporate nexus (Amsden 1994; Haggard 1990). The attempt to identify "best practices," however, runs up against the fact that these countries were uniquely positioned within a global political economy. Their relative success is not inherently reproducible. The outcome, as Safa (1981) notes, reworked relations of inequality between countries within the global South:

> In Southeast Asia, a labor hierarchy has already begun to develop, with more established sites such as Hong Kong and Singapore becoming regional headquarters for the electronics industry, providing jobs, which require high skills, and better wages. Meanwhile, Malaysia serves as an intermediary center for testing; and Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand represent the last frontier, with the lowest wages and worst working conditions. (430)

We can further identify the contingent circumstances that enabled success or failure with EOI by looking at other regions across the world.

In Latin America, for example, export-led growth under US hegemony directly skewed to the benefit of Northern MNCs as opposed to the workers in the countries themselves. As Cooney (2001) puts it, "The net effect for Mexico will be the production of surplus-value locally but not

its realization" (78). Sklair (2011) also remained skeptical of the idea that Mexico, for example, would take off under the US's Border Industrialization Program, which anticipated EOI. He maintained, though, that "capital is sometimes forced to give opportunities for genuine development to sustain its own interests" (19).[12] Later case studies demonstrated the challenges faced by workers in export industries (Muñoz 2008; Salzinger 2003; Tiano 1994).

Moreover, as Cooney (2001) shows, EOI did not lead to the same path of industrialization followed by East Asian countries. Citing another study, he offers statistics, such as the proportion of domestic inputs in EPZs rising from 13 percent in 1972 to 32 percent in 1977 in South Korea. As he puts it, "These figures clearly contrast with the lack of growth in the case of domestic inputs used by Mexico's maquiladora industry after 30 years" (Cooney 2001: 75). Explaining these facts, Chibber (2006) argues that a combination of preferential access to market networks and state intervention enabled East Asian countries such as South Korea to succeed. EOI's benefits, accordingly, are not predetermined. What we see from looking at these different examples is that EOI's effects depended on the ways in which the class interests of capital interacted with the state and US hegemony.

Moreover, the Mexican example shows that the specific dynamics of the maquila industry, including Northern MNCs outsourcing through subsidiaries, was a specific aspect of the US project abroad in Latin America. It did not reflect dynamics inherent to globalization.

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[12]Cooney (2001) provides a brief history:

> After the bracero program came to an end in 1964, a new program supplying cheap Mexican labor to U.S. firms, known as the Border Industrialization Program, began in 1965. Under this program foreign-owned assembly plants known as maquiladoras set up shop in Mexico's border region. They imported parts and semifinished products from the United States after assembly, exported the finished goods back to the United States, import duties being paid only on the value added by the Mexican workers. This was accomplished through the new U.S. tariff items 806.30 and 807.00. The Mexican government waived all duties and restrictions on imports materials and parts from the United States on the condition that the finished goods would be "exported" back to the United States. (62)

Authors such as Moody (1997) have noted that much of the literature about US manufacturing being undone by outsourcing is "globaloney" (7). Similarly, in the case of countries in the global South we must look at the state-driven dynamics that produced the globalization of trade we see today.[13]

Finally, perhaps the most visible expression of EOI, enclaves governed by different rules and regulations, have not had the same function across time and space. In India, the first Free Trade Zone (FTZ) was established in 1965, but it took on a different role from what policy makers currently envision. According to Maruschke (2017), The Indian state established Kandla FTZ for refugees from Pakistan (422). The state did not use it as a plank of a domestic liberalizing agenda, which would only come much later in the case of India, in the 1990s. The FTZ, as Maruschke argues was in fact part of the strengthening or "reterritorialization" of Indian state sovereignty.

In the case of China, the state designed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) with technological and trade networks sponsored by the government (Bach 2011; also see Rofel 1992 for an ethnographic discussion of Chinese modernity). In addition, SEZs have come to represent a range of issues in places such as India, including land-grabs, dispossession, and financial speculation (Karmakar 2017). Different spaces—EPZs, FTZs, and SEZs—reflect different strategies of engagement with the global order. In my dissertation, I focus on EPZs, because they are the expression of a trend prominent in EOI policy that envisions *industrial manufacturing* driven by the global market, with minimal intervention from the state.

[13] Similarly, Maruschke (2017) identifies different dynamics in the process of globalization:

> The expansion of Japanese firms' manufacturing overseas was an alternative strategy to the guest worker programmes pursued in countries such as West Germany; Japanese zones would allow Japanese firms to manufacture using cheaper labour without allowing migrants to settle in Japan. By 1975, ninety-five Japanese firms (twenty-two joint ventures) and eight US firms (three joint ventures) were operational inside Masan zone in South Korea; 87.8% of total investment in the zone came from Japanese firms. (416)

Despite the different spatial strategies, defense and trade agreements, and positioning vis-à-vis other nation-states outlined in this section, I identify export capitalism as a general phenomenon to critique the assertion that countries in the global South necessarily benefit from global growth. Policy makers posed EOI as a direct response to the apparent failures of ISI (International Labour Office 1988). As implied throughout this section and argued by early pioneers in the field such as Frobel and others (1981), however, EOI has continued to benefit a narrow stratum of the population. Its gains often have not extended extend to workers themselves.

Instead, the same problems that plagued ISI—a weak domestic market, surplus labor, and so on—are also expressed under the EOI model. A version of the latter was successful in several East Asian countries because of a combination of geopolitical circumstances and states that defied conventional wisdom by intervening in the economy (Chang 2002). Because the neoliberal paradigm of export capitalism demands that the "market" reign supreme, I turn to its critique from the perspective of workers in the countries that are supposed to attract investment from abroad.

Literature Review: Informalization and Social Assistance

EOI has reified old distinctions in many Southern countries. Authors return to the divide between formal and informal work. This distinction, they argue, reflects the divergent paths taken by Northern and Southern countries. D'Costa (2014) proposes that advanced capitalism can coexist with the dynamics of what he refers to as "Petty Commodity Production [PCP]." D'Costa, comparing India and China, points out that states have managed to train highly qualified professionals, even as most of the population survives on the edges of the informal economy.

At first sight, this problem appears to parallel to the question of the semi-proletariat discussed by authors at the height of ISI. The semi-proletariat operated as subcontractors in the global market. Authors writing in the context of EOI, however, emphasize that workers in the informal economy may be cut off entirely from capitalist production (Sanyal 2007). Accordingly, the figure of the semi-proletariat is displaced by the question of surplus labor.

Nevertheless, authors such as Kasmir and Carbonella (2014) challenge this thesis on both empirical and theoretical grounds. As they put it, authors such as Sanyal "miss the various ways that the surplus value produced by the precariat and nonwaged labor makes its way into the global circuits of capital, and they overlook the relationship between capital's prosperity and labor's deepening poverty" (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014: 24). Moreover, authors have identified workers' back-and-forth movement between the formal and informal economy (De Neve 2012). For the purposes of my own dissertation, I ask, regardless of the empirical and theoretical validity of the distinction, what is at stake *politically* in accepting a strong version of the thesis of the separation between the formal and informal economy?

According to authors such as Ferguson (2015) and Harris and Scully (2015), newer social assistance programs such as India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), Brazil's Bolsa Familia, and South African cash transfers create options for people who do not have regular employment. Ferguson especially notes the irony of the retreat of the neoliberal welfare state in the North in a context in which social assistance is supposedly expanding in the South.

Still, by downplaying workers' location in production, Ferguson and Harris and Scully, among others, do not necessarily identify ways in which movements must confront the structure. As Latin American countries ruled by Pink Tide governments have begun to experience, social

assistance programs such as direct cash transfers can be first on the chopping block when right-wing governments win power.[14] Moreover, even relatively successful programs such as NREGA experience mixed results (Lerche 2013: 400). In addition, dominant institutions such as the IMF and World Bank demand budget discipline, which imposes constraints on the scope of social assistance programs to transform the lives of the poor.

Ultimately, the scholarly emphasis on direct cash transfers conceals the state's retreat from broad areas of social life, from critical services such as healthcare and education, to building roads and infrastructure. In this regard, activists in the global North look skeptically at Universal Basic Income (UBI) proposals, insofar as they can be incorporated in calls to further "streamline" the welfare state. In the South, the critique of bureaucracy, especially corruption, often leads to popular frustration and mass disengagement. This process reaffirms the neoliberal belief that only private sector providers can offer people effective services, whether private companies, NGOs, or new forms of microfinance and "social entrepreneurship."[15]

Accordingly, I argue that promoting social assistance programs as the alternative underestimates the profound structural changes that have been mandated by export capitalism. Southern states are compelled to offer incentives, such as tax and duty concessions, to attract capital from abroad.[16] Whether or not foreign capital arrives, in the case of many Southern

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[14] Rojas (2018), however, contextualizes the impact of electoral change:

> The on-the-ground balance of organizational forces redounds in a sort of policy stalemate: although the Pink Tide reforms cannot be deepened, neither can they be completely gutted. Some might say that thin reincorporation is a fixture in the region's new political ecology. This perspective should allay concerns over the exaggerated threat of a neo-authoritarian hard right in the region.

[15] Gupta (2012) argues that the effect of bureaucracy in India is structural violence toward the poor, but he also identifies scope for negotiation on the ground.

[16] As Chang (2002) argues:

> …Even if the conformity to international standards in policies and institutions were to bring about increased foreign investment, foreign investment is not going to be the key element in most countries' growth mechanisms. In other words, the potential value of a policy or an institution to a country should be

countries, like ISI, Southern capitalists benefit from these changes. Moody (1997) notes that the overall direction of investment has not shifted dramatically from North to South. Instead, it remains concentrated in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows between Northern countries.[17]

Nevertheless, the logic of tax and other incentives is crucial for restructuring society in favor of elites. Like financial deregulation and the shift to shareholder capitalism that resulted in industrial retrenchment and downsizing in the North, the emphasis on attracting investors in many Southern countries, especially smaller ones, has justified the program of cutting public services at the expense of the poor.[18] In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, as Moore (2017) notes, from the 1980s to 2014, government revenue as a proportion of GDP nearly halved, to 11% (6). It is impossible to envision social assistance programs as having a transformative dimension without confronting this barrier head on.

There is an alternative though in the renewed focus on social movement unionism, especially on the global level (see Brookes and McCallum 2017 for an overview). As Seidman (1994) notes, "Many of the most dramatic moments of labor militance in Europe and the United States occurred when rapid industrialization created urban working-class communities of semi-skilled workers and their families, denied access to labor rights and social resources and lacking the moderating influence of established craft unionism" (5). If, as Silver (2003) argues, workers

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> determined more by what it will do to promote internal development than by what the international investors will think about it. (137)

[17] Moreover, as he noted at the time of writing his book, FDI accounted for less than five per cent of total global investment (Moody 1998: 7).

[18] Seidman (1994) notes that "For capitalist NICs [Newly Industrializing Countries], redistributive programs appear to be especially problematic: in the attempt to attract investment or increase sales in a competitive international environment, industrializing states have often tended to privilege capital accumulation, industrial expansion, and low wage bills over social welfare and labor rights, viewing the latter as benefits that will trickle down with economic growth" (8).

in the North must rebuild their associational power based on broader alliances, to what extent have Southern workers already begun to show the way?

Literature Review: Gender and Class Dimensions of Export Industry

To identify the ways in which the labor movement could potentially challenge export capitalism, we must identify battles against and over the state in the global South, just as authors have returned to focus on the Northern state in debates about austerity. In the mainstream literature though, when authors discuss the Southern trajectory, they tend to emphasize the global dimensions of inequality. Although Sklair (2011), for example, mentions alliances with Southern capitalists, the image of the Northern MNCs dominates debates about inequality in the South.[19]

This perspective is adopted by Global Commodity Chains (GCC) and Global Production Network (GPN) scholars. The latter criticize GCC scholars for ignoring the question of who benefits disproportionately from supply chains.[20] As Brewer (2011) puts it, "it is not difficult to imagine how firm-level GCC upgrading might be completely divorced from meaningful gains in benefits captured by the majority of workers or other GCC participants at the comparatively local scale or at the point of production" (311; also see Selwyn 2012). The analysis of the concentration of wealth and the creation of market barriers in global supply chains is useful

[19] Sklair (2011) identifies the ways in which Northern MNCs must interact with Southern capitalists. He writes, "Whenever we find the ELIFFIT [Export-Led Industrialization Fuelled by Foreign Investment and Technology] strategy at work, we also find an alliance between transnational capital, the host state bureaucracy, and a comprador bourgeoisie which produces the class that is mainly responsible for the reformation of capitalism at the local level" (Sklair 2011: 14).

[20] Gibbon and Ponte (2005), for example, note that, "This period started approximately in the early 1980s, but its characteristic trends accelerated in the 1990s and early 2000s" (xii-xiii). They identify six characteristics: 1) intensified economic globalization, 2) increasing internationalization of retail activities in Northern countries through Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A), 3) corporate financialization, 4) oligopolistic rent-seeking and branded marketing, 5) the shift from vertical integration to outsourcing, and 6) global contract manufacturing.

because it highlights the issue of inequality. Unfortunately, however, the national dimension tends to disappear.

Because of the emphasis on global inequality, ethnographies and studies of export workers have tended to focus on the transnational aspects of their work, rather than their relationships with other working-class constituencies within their own countries, such as informal workers discussed in the previous section. Ross (1997), for example, argues that globalization is driven by subcontracting in which Northern buyers exercise extreme power over a weak labor force. As he evocatively puts it, "US retail giants who are in command of the vast internal market call the shots globally, while cutthroat contractors, pursuing ever tighter profit margins, crack the whip in local enterprise zones and assembly platforms" (Ross 1997: 10). Ross's image of the global sweatshop regime dominates scholarship. It is frequently the background assumption of studies of export workers in the global South.

Although authors discuss shop floor dynamics, especially issues such as gender, they tend not to offer analysis of the ways in which Southern capitalists consolidate under export capitalism, and the reconfiguration of the labor process this process entails. Instead, studies have predominantly focused on the ways in which women workers are interpellated by transnational regimes of gendered labor (Elson and Pearson 1981; Feldman 1992; Hewamanne 2010; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1984; Ong 2010; Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006; for a useful overview, see Bair 2010). These studies are important because they bring attention to the shifting dynamics and representation of the global working class. Like scholars who opened the debate about working-class representation in the North (see Rose 1997), studies of factory workers in the South are an important counterpoint to the traditional image of the industrial, male-dominated working class (also see Caraway 2007).

Studies focusing on gendered regimes have not necessarily examined, however, the ways in which gender interacts with changes in the labor process in Southern factories. I return to this point when I examine the labor process at the factory I worked at, Lean Lanka, in Chapter Two. Many have analyzed the identities of women workers without periodizing changes in the structure of production; or rather, they over-emphasize the role of subcontracting in global supply chains.[21]

On a theoretical level, as Ong (2010) put it in what could be considered one of the inaugural studies of the literature, "Eschewing Marxist claims that capitalist relations of production are governed by an internal logic, the critical questions to be asked are: Why is *female* labor preferred? What are the implications of a global production system in which relations of gender and of race are critical for the expansion of economic and symbolic capital?" (151). Ong's questions ultimately meant shifting from previous labor studies analysis of changes in the labor process to identity. I argue in my dissertation, however, that identity is materialized in the process of production, which is why we must analyze the latter from a historical and national perspective.[22]

Furthermore, ethnographies and studies of women factory workers have not necessarily analyzed national institutions as contradictory expressions of the state's obligations to its citizens, constrained as Southern states are by export capitalism. As institutions with labor market implications, education and healthcare, for example, are highly gendered. Other than

[21] Although Collins' (2003) work, for example, is useful for moving back-and-forth between the garment industry in the global North and South, for example, she relies heavily on the trope of subcontracting to argue that it "deterritorializes" the workplace (16).

[22] Conversely, one could also argue that Ong falls into the trap Arruzza (2013) defines as "making gender a class" to counter reductionist Marxism (128).

brief mention of structural adjustment's impact on declining budgets for public services, however, authors of studies on export workers have not focused on the ways in which these changes reflect the transformation of the state under export capitalism.[23]

The ways in which EOI reconfigures the state in turn depends on assumptions about the telos of development. From a temporal perspective, export capitalism is defined by the transition that is theoretically supposed to occur from labor-intensive to capital-intensive industry. Accordingly, ethnographies of export workers have looked at a broad range of industries. As Bair (2010) notes, "first, lower barriers to entry make the apparel industry particularly competitive and sensitive to labor costs; second, the (relatively) greater capital intensity of electronics assembly means that most of the maquilas in this sector are subsidiaries of multinationals, while sewing factories are more likely to be locally owned companies working as subcontractors for foreign firms" (212). The export garment industry is viewed as difficult to organize because workers have both less structural and associational power, as Silver (2003) might put it.

In my dissertation, I nevertheless identify the consolidation of Sri Lankan MNCs in the garment industry, and the reconfiguration of their relationship with the state that this process implies. Although they are technically suppliers to Northern buyers, they can no longer be viewed as small "subcontractors." These companies have expanded abroad, employing tens of thousands of people, but they remain based in Sri Lanka. The state's embrace of export capitalism was predicated on the assumption that MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign, would

[23] Ong (2010), for example, does mention the role of Malaysia's investment promotion agency, but she does not theorize the state as such, other than its paternalistic role in managing the workforce. However, for a more detailed look at the ways in which the state in Bangladesh, for example, institutionalizes assumptions about female labor force participation, see Feldman (1992).

create the forward and backward linkages to develop the entire economy. Instead, the profits of Sri Lankan MNCs especially have increased, but they have not reinvested in capital-intensive industry. Why?

As I show in Chapter Two, because capitalists have increased their domination of the labor process under export capitalism, they seek short-term solutions. Capitalism is driven by competition between capitalists. This process though is structured by the relationship between labor and capital. In other words, it depends on the ways in which capitalists can extract more surplus value from workers without investing in production. The latter option, as we saw in the case of the North after the economic crisis of the 1970s, was the reason for the adoption of lean. Similarly, many companies in Sri Lanka's export garment industry are embracing lean.

Accordingly, are we trapped in a tautology in which Sri Lankan export garment workers have no hope of transforming the system because they work in the export garment industry? Despite the apparent "impediments for vindicative action" (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1984: x), I do not think so. Rather, the fact that a predominantly female workforce could represent the demands of the broader Sri Lankan working class, for example, should instead inspire hope. I discuss the challenges and possibilities in Chapter Four. They could become the "vanguard" to push back against export capitalism, for better workplace conditions and better public services.

Still, there is no easy correlation. The outcome depends on the unions and parties with which they organize. As Lambert and Webster (2002) note regarding the challenges facing global unionism, the loss of political perspective potentially explains the difficulty in developing a common front against global capital. Unionism has devolved into "ideological disarray and confusion" (Lambert and Webster 2002: 339). If Lambert and Webster's argument is true at the scale of the global, it is no less true at the national.

To summarize, thus far, neither studies of EPZ workers nor those of informal workers have brought their relationship into view within the comprehensive framework of a critique of export capitalism. There are signposts, however, including Seidman's (1994) work on social movement unionism, which analyzes labor's role in struggles that affected a broader range of people in Brazil and South Africa. My goal is to contribute to the growing trend of analysis of the changing practice of Southern unionism by identifying export garment workers as both narrowly-defined economic agents and representative of a broad political constituency. My final question, however, can only be answered by analyzing the historical effects of political practice: who, accordingly, represents the working class in Sri Lanka? How?

Sri Lanka's Political and Economic Transition

To prepare for my own analysis in the chapters that follow, I turn to the history of changes that led up to Sri Lanka's embrace of export capitalism in 1977, and the shifting concentrations of workers that economic transformations entailed. Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948. Even before achieving independence, nationalist leaders claimed to represent the peasantry, as the social basis of their rule. During the 1930s and beyond, leaders agitated on issues such as land. Samaraweera (1981), for example, argues that, "It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the land question was looked upon by the first generation of nationalists as a convenient issue which would give legitimacy to their claim as 'representatives' of people of the colony…" (131).

At the same time a proletariat emerged in the shipyards and railways, concentrating workers in the colonial export economy. In addition, hundreds of thousands worked on plantations. Because the latter were mostly Tamils, however, who had been brought by the

British from South India through a process of indentured labor, they were neglected both by the dominant Tamil elites in the North as well as majoritarian Sinhala leaders in the South.

As a result, the labor movement that emerged under British colonialism was divided along ethnic lines. Early leaders such as AE Goonesinha were reformists, willing to cooperate with the colonial government (Jayawardena 2017). Moreover, Goonesinha, as Jayawardena notes, often used racial rhetoric to criticize "outsiders." A series of riots and attacks against South Indian workers on the southwestern coast during the early part of the 20th century intensified divisions. A young group of students who had been educated abroad, however, embraced a socialist ideology that emphasized class above ethnicity.[24]

For the first several decades, the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Sama Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP), challenged capitalists and put forward progressive stances on the ethnic issue. Much of the scholarship on Sri Lanka's post-independence labor movement subsequently examines the ways in which, overtime, because of their participation in coalition government with mainstream parties, even socialist leaders eventually accepted Sinhala nationalism (Amarasinghe 2000).

Up until the 1970s, however, the state established and funded core institutions of the welfare state. Education up to the university level remains free. Universal healthcare led to praise

[24] Jayawardena (2017) contrasts the students who studied abroad, the nucleus of Sri Lanka's "Old Left" parties, including the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), with Goonesinha's reformism:

> The views of the Ceylonese socialist students in London presented a new departure in ideology for the Ceylon political and labor movements. While these students remained abroad, their agitational activities were confined to student organizations and foreign nationalist or Communist groups. The impact of these ideals was felt in Ceylon in the early thirties, when all the active members of the student group returned home. On their return they emphasized the need for a new political party; this was formed in 1935 but until then, the young socialists joined the radical Youth League movement which had already taken root in the country. (91)

among global institutions such as the UN for boosting life expectancy.[25] In addition, universal welfare such as the rice subsidy enabled Sri Lanka to achieve high living standards for a developing country. In 1953, however, under the advice of the World Bank, the government at the time attempted to cut the rice subsidy. The budget cut brought workers and people of all walks of life onto the street in the famous Hartal.[26] Over time, however, the LSSP and CP joined mainstream coalitions led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), compounding the tension between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary mobilization. They had to discipline labor when in power. Strikes, then, were frequent but did not necessarily develop into an island-wide platform for the working class.

In addition to relying on a plantation export economy that included tea and rubber, ISI policies dominant across the world influenced post-independence governments. The Sri Lankan state attempted to use income from plantation exports to subsidize industrialization in light industries. As previously noted, however, local capitalists were more likely to benefit than workers themselves. In addition, the eventual nationalization of major industries, including the plantations, meant that a politics of patronage incorporated those who held posts in the public sector (Fernando and Skanthakumar, eds. 2014; Shastri 1983). When several left parties formed a coalition with the SLFP in 1970 and won power, they focused on expanding party benefits rather than mobilizing the working class to put pressure on the state.

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[25] Herring (1987) notes that, "Even the World Bank, long critical of the Sri Lanka's heavy expenditures on education, health, and nutrition (about 10 per cent of GNP over the previous two decades) commended the results in terms of 'human development'…" (328).

[26] Kearney (1980) writes, "The 'hartal' is closely related to, and can be considered along with, the exclusively political strike. A hartal, technically, is not limited to a strike by organized workers but involves the closing of all shops, businesses, and schools and the suspension of normal activities by all members of the community" (249). In addition, he notes, the Hartal of 1953 "had by far the most serious political consequences of any political strike" (250).

As a result, when the 1970s crisis hit, and the balance of payments for imports grew far more than exports due to the oil shock, the right saw an opportunity to challenge the order of universal welfare. As JR Jayewardene, the local combination of Thatcher and Reagan, saw it, Sri Lanka needed to invite capital from abroad, in addition to freeing up capital controls. Jayewardene won power in 1977 as prime minister, later changing the constitution to become president. With his deepening control, he initiated the EPZs under the Greater Colombo Economic Commission (GCEC). Eventually the GCEC merged with the Foreign Investment Advisory Commission (FIAC) and became the Board of Investment (BOI) for the entire island in 1992. The state granted enterprises located inside and outside EPZs tax concessions and other benefits. Sri Lanka now has thirteen EPZs located across the island. Nearly half-a-million workers are employed in all BOI-registered enterprises (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2015: 64). Sixty percent of these people are employed in the export garment industry, or around 300,000.

The assault on welfare, including the elimination of the rice subsidy after Jayewardene's election in 1977, meant that as the cost of living rose for villagers, many were forced to migrate to work in the newly established factories located mostly on the southwestern coast, in places such as Katunayake (Skanthakumar 2013). In addition, Jayewardene attacked organized labor. He crushed a General Strike in 1980 that consisted mostly of public sector workers. The new working class participating in export industries came from villages and often had little prior contact with the urban-based trade unions. People who came from the villages were more often radicalized by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or "People's Liberation Front") in the south and Tamil militant groups in the north. These groups proposed a direct, frontal assault on the state, rather than adopting the parliamentary tactics of the Old Left parties.

As a result, in the middle of civil war that broke out between the government and Tamil separatists in the North and East in 1983, workers had few options for collective resistance in the EPZs, outside of unorganized wildcat strikes. Still, the ferocious repression of workers at Polytex during a strike occurring intermittently in the early 1980s illustrated the challenges of mobilization. In the meantime, the state cut back on public expenditure. It relied increasingly on massive aid and eventually loans to build the infrastructure of the country.[27] Moore (2017) notes the decline in tax revenue, which is an effect of the government's liberalization policy, including tax concessions to attract investors that undermined the state's revenue base. Nevertheless, experts continue to argue that, like successful East Asian countries, Sri Lanka could move from garments to electronics if it adopts more liberalizing measures, especially privatizing the remaining State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

In contrast, I argue that Sri Lanka has struggled to achieve a sustainable economy because of the dynamics of capital's consolidation, which I discuss in Chapter Two. Sri Lankan MNCs in the export garment industry reaped profits for decades thanks to trade agreements, tax concessions, and wage repression. They did not reinvest, however, in capital-intensive industries. Moreover, Sri Lanka's export garment industry has become vulnerable. Sri Lanka lost quota privileges for its garment industry with the end of the Multi-Fibre Agreement in 2005, in addition to the loss, for human rights reasons, of the Generalized Systems of Preferences (GSP+) benefits under the European Union in 2010, although the latter was regained in 2017. More

[27] Herring (1987) notes that, "In the 1981 Budget some of the more ambitious development projects had to be cut; but a share of the remaining deficit was still covered by international assistance. The foreign contribution to financing of the net cash budget deficit in 1976 was 32.5 per cent; in 1980, 70.4 per cent…" (329).

importantly, perhaps, it faces increasing competition from countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia, which offer cheaper labor.

Because of these trends, we see more clearly the development of contradictions within export capitalism. Sri Lanka's economy has become more financialized. Real estate speculation has deepened. In addition, the state issues dollar-denominated sovereign bonds to shore up spending on mega infrastructure projects. More recent pressure on foreign exchange entails renewed calls to deepen the liberalization of the economy. Emerging movements of opposition are mostly based, however, on protecting the interests of members of professional guilds, such as the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA). Workers find it difficult to organize and assert their interests in the absence of a movement that offers an alternative to export capitalism.

In addition, as Bernstein (2006) and others have noted, the agrarian question that dominated 20th century debates about the economic transition of Southern countries has been folded into the paradoxes and challenges represented by the informal economy. Although Sri Lanka's informal economy is 60% compared to India's, which is well over 90%, it is the outcome of similar attacks on organized labor, including deregulation and non-enforcement of labor law. Although unions can now organize in EPZs, critical state institutions such as the Labor Department remain underfunded and understaffed when it comes to investigating workers' grievances. Thus, although Sri Lanka still has relatively strong labor laws on the books, the question of whether these are enforced is the main issue. As Breman (2013) puts it in the context of India, "Far from being a feature of a backward economy, informality should be understood as an expression of the state's inability or unwillingness to regulate capital and control those who own it" (22).

I have outlined Sri Lanka's political economy in this section to identify concretely the shift from ISI to EOI that I have discussed in this Introduction. But, I also argue that these changes did not occur solely because of external pressure. Instead, we must examine dynamics of struggle between capital and labor within Sri Lanka itself. Although Sri Lankan capitalists were unevenly affected by liberalization (Gunasinghe 2004), those classes that may have benefited from perks and privileges under the previous regime were similarly likely to gain new concessions under the new regime. Future inquiry could explore this area of research. In the meantime, the public institutions that guaranteed a decent standard of living for all have been undermined.

In terms of changes during the period of liberalization, the shift from EPZs to new proposals such as the creation of a billion-dollar, Chinese-funded "Port City" in Colombo reflect the dynamics of international funding, especially the increasing reliance on loans. This process is the outcome of the lack of foreign investment in traditional areas such as manufacturing. Despite the apparent failure of EOI, experts offer similar answers to the question of how to attract investment. Planning, including industrial policy, remains off the table. As a result, the development issues generated by the export garment industry's short-term profit-seeking have not been resolved. At the same time, the emergence of new concentrations of workers in areas such as logistics, construction, and service sector industries such as tourism encourage us to identify their relationship to export garment workers.

As Silver (2003) might put it, the working class is forever being made and unmade. The argument of my own dissertation is realized in the concrete analysis of factory workers' lives in the chapters that follow, and the ways in which they relate to changing political and economic circumstances. By looking at their position both as economic agents in the factory and as a broad

political constituency, we can see the ways in which efforts to unionize face challenges based on the difficulty of building a movement based on a common program. This task requires intellectual change in thinking about the goals and benefits of export capitalism, and who and how people are affected, in Sri Lanka and beyond.

Methodology and Representation

To complete this study, I pursued 26 months of ethnographic research in Sri Lanka, from July 2014 to December 2016. As mentioned in the Acknowledgments, I first gained access to the Katunayake EPZ by meeting workers at an English class conducted in a trade union drop-in center during the summer of 2014. Several workers invited me to live in a boarding house near the EPZ, in the town of Averiwatte. I spent nine months living in the boarding house from January 2015 to September 2015, returning consistently throughout my research period to sustain relationships and gather new information. In addition, I gained access to a factory in the south, which I refer to as Lean Lanka, for three months, during the summer of 2016, to continue my research on the shop floor.

Throughout the research period, I also interviewed factory managers, government officials from relevant institutions such as the Labor Department and BOI, and trade unionists. Overall, I believe I achieved a comprehensive understanding of the situation facing workers on the western coast and southern coast. I generalize my work to discuss the dynamics of the export garment industry across the island. The garment industry dominates exports produced by BOI-registered enterprises, contributing to over half of manufacturing exports (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2015: 64). I recognize that more research must be done on differences and similarities across other industries, including rubber and chemicals.

In addition, Sri Lanka's workforce of over eight million has changed in composition over the past several decades. Although Sri Lanka's production has been concentrated historically in plantation and agricultural exports, since the opening of the economy under JR Jayewardene's liberalizing policy in 1977, manufacturing has become more visible. At the same time, newer dynamics involve the more recent expansion of the service sector. Manufacturing as a proportion of GDP remains about a quarter of the economy (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2015). The changes that have occurred in areas such as tourism highlight the shift to real estate speculation and construction, which has consolidated in the debt boom since the end of the civil war in 2009. As a result, in my study I try to locate the export garment industry in the transformation of the Sri Lankan economy, and, consequently, the long-term trajectory of export capitalism in many other Southern countries.

To identify the transformation since 1977, I rely on narratives from workers' lives, drawn from the hundreds of pages of field notes that I wrote. Ethnography is useful for making the abstraction of the "economy" concrete. It enables us to identify the ways in which people move between jobs, and, thus, the nature of class in general. Statistical and quantitative work can be done to contextualize inferences drawn in this dissertation, but I follow the works of those authors who emphasize the ways in which economic processes are distinctively embodied by workers and managers, among others. As Salzinger (2003) puts it, "The use of the embodied, emotional, thoughtful self as a research 'instrument' is well suited to the enterprise of making connections between the purportedly public and private, between economics and gender, between the production of workers and that of their products" (3).

Nevertheless, in telling people's stories, I have also tried to balance concerns about confidentiality with descriptive information about people's lives. This issue comes up in the

Katunayake EPZ, where many people identified each other by their relationships and connections to the villages from which they migrated. Although around 40,000 people work in the EPZ, and many more live nearby, it is relatively small enough that I try to preserve people's confidential information by erasing details about the places from which they arrived. Thus, I refer to the "village" in the abstract, or if necessary, broad details about which parts of the country I visited with workers from the boarding house. This representational device also speaks to the ways in which I generalize my data to illustrate the circumstances of export garment workers across the island.

Similarly, I provide a general description of the factory I worked at, but I also keep details vague, both to maintain confidentiality, but also to produce an account that is representative of the labor process in other factories owned by MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign-owned. For example, production is handled by cutters, who cut fabrics, which are then transferred to lines of assembly, where teams of workers (under twenty, generally speaking) sew the pieces. Bigger factories can have upwards of one thousand workers on each shift. Depending on the type of garment, there may also be others working in units such as washing and pressing, in addition to packing. Finally, an array of support staff, which I discuss in Chapter Two, maintain quality standards and oversee the many style changes that occur throughout the year to meet the demands of different buyers. In my own case, I sewed the simplest operation of a relatively simple garment, but I also had the opportunity to learn about the paradigmatic way in which garments are produced.

At the Lean Lanka plant where I worked, though, the challenges of doing ethnography became concrete. I grappled with the tension between my position as a researcher and my own sympathies toward workers' grievances. I stressed to people throughout my research period that,

regardless of my own position, objectivity implied that the kinds of questions I asked where inherently open-ended, rather than driven by action on issues. Still, managers, workers, and others sized me up based on their own attitudes toward my status as a researcher and an outsider in an often politically-charged context. Although this thesis is not an auto-ethnography as such, the data I obtained is necessarily shaped by how people perceived me. I try to highlight those changing perceptions in the narrative as much as possible.

In addition, my status as an outside researcher afforded me many privileges, especially in the factory. My attempts to approximate the lives of workers could not avoid the inherent gap between me working voluntarily—or my ability to take breaks in Colombo, for that matter—and their work to survive. Nevertheless, when I spoke to people, they described my research as an attempt to experience "the sweat and scent (*ganda suwanda*)" of people's lives. I found this phrase a useful description of participant observation, and the challenges of ethnographic representation.

The tensions between my work as a researcher and my personal relationships meant that I became a target of suspicion and solidarity, depending on the way in which people identified me. As one worker put it to me when I was leaving the factory, after management explained my research period had "expired": "They're making you leave because you speak better English than they do, but you hang out with us." This ethnographic moment among others enabled me to see the ways in which my own actions inevitably shaped the kind of data I obtained.

In addition, I try to be clear about the ways in which I also revealed how I personally thought about different social issues. Because I was open with people about my own political views, for example, I had a better sense of where we agreed and disagreed. Thus, I believe I obtained a deeper understanding of the challenges workers faced. Often during discussions about

the previous government of Mahinda Rajapaksa, which was defeated in 2015, for example, I expressed my own position. When people pushed back against what I said, we had revealing conversations about the structural challenges they faced. For me, then, ethnography is not only a methodology, but a practice of conversation that required being honest about my own positions. I remained in "research mode" by asking questions, but I found that by taking stances on issues, I also learned more.

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation is structured into four chapters. In Chapter One, "The Effects of Dismantling the Welfare State on the Working Class," I look at the state's discourse of attracting foreign investment and its implications for cuts to public services. Due to decades of popular struggles before and after independence, Sri Lanka boasts universal education and healthcare. Since the opening of the economy in 1977, however, the amount of government expenditure as a proportion of GDP has declined. This process has resulted in the underfunding of public services that benefit workers.

The shift to a discourse of attracting foreign investment is operationalized in the building of EPZs. In contrast, the infrastructure of the surrounding towns in which workers live, especially near the Katunayake EPZ, receives less funding. In addition, the breakdown of infrastructure in rural areas contrasts with funding for mega infrastructure projects that require the Sri Lankan government to take on bilateral, multilateral, and market-based debt. This shift has led to further demands for budget cuts and austerity by global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.

Accordingly, I analyze the effects of these changes from the perspective of export garment workers who migrate to work in the Katunayake EPZ, in addition to those who continue

to live in rural parts of the country. Recent literature on social programs in the global South highlights the potential of cash transfer programs. I conclude the chapter by questioning the transformative possibilities of these programs insofar as export capitalism constrains funding for public services.

In Chapter Two, "The Dynamics of Capital Accumulation in the Export Garment Industry," I focus on the case of a factory in the south, Lean Lanka, and the consolidation of Sri Lankan MNCs in the global supply chain. Academics and activists often portray the global garment industry as a network of subcontractors dominated by Northern buyers. Instead, in my own ethnographic examples, I show the ways in which Sri Lankan MNCs especially consolidate, or "vertically integrate," production across factories they own.

Rather than emphasizing the effects of subcontracting in the export garment industry, I focus instead on the ways in which lean management is adopted by MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign-owned, to extract more from workers through the labor process. Moreover, given the predominantly female workforce, wage repression and the intensification of work are justified by managerial assumptions about young women who leave the industry after five years to collect small pensions to start up shops back in their rural homes. In addition, the expansion of a layer of production staff represents new inequalities between workers and Sri Lankan managers.

I conclude by looking at ways in which workers experience the effects of these changes on the shop floor, especially exhaustion, resulting in high turnover in the industry. I also analyze attempts to moderate the pace of work. I argue that the latter include "work games" (Burawoy 1985) that contextualize changes on the shop floor. Thus, I shift from previous scholarly emphasis on the transnational identity of Southern women workers in global supply chains, to a

focus on the ways in which workers respond to the introduction of lean by MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign.

In Chapter Three, "The Ideology of Reciprocity Among Workers," I analyze the ways in which workers both in the boarding house near the Katunayake EPZ and across the island depend on others outside the factory. The debate in the scholarly literature often focuses on whether workers' relationships and their reproductive labor in the household subsidizes the costs of labor for capital or represents a potential trend in the decommodification of labor.

Based on analysis of the relationships between workers and their friends and family, who do not necessarily participate in factory work, I argue that community embodies the contradictions of export capitalism. I focus on the ways in which community can be both supportive, but also insular. In addition, I analyze the manifestation of tensions within community.

By taking up the perspective of gender relations within communities of workers, I ask whether practices of reciprocity inspire a critique of the constraints of the capitalist system or represent another way in which the state and capital attempt to control the labor force. I conclude by focusing on workers' practices of consumption, insofar as they imply a collective mode of enjoying leisure time. Similar practices such as hosting trips and participating in cultural activities are adopted by workers' organizations in their attempts to recruit workers.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "Export Garment Workers in the Labor Movement," I examine the challenges facing union organizers attempting to organize the export garment workforce, which is gendered as female. As Salzinger (2003) points out, gender is produced on the shop floor. At the same time, unions have struggled to bring new members into the movement. The

changing composition of the workforce frames debate about the leadership and the functioning of organizations that emerged in a different historical context.

Rather than downplaying unions, however, and in contrast to scholarly emphasis on transnational solidarity campaigns, I point out the ways in which buyers' audits, international law, and agreements with Global Union Federations (GUFs) are constrained by the dearth of organizing on the ground. Using the examples of workers who had been fired from a factory for trying to organize, I ask, how do unions envision their role, given persistent delays of official institutions in processing workers' grievances?

I argue that the question of strategy requires examining the political dimensions of organizing, especially the relationship between mass parties and movements. Sri Lanka's unions emerge from a diverse background of political traditions. The pressures and consequences of organizing in the EPZs, however, have forced many to prioritize building alliances between export garment workers and other working-class constituencies. This process also requires confronting the state. Because of competing electoral affiliations, though, unionists struggle to define a common program. Debate within unions returns us to analysis of their leadership and organization.

Finally, I conclude by focusing on the impact of the demands of new groups of workers on the direction of the Sri Lankan labor movement, and implications for theoretical debate about the representation of the working class, in Sri Lanka and beyond, during a period of global crisis and transformation.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE EFFECTS OF DISMANTLING THE WELFARE STATE ON THE WORKING CLASS

Introduction

One of the first people I met in the Katunayake EPZ was a worker named Vijaya. He often mentioned that he wished to return to the village. Nevertheless, Vijaya had been working in the EPZ for years. He along with twenty other families lived in a boarding house near the EPZ. Although his perceptions may have reflected his own personal aspirations, Vijaya, among many others, compared Katunayake unfavorably with the village. When I finally visited the village with Vijaya though, as we looked from a hill across the plains where he was building his house, he admitted that there was "freedom, but no pay" (*game nidahasa, haebaey padiya nae*). Over time, I identified the content of Vijaya's message that transcended its urban/rural framing: there was no escape.

The idea that employers exploited workers was relevant to Vijaya's critique but not necessarily his central preoccupation. Instead, he like many workers were equally if not more critical of the government. The state had a responsibility to provide, yet, according to him, it failed the poor. When I tried to understand the root of this ideology, I turned to the history of Sri Lankan leaders' appeal to rural constituencies. As mentioned in the Introduction, this appeal to the rural was the basis of a relatively strong welfare state until the 1970s that included not only a rice subsidy, but universal healthcare and education. Yet the state's revenue basis was constrained by Sri Lanka's dependent economy (Ponnambalam 1981).

Comparing the welfare state in the global North versus South, we see that despite a similar orientation to the concept of citizen's rights, Sri Lanka did not have the economic basis to withstand the pressures of global capitalism. Moreover, it was subordinate to the geopolitical

control of dominant institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The question of why these institutions intervened at a precise moment after World War II has informed anthropological inquiry (Escobar 2011). In addition, the stakes of intervention changed during the economic crisis of the 1970s.

In the case of Sri Lanka this crisis intersected with the emergence of a relatively prosperous local business class under Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). Analyzing the transition of this class is important grounds for future research on the ways in which the same constituencies that benefit from social programs may also be part of their undoing. The same has been argued in the US context, where relatively prosperous workers came to identify as a taxpaying middle class (Panitch and Gindin 2017: 41; also see Hall's (1988) work on Thatcher's popular appeal). Accordingly, the importance of a perspective on the articulation of people's political identity is central to analyzing the ways in which gains are won and secured in the context of economic pressure. In Sri Lanka's case though, universal institutions such as education and healthcare remain broadly popular.

The question of political mobilization is central to the creation of the welfare state in both the North and South. The establishment of universal welfare often requires a process that combines elite-led bargaining and pressures from below. In Sri Lanka, Gunasinghe (1996) argues, however, that the peasantry was a bystander rather than an active agent in the creation of the welfare state. As he puts it, "The only social group that did not enter the political arena with a distinct platform of its own was the peasantry" (Gunasinghe 1996: 60). In the case of people like Vijaya, who migrated from the village after economic liberalization began, however, the erosion of these gains brought people onto the street. Recent protests have included criticism of fuel price hikes and demands for cost of living relief. Protests over the past decades, though, have

often focused on piecemeal demands. While the state was embedded in Vijaya's perspective, the movements that claimed to represent his interests did not necessarily articulate welfare as a universal principle.

Perhaps because Vijaya was a factory worker and a participant in a union, he saw the potential in organizing. The question in much of the academic literature is, how do we identify the associational capacities of the poor in largely informal contexts (Lier 2007: 829; Rutherford 2010: 774; Taylor 2009: 444)?[28] Authors such as Petras and Veltmeyer (2002) discuss different strategies, from roadblocks to neighborhood associations. Rojas (2018) among others argues, however, that only workers have the leverage to force capital to accept the broader demands of the working class by stopping production. Nevertheless, workers, as representatives of the marginalized, have slowly disappeared from political rhetoric in Sri Lanka.

Still, many of the people I met across different sites identified clear points of connection between their own experiences as both export garment workers and residents of villages. Because the government did not invest sufficiently in rural schools, for example, the middle-class jobs of the new economy, in areas such as Information Technology (IT), were not accessible. For them, work in the export garment industry was one of the few options. On the other hand, Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in the industry, whether Sri Lankan or foreign-owned, benefited from tax concessions. They did not provide the revenue basis for the state to fund and expand public schooling and healthcare.

[28] Petras and Veltmeyer (2002) are nevertheless hopeful about the emergence of movements in Latin America, such as the Zapatistas and the landless workers' movement in Brazil:

> However, most important is the fact that the contemporary peasant movements mentioned above differ substantially from those in the past. First, they are all independent of electoral parties and urban politicians. Second, their leaders are not part of and subordinated to a bureaucratic apparatus, but are the product of grassroots debates and accountable to popular assemblies. Third, they link sectoral struggles with national political issues. (60)

Most importantly, perhaps, the emphasis on attracting foreign capital became an excuse to cut services. I examine the deepening of this process of liberalization because of the apparent failure to move up the value chain in industrial manufacturing. Although rhetoric about promoting the export garment industry remains a major component of policy, the state is shifting the focus to service sector industries such as tourism. As many authors in postcolonial studies and anthropology have since pointed out, the telos of development is itself subject to change, as the trajectory of global capitalism reconfigures narratives of opportunity and decline (Gupta 1998; Ferguson 1999).

Regardless of the type of industry, though, the underlying structure of export capitalism has not changed. I argue that the government's shift from EPZs to new types of enclaves such as the Colombo Port City—representative of the recent turn to debt-driven, mega infrastructure development—demonstrates continuity in the failure to redistribute the supposed gains of integration into the global economy since 1977. In this regard, the choice of industry itself does not necessarily matter. Based on Vijaya and others' experiences, I argue that the underlying model of attracting foreign investors must be scrutinized.

People like Vijaya demanded cost of living relief and searched for alternative sources of income. I argue that their critique implies that the scale of problems people face requires a broader solution, which inevitably goes beyond the cash transfer mechanisms other authors have identified in places such as India, Brazil, and South Africa. Universal services that decommodify livelihoods are a collective planning problem, and one that has been difficult, if not impossible, to resolve within the framework of export capitalism.

Accordingly, in this chapter I identify three areas of ethnographic investigation—tourism and interaction with outsiders, infrastructure and housing, and the commodification of

livelihoods—to examine the scope of the impact of economic liberalization on export garment workers' lives, insofar as they are representative of the concerns of the Sri Lankan working class.

"Your People"

Neoliberal policy in the global South is epitomized by Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI). In contrast, the welfare state, including universal services such as healthcare and education, tend to be associated with the previous period of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, universal education and healthcare were emphasized during the period of the 1930s to 1970s. Both mainstream parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), affirmed Sri Lanka's need to produce its own commodities. As a result, State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) expanded in industries, from producing matchboxes to tea. A balance of payments crisis occurred during the 1970s because of declining terms of trade for plantation exports such as tea and rubber. The neoliberal right saw an opportunity to attack the import model.

Sri Lanka's transition to EOI coincided with the global shift that was occurring. As Cooney (2001) puts it in the context of Mexico's maquiladoras:

> The track record of the Mexican government in general reveals its bias toward foreign firms over domestic workers and communities. It can be argued that the Mexican government's main interests with respect to the maquiladora industry are (1) foreign exchange to pay its foreign debt and thus accommodate the IMF and, by association, the U.S. government and banks; (2) government revenue; and (3) a source of Mexican employment or a means to reduce unemployment. (69)

The Sri Lankan government adopted a similar approach, establishing EPZs near and far from Colombo. It also invited capital from abroad to invest in infrastructure projects, although it more often relied on grants and loans from international institutions such as the World Bank. This policy model, however, was predicated on cutting taxes, offering concessions to investors in

EPZs. It undermined the revenue base for universal services.[29] Working class Sri Lankans began to see the material impact on their lives.

The question is, how did people perceive these changes? In this section, I argue that tourists represented the hopes, anxieties, and frustrations of the "Open Economy," as the process of economic liberalization is generally known in Sri Lanka. In general, people with whom I interacted tended to lump all "outsiders" together. I remember my amusement when a friend from the Katunayake boarding house pointed to a group of East Asian tourists during a religious festival in Colombo. "Your friends!" I joked that I knew everyone. I made up backstories about how we had "met." I thought it was a one-off incident.

My friend was not alone, however, in assuming that foreigners, regardless of ethnicity, were "my people." On a separate occasion, when I stopped at a café in Averiwatte to get something to eat, the hotel manager pointed to a group of East Asian tourists. "Your people (*oyage kattiya*)," he mentioned. I struggled to put the narrative together. When I was in more rural areas, at least, I could possibly understand the confusion given that, outside of known tourist spots, many had less sustained contact with foreigners. As a friend on the bus I took home from the Lean Lanka plant in the south put it, other than two Filipina women who had toured the factory, no other non-Sri Lankans had arrived. Still, the confusion about my background seemed odd given that many people either worked in tourism or had friends and family who participated in the tourist economy.

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[29] Moore (2017) outlines the effects of the change in policy:

> For the first 30 years after independence in 1948, the ratio of government revenue collection to GDP – a figure that I will henceforth term the 'tax take' – oscillated around a long-term average of 21 per cent. This was a rather high figure for a country that was then relatively poor. In the 1980s, the tax take settled down to a near-stable 20 per cent. But it began to decline from around 1990, slowly but almost continuously. By 2014 the figure had almost halved, to just 11 per cent of GDP…This figure is exceptionally low. (6)

What did tourists represent across this diverse spectrum? First and foremost, tourists embodied anxieties about sexuality. In general, when people talked about tourist behavior they often implied that tourists were "loose." When I went to a beach near the Katunayake EPZ with male and female friends, for example, they gawked at foreign women wearing bikinis. People's fixation was relatively benign. I became frustrated though when attention manifested as sexual harassment.

In one instance in the south, for example, two men stared lecherously at a white woman near a café where I used to eat dinner. I walked up to them and asked them what they were doing and where they were from. They mentioned that they were from the northwestern part of the country. They left quietly. The conventional sexist trope was common across society, however, insofar as women were objects to be leered at but also excluded from spaces where men drank. When a white couple showed up to a local bar, it was clear that they were out of place in the men-only establishment. They left quickly.

The *mahattaya* ("mister"; often used as a term of respect) of the house where I stayed in the south while working at Lean Lanka reinforced the narrative of impropriety. I stopped by during a conversation with two Australian men in the living room. Later, when I was hanging up clothes on the roof of the house, the *mahattaya* came by, mentioning the men who had visited. They were the owners of a nearby hotel. The *mahattaya* said, "They're good. They don't drink or eat meat. They're vegetarian." There were two vectors of meaning in the *mahattaya*'s statement. It could have been a general comment applied to all people, Sri Lankans and foreigners. In the context of our conversation, however, it also connoted the subtext that tourists in general were amoral.

Tourists represented the familiar Western ideal of unbounded liberty because of their economic status. When I negotiated the fees for my room with the *mahattaya*, he implied that I should be "careful" about my belongings. He mentioned that a foreign couple who had previously stayed in the quarters had left a gold watch worth 40,000 Rupees (about $264 at the time) lying in the open. He did not take it, but, he said, the watch was gifted to him by the couple when they left. It was difficult to figure out whether the *mahattaya* meant this anecdote as a threat or a subtle prod to give my own gift. I negotiated the boundary between my "foreignness" and the fact that I could articulate a local connection because my father's family originally came from the south.

In other cases, friends were honest about how I would be perceived. Back in Katunayake, another friend from the boarding house, Nimal, offered to buy my pots and pans in the market in Averiwatte, the town near the Katunayake EPZ. We were eating at one of the few decent restaurants run by a man who had returned from abroad. "I can go with you to buy [the cookware]. If you go they will charge you more because they'll think you're from another country (*rata kenek*), a white person (*suddek*)." The idea that because I was a tourist I would be hustled was constantly at the back of my mind, from buying knick-knacks to getting bus fare. When I went to the south, Nimal's comments became even more relevant. The place near where I lived was lined with surf shops and hotels. Hustling the occasional tourist occurred in the context of the transformation of the economy.

At the same time, the people I spoke to did not always perceive tourists negatively. They could also represent a broader horizon, a world beyond the narrow confines of village poverty. When visiting Vijaya's village in Ratnapura, for example, his friends were upbeat. One mentioned that he guided tourists to casinos. He emphasized that Chinese and Thai tourists were

kind. Vijaya agreed and mentioned the way in which they bow respectfully. The tourist guide had presumably picked up a bit of Mandarin. In another instance, when I was in Katunayake, a shop owner quizzed me about my origin. "Not many foreigners speak Sinhala." But, he added, "We also can't speak English (*apitat ingirisi bae*)."

The state's policy of earning foreign exchange meant that tourists could provoke people's frustrations and aspirations. Tourists were the floating signifier of the new economy that had transformed Sri Lanka. Since the opening of the economy in 1977, the general direction, however, was increasing inequality. State policy shifted from providing universal services to cutting the public budget to attract foreign investors. Investment has not necessarily been channeled into the expansion of factories, but real estate speculation, especially in Colombo. Although in this dissertation I focus on the changes occurring in the export garment industry specifically, the emphasis on attracting foreign investment represents the broader shift in the privatization of the economy. Tourists were the shock troops of the Open Economy,[30] physically embodying the government's claims to attract capital.

The institutional way in which that policy was manifest, of course, was in the construction of the EPZs. The private investors who set up shop—including Sri Lankan MNCs discussed in Chapter Two—however, remained concentrated in labor-intensive industry. The focus on cheap labor for an industry that had low barriers of entry meant companies were considering moving their operations abroad to other countries that had begun to dominate the supply chain, including Bangladesh and Cambodia. The remaining factories in Sri Lanka's EPZs

[30] I borrow the phrase from Adolph Reed, Jr. who, in an entirely different context, refers to a class of intellectuals as "shock troops of neoliberalism."

continued to close or consolidate. There was little indication that they would catalyze economic expansion.

EPZs though are different from the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) model that has become popular in countries such as India. Generally, scholarship focuses on the fact that SEZs are designed with multiple purposes in mind. They are concentrated in services such as IT and Telecommunications, but also associated with booming real estate (Jenkins 2015).[31] The upshot, some have argued, is that SEZs enable land speculation. In the context of India, Karmakar (2017) writes:

> Since the advent of neo-liberal reforms, the government has acted as a promoter of corporate-led growth, where the state acquires land for SEZs and then transfers it to private developers. In this respect, the market shifts the issue of displacement to the private arena where compensation is supposed to be negotiated. Hence, the state excludes itself from the responsibilities of rehabilitation (176)

As a result, emerging movements challenging SEZs have focused on land dispossession of peasants, and the inequalities speculation engenders in existing communities (Cross 2014; Levien 2013), as opposed to highlighting the living conditions of workers in the SEZs themselves.

Since the end of the civil war between the government and Tamil separatists in 2009, Sri Lanka has begun moving away from EPZs toward a quasi-SEZ model. With the recent attempt by China to acquire the Hambantota port, located on the southern coast, which it financed,

[31] D'Costa (2014) advances a more optimistic explanation in the case of bigger Southern countries such as India and China:

> Late-industrializing states are good at provisioning public goods and services in technologically stable sectors that are critical for private sector development. Chinese-manufactured exports from special economic zones and India's software exports from its software technology parks are two illustrations of favorable state—business partnerships. The substantial development of tertiary technical education and the university system in both countries has also facilitated the internalization of industrial and institutional learning and thus the promotion of competitiveness, particularly in mature industries. (336)

struggles over land dispossession are emerging. Moreover, Sri Lanka's real estate market has boomed throughout the post-war period. In Colombo, there is talk of a housing bubble because of the oversupply of apartments in upscale complexes.

The trend is a tourism- as opposed to manufacturing-driven shift. For workers in places such as the Katunayake EPZ though, attempts to attract new types of foreign investors appear to generate little prosperity that they enjoy. The state's priority to attract foreign investment undermines building public infrastructure for the workers in the industries, such as garment exports, that the state still claims to want to strengthen. How was the bias toward capital revealed in workers' living conditions?

"We Don't Have Anything"

When I spoke to workers, they often emphasized that the political class was to blame for their troubles. Many supported politicians such as Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's democratically-elected yet increasingly authoritarian leader from 2005 to 2015. Workers praised Rajapaksa for initiating infrastructure projects. Most of the projects begun by Rajapaksa were classified as mega infrastructure projects, but his government also built roads and expanded electrification in rural areas. Thus, many were willing to forgive him tentatively for the corrupt aspects of his regime.

Workers' complaints about their own living conditions, however, underlined the macro economic constraints on the Sri Lankan state, regardless of which regime occupied the state apparatus. Experts often blamed excessive spending by the government. In contrast, based on discussions with workers, I argue that the state encountered the structural barriers of export capitalism. The question was whether workers could push back against the system, given the tremendous inequality in the distribution of resources that they confronted.

The most obvious example was housing. The Katunayake EPZ epitomized many of the trends of other urban settlements where workers settle for brief periods of time before returning to homes in villages. Maruschke (2017) argues that in the case of Shenzhen, for example, some residents benefited. She writes:

> Shenzhen's original inhabitants, before the planned SEZ, were rural dwellers in China's household registration system (hukou). The government assumed that the villagers adjacent to the SEZ site would supply the zone with agricultural products. However, their 'rural' status allowed these villagers to own collective property and gave them special border privileges; they constructed low-cost housing and became successful landlords in the booming metropolis that emerged, so that now the city contains a mixture of 'rural' and 'urban' space, two different regulatory spaces that have created diverging aesthetics." (418)

Similarly, landowners in Averiwatte set up boarding houses or rented out small rooms for workers. Because of the lack of economic expansion in industrial manufacturing, however, real estate near the Katunayake EPZ did not skyrocket in value. Thus, even though boarding house owners were generally more well-to-do than the export garment workers for whom they offered accommodation, they were not necessarily rich by the standards, for example, of the propertied in Colombo.

Workers, however, suffered the most. Private dwellings were not regulated. They often lacked access to municipal services. For example, in the boarding house where I stayed, the water could be cut off at any time due to a busted tank motor. If the river flooded the trash pit near the well, workers had to bathe and wash clothes at a nearby temple. Unlike a slum though, residences in Averiwatte were spread out. It did not have the same density as a slum. The conditions I saw were similar to what Frenkel and Yu (2014) describe in the case of Shenzhen. As they put it, "In addition, migrants tend to live in low cost, low quality residences separate from local people, although these are not slums with distinctive sub-cultures typical of

underclass *milieux*" (279). The people who stayed in the boarding houses near the Katunayake EPZ considered their stay temporary.

Although export garment workers did not necessarily consider Averiwatte their home, they were no less appalled by the living conditions. One man in the boarding house pointed out that the owners were "cruel" because they did not install more lighting. In one instance, I learned, upon returning to the boarding house after my initial research period, that the well had been flooded for more than two weeks and the tap had been broken. Moreover, the well near the river and the dusty courtyard were the only common spaces. When I visited the village of the informal leader of the boarding house, Sithumini, over the Sri Lankan New Year, which is celebrated in April, she commented, for example, that it was sad (*pau*) that Vijaya's toddler had nowhere to play. The everyday complaints about the lack of facilities echoed across many workers' experiences in Katunayake.

Herod (1997), among other labor geographers, argues that the struggles over housing are one example of the way in which labor, like capital, participates in the making of a place. Herod argues that his view moves beyond the traditional emphasis within labor geography on capital's ability to relocate, unilaterally remaking landscapes. To quote Herod at length:

> Just as capital does not exist in an aspatial world, neither does labor. The process of labor's self-reproduction must take place in particular geographical locations. Given this fact, it becomes clear that workers are likely to want to shape the economic landscape in ways that facilitate this self-reproduction. Struggles over the location of work, new or continued investment (public or private), access to housing and transport, all can play significant roles in allowing working class people to reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis. Recognizing that workers may see their own self-reproduction as integrally tied to ensuring the economic landscape is made in certain ways and not in others (as a landscape of employment rather than of unemployment, for instance), allows them to be incorporated into analyses of the location of economic activities in a theoretically much more active manner than traditionally has been the case" (16)

In Averiwatte, however, workers lacked the organization to sustain a campaign for better services from the government. Workers' demands for better facilities were fragmented because they were considered "outsiders" in the area. Workers themselves often reinforced this perception by arguing that their stay in the boarding house was temporary. In this regard, export garment workers were not necessarily "based in place and [developed] feelings and attachments to these places" (Lier 2007:816).

The lack of infrastructure though affected everyone in the town. The government prioritized making the Katunayake EPZ attractive to investors. It neglected the town of Averiwatte where most workers lived. One local official explained that the urban council handles water and waste management, and transport and electricity are handled by central institutions (interview, August 13th, 2015). He explained that revenue comes from taxes, but that the central government also provides money for projects such as building roads. The government focused though on projects meant to attract investors. Given that the EPZs were enclaves, this meant neglecting infrastructure for Averiwatte. For example, the town is only slightly above sea-level, so the water does not drain properly. The official became slightly more critical during our brief interview, mentioning that the government needed to construct a water management facility.

In many ways, the local official's comments implied a critical perspective like the one offered by Hudalah (2017) on the state of urban governance in Indonesia. As Hudalah notes, "In periurban Jakarta, exclusive middle-upper income housing construction has facilitated the formation of gated communities and reinforced social segregation in and surrounding the new towns" (65). In the case of Averiwatte, however, all residents, temporary and permanent, seemed to bear the burden of poor infrastructure. Even the relatively well-off residents in the area did not benefit from the EPZ nearby, insofar as it had failed to incentivize a real estate boom in the area.

Outside the Katunayake EPZ, and across the island, the lack of infrastructure was a point of departure for working class critique. Early into my stay in the boarding house, when I frequented a tea stall near a union drop-in center, for example, I had a conversation one day with a man who drove for tourists in the area. Initially, he asked me the usual questions that I had become accustomed to: Who are you? Where are you from? I changed the conversation by asking him what he wanted specifically from the government.

As we had our tea, we moved from present to past. I mentioned that Premadasa, a populist president who moderated aspects of JR Jayewardene's liberalization program in the 1980s, introduced new social programs. As Harris and Scully (2015) might point out, these programs, such as the Samurdhi cash transfer system in Sri Lanka, which was initially called Janasaviya, were targeted toward poorer constituencies.[32] They represented a framework for welfare in the neoliberal context. The driver argued that while programs such as Janasaviya and the provision of a midday meal for schoolchildren were important, Sri Lanka needed bigger projects to attract investment. I mentioned that in the neoliberal framing, these projects required loans, which inevitably became an excuse to further cut the budget for social welfare. He replied anticlimactically: "we must bear the burden."

The driver's comments were supported by other observations made by friends at Lean Lanka. When I went on a trip with a group of workers, one man, Priyantha, sat next to me and explained that the Rajapaksa regime's mega infrastructure projects (*maha vyaprutti*) were

[32] Stokke (1995), however, offers a critical analysis:

> The rise of the Janasaviya Programme and the continuation of its basic ideas could be interpreted as moments in a process of passive revolutions, whereby the dominant classes manage to remain dominant by making concessions to subordinate classes within political networks. The dismantling of Janasaviya, on the other hand, can be attributed to factional politics, dividing the dominant classes into rivalling political networks. (134)

necessary because "without them you can't get goods to market." Priyantha's perspective was widely shared among other workers in the factory. As one elderly cleaning lady put it to me while I drank coffee in the canteen early in the morning, Rajapaksa was good because he made roads. She happened to be from the former president's district. At the same time though, she also mentioned her difficult work. "Even if we work, the pay is little" (*mahansiyen vaeda kerot eet padiya aduy*). It became clear to me that what was at stake in the question of infrastructure was a much bigger understanding of what people needed to survive.

Workers explained away the tension between the narrow demand for better roads and the much bigger need to redistribute resources by focusing on corrupt politicians. According to Vijaya, the problem in Ratnapura was not the Rajapaksa regime, but the "vote-giving fish (*chandaya denna maaluwo*)" who benefited from local patrons. In Vijaya's wife's, Piumi's, village, his brother-in-law explained to me that the bus stand was in disrepair because "it's all politics." In a few instances, this critique took on a racist character. As Piumi's sister explained to me during another visit to Piumi's village, "They give to Tamils" (*demala ayata denawa*).

Even Rajapaksa, who became representative of aggressive Sinhala nationalism during his tenure as president, however, could be subjected to criticism from workers. Supporters of his from the boarding house near the Katunayake EPZ admitted that he lost the presidential election in 2015 because of "the people around him (*vate inna kattiya*)." This critique implied that Rajapaksa's government was also corrupt. During a heated argument between mechanics in the canteen at Lean Lanka, one person made the point explicit: "He's a thief (*horek*). his brothers were thieves. If you say you're going to do something for the country, you have a duty (*vagakimak*), you can't take from it." Political disagreement meant that there was no consensus among workers about politicians' responsibility for economic failure.

Export garment workers I met were generally excluded from the network of patronage that provided a minimal redistribution of resources in return for political support. Instead, as a friend in the Katunayake boarding house mentioned, "we don't have anything (*apita mokut nae*)." Although workers fixated on corrupt politicians, their frustrations also pointed to the limits of the structure. To change the latter, however, required a much broader campaign to expand the welfare state. People such as the driver from the shop near the union drop-in center near the Katunayake EPZ may have agreed with this sentiment, but it begged the question: what to do (*monawa da karanna*)?

The Cost of Living, Alternative Incomes, and the Retreat of the State

To provide a tentative answer to the question of what a different order might look like, we must analyze the limits and possibilities of existing state support as described by workers themselves. The question of state intervention on behalf of the poor in the form of new social assistance programs has framed recent debates about political change in the global South. Harris and Scully (2015) argue that, "…The limitations of job-centered state welfare systems introduced across the global South quickly appeared as those without access to secure wage employment fell through the wide gaps of "modern" social welfare systems" (423). Similarly, many of the export garment workers with whom I spoke often mentioned decreasing the cost of living and generating alternative incomes, which represented the underlying demand to decommodify livelihoods. In the absence of the classical industrial proletariat, who represents the transformative agent that can demand redistributive policy?

To answer this question, we must specify the relationship between export garment workers and the broader class that they represented. The working class in Sri Lanka occupies many diverse job positions. This spectrum does not negate the fact that there is a relative

threshold for those who have and those who do not. Accordingly, the issue, I argue, is not whether export garment workers are working class or constitute a new precarious subject. Rather, it is the relationship between public services and the wage as manifest in the distinction between the working class as a political constituency and workers as economic agents. When I visited Sithumini's village, for example, as her mother put it in an outdoor kitchen with clay (*maeti*) walls, "We're poor (*duppat*), not rich like you all (*posat*)." I was the object of her critique because I was an outsider visiting the village. Sithumini's mother's comment, however, also reflected a general point about the class divide.

Accordingly, I shift to the specific ways in which workers discussed the manifestation of inequality or, rather, the economic pressures of their class position in general. Vijaya happened to be someone with whom I spoke frequently about these issues. He often focused his critique on the rising cost of living. As he and his friends explained in Piumi's village in the hills of southern Sri Lanka, the government's price relief for gas, for example, had not decreased the price of other commodities. The price of cement, which had more than doubled in several years, was pertinent to the conversation because Vijaya was building his house at the time.

Workers consumed not only goods, but also services. The retreat of funding for universal education, for example, was perhaps even more challenging. Vijaya's friend described costs for sending a child to school: 4,000 Rupees (about $29 at the time) for transport, 1,000 Rupees (about $7) for school fees, and more for clothing. Added up, the expenses were a large amount for a family that may have a combined income of 50,000 (about $365) Rupees a month. If the average family had two children, the costs could increase to twenty percent of the monthly budget. The increasing cost of living reflected the state's inability to provide acceptable

standards of education. Workers mentioned the pressure of sending children to private tuition classes because of the poor quality of public schools.

In one case, a friend, who lived in a small boarding house near the Katunayake EPZ along with the owner and her family, invited me to speak with her. The owner had three kids. She mentioned the costs of schooling, amounting to 3,000 Rupees (about $20), confirming the observations of Vijaya's friends. She also mentioned the costs of sending children to school; 50 Rupees a day per child. The fact that it was cheaper than the figure quoted by Vijaya's friends, which averaged 133 Rupees a day, implied that roads and therefore transportation was better closer to Colombo. Still, workers experienced similar pressures across the urban/rural divide.

The issue of schooling reflects a challenge facing workers across the world. Workers decision to raise families near the Katunayake EPZ or stay in the rural areas reflects the Faustian choice of having enough to survive or improving prospects for children. As Siu (2015) puts it in the context of China:

> Many of the older migrant workers today leave their children behind in the countryside while the parents work in cities. This is a direct consequence of the difficulty in supporting an urban-based family financially. Their children do not enjoy the same public education and healthcare benefits as urbanites, and the workers have to pay dearly for schooling and hospital care…However, most of them told me that, because teaching standards in the countryside are low, there will be few opportunities for their children to climb the ladder to a better future. (59)

The extreme example is migration abroad for work. Many export garment workers, especially women, had left their families behind to make a living. The state emphasized that mothers must stay home with their children, restricting migration abroad via official channels. This policy uncritically reproduced the gendered ideology of domesticity, while ignoring the economic process that dislocated families.

Given the retreat of public services, how did people generate income to pay for things like education and healthcare? In our conversations, Vijaya and his friends focused on the challenges of agriculture. For example, they mentioned the need to lower the cost of inputs for farmers. One evening we had a conversation with another friend in the courtyard of the boarding house. Many had returned to their village for the April New Year. Vijaya's friend pointed out that the price of fertilizer had gone up, implying the government should subsidize small farmers. Prior to our discussion, however, another worker in the boarding house explained that "*mudalalis*," large traders in the village, set the price for crops. The issue was not necessarily a question of land reform (see Herring 1983 for an overview of the question in South Asia). Rather, it required a whole set of interventions to secure the productive basis of small farmers.

As Hart (2002) explains, what is pertinent to this discourse is not the question of what farmers produce, but the underlying question of the ways in which people migrating from rural areas survive. Or, as she puts it, we must aim "to dis-articulate or delink the land question from agriculture and from individual restitution claims, and to re-articulate or reframe it in terms of the erosion of social security, and the moral and material imperative for a social wage" (12). Her comments anticipate recent academic narratives about South Africa's post-apartheid transition. Scholarship highlights "recombinant" livelihoods: novel ways in which people survive off support from the state in rural areas via extended family networks (Du Toit and Neves 2014). Thus, although agriculture might be viewed as a "traditional" livelihood, it was one among several tools for survival.

Another option was subcontracting. I saw several workers use their experience working in the factories to sew garments as subcontractors for the local market. When I spoke to a mechanic at Lean Lanka, for example, he mentioned that he produced garments at home, paying

family members by a piece rate. This process embedded self-exploitation within families, which become part of the network of subcontractors within a global economy. As De Neve (2014), Chari (2004), and others argue, subcontractors take on the risk to produce garments for a global economy.

Subcontracting represents another way in which the formal and informal intersected in workers' lives. Although brands and retailers portray finished goods as an example of a formalized process, in many instances they rely on subcontracted labor within smaller households. This economy ran parallel to the production that occurred in the EPZs. Rather than companies in the EPZs subcontracting work, however, workers in these factories applied their skills for production for the local market, as opposed to export. The Sri Lankan garment industry contrasts with supply chains in India, in which subcontractors are integrated into global networks (Mezzadri 2008). The production I learned about was mostly for domestic consumption. I did not encounter global buyers outside the main factories.

Finally, another possibility for workers to supplement their income was tourism. A cutter I spoke to in the Lean Lanka plant drove trishaws ("hire") when his official duties had ended. Lean Lanka was near the beach, so many people had side jobs in the tourist economy. One Human Resources (HR) staff member commented on similar examples when we had drinks at a hotel near the factory. "You know machan [slang for "dude"], some of the team members earn more than me." He implied that because people hustled on the side, they did not need to earn as much in the factory; a core assumption of managers' justification for lower wages that I return to in Chapter Two.

Regardless of whether workers farmed, sewed outside the factory, or engaged in petty transactions in the tourist industry, many workers still barely made ends meet. Workers pursued

these activities though not just to survive, but in the small hope that they could achieve a breakthrough and become self-sufficient. Many workers mentioned the possibility of starting a small shop. This rhetoric, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, had been adopted by garment companies, in addition to the state, to identify workers as "small entrepreneurs" as opposed to people who had careers in the export garment industry. One resident of the boarding house, for example, mentioned that many people had small plots of land or could engage in self-employment. The goal was to save enough to start a small shop. The dream of rural self-sufficiency, however, felt like a phantom rather than a real possibility.

Vijaya and other residents in the boarding house embodied the lack of opportunity. They recognized that the state's discourse of small entrepreneurship was impossible to realize in practice. Still, many people clung to it as their only hope. The logical conclusion to believing one could become the statistical minority who were successful was Vijaya's hope of finding gems. It boiled down to luck, or gambling. When Vijaya invited me to his village to stay for April New Year's, we passed by gem shops and mining pits. Along the muddy roads in the central hills of Sri Lanka, we coasted down a slope on a motorbike with Vijaya's brother-in-law. In one gem shop, Vijaya pointed out that a person could earn a tidy sum. As he put it though, most people did not get a "chance." Instead, their fate was linked to the precarious and often physically dangerous work of mining.[33]

The discourse of small entrepreneurship enabled the Sri Lankan state to move away from universal subsidies, to the targeted emphasis on providing loans for small entrepreneurs via programs such as Gamperaliya (Village Revolution) and Grama Shakti (Rural Power). The

[33] The day I arrived at Vijaya's parents' house, his father mentioned that three people had passed away in the mines because they breathed in noxious gases by accident.

discourse of entrepreneurship paradoxically mirrors claims made by Harris and Scully (2015), among others, that new forms of social intervention represent a break from the Western model of the welfare state. In the case of Vijaya and others, though, they emphasized that they did not receive direct welfare payments from the state. When I spoke to a couple in the boarding house, for example, they mentioned during an interview that their Samurdhi payment was cut (interview, April 3rd, 2016).[34]

Workers I spoke to often shifted back-and-forth, from the question of alternative income back to the cost of living. Discussion about the gap compounded people's sense of desperation. When I spoke to Vijaya, he often mentioned throughout my research how he barely made ends meet. On one occasion he pawned his wedding ring for 5,000 Rupees (about $34) to pay for his Korean language exam; the price for the minimum possibility of migrating abroad to work in South Korea. These hidden educational fees and costs of adult retraining showed that for export garment workers, the industry itself did not provide a path for advancement.

The gap between income and costs was reflected in the sense of desperation in the absence of state support. Vijaya often mentioned that he had no savings (*ituruwak nae*) or that all his money had been spent (*viyadam kara*). How did the state expect people to run small shops when the economy itself could barely sustain the people living in villages? It was clear that a much broader transformation of the economy was required, one that redistributed resources from the rich to the poor. As Safa (1982) aptly puts it: "In spite of their ingenuity and adaptive capacities, the workers in the informal sector are crippled by their basic lack of opportunity to

[34] Skanthakumar (2013) notes:

> Has the Samurdhi programme succeeded in "alleviating" leave alone eliminating poverty? The consensus across the political spectrum appears to be that it has failed in its objective of promoting income-generating self-employment and co-related increase in savings…Instead, its main achievement is to transfer modest amounts of cash for consumption purposes, and not necessarily to those in greatest deprivation. (32)

accumulate any capital, whether of skills and knowledge, or of physical resources. That is why a state policy of merely supporting existing activities in the informal sector turns out to be barren…" (7). Although authors have focused on the informal economy then, we must analyze the ways in which informality itself is the effect of the dismantling of the welfare state.

Vijaya among others recognized that exploitation in the factory was connected to their predicament in the boarding house. Their everyday struggle to survive, whether in the EPZ or in the village, pointed to the concrete ways in which the government's policy of attracting foreign investors often required privatizing public resources. In this regard, export garment workers represented a significant group that called out the gaps in the state's promises for social transformation. They demanded more for public services across rural and urban areas. Their "temporary" status as workers, however, meant that many of them considered their challenges from the perspective of the villages to which they expected to return.[35]

Nevertheless, because workers in the Katunayake EPZ articulated challenges such as the cost of living and lack of alternative income as common issues with other members of the working class, we must delve deeper into the nature of their role in a bigger movement to expand welfare. Having looked in this chapter at how little export garment workers consume of the total product, especially in terms of public services, I turn to analyze the ways in which capital appropriates what they produce in the next chapter.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the broad class divide between those who have and those who do not framed my discussions with export garment workers and others in the

[35] I will also look, in the next chapter, at workers who have spent significantly more time working in the factory, which undermines this assumption.

Katunayake EPZ and villages. Although people had various means of identifying, whether referring to themselves as poor people (*duppat minissu*) or villagers (*game minissu*), the implied differences inevitably had class implications. Thus, based on my discussion in the Introduction, I use the term working class to refer to a political constituency that expressed an interest in defending the historical gains of the Sri Lankan welfare state. The state's claim to attract foreign investors under export capitalism had not benefited all.

At the same time, the dominant policy narrative depended on assumptions about EOI that had failed to materialize. Labor-intensive manufacturing in the export garment industry had not become capital-intensive manufacturing. In addition, tax concessions undermined the state's revenue base.[36] These processes were magnified in the global context of financial capitalism. The Sri Lankan state borrowed more, turning to debt-driven, mega infrastructure projects. These projects included the Colombo Port City, in addition to the construction of the Hambantota port in the south. These and other ventures depended on Chinese-, US-, and market-based debt. It is difficult to anticipate the future direction of the economy, but the danger is that as demand fails to materialize, Sri Lanka may in turn be heading into an economic crisis like the one faced by Northern countries during the Great Recession.

This potential crisis is compounded by the fact that the global trade order is also under attack by right-wing populists in the Northern countries that helped put it into place. Although institutions such as the IMF and World Bank have long imposed structural adjustment policies, the narrative was that Southern countries could benefit in the greater share of global growth. Sri

[36] Again, as Moore (2017) notes, "The powers of the GCEC – which was later renamed the Board of Investment – included the right to grant tax exemptions to investors. These powers were steadily expanded and used liberally. This helped to create a broader culture of tax exemptions" (13). He cites these concessions as a main factor in his comprehensive article on the decline of revenue.

Lanka, however, has remained restricted to the margins of labor-intensive manufacturing. The few options for middle class employment in new industries such as IT that have been created in Colombo are not accessible to all, precisely because of the retreat of the welfare state.

Authors such as Ferguson (2015) and Harris and Scully (2015), however, see the new range of social assistance programs as cause for modest hope, insofar as they argue that these initiatives imply a decommodification of social life. From the perspective of my research though, it is difficult to embrace these claims, because they emerge in a wider context of the abandonment not just of export garment workers, but the working class in general. Roads are broken. Hospitals and schools remain underfunded. Housing near EPZs and other work sites is low-quality and forces people to return to the village. What would it take to propose, then, a new agenda?

Just as policy making solutions from above, even self-critical ones that try to identify critical spaces within development discourse, are limited by the structural context, change requires collective mobilization on a scale like the period of workers' struggles that created robust welfare states in the North. Without this dimension, it is difficult to identify the ways in which even programs with a broader vision such as India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and Brazil's Bolsa Familia can solve the extensive planning issues that are implied by the challenge of developing a sustainable economic basis under export capitalism. In the case of the workers who I interacted with in the Katunayake EPZ and the south, they were frustrated because EOI had dominated policy debates, sidelining what they argued were the state's fundamental obligations to those who had less in the form of better services.

Workers, who were pushed out of the political space and whose democratic rights were curtailed by the transition to "expert" decision-making could focus their critiques on outsiders

(tourists), insiders (the political class), and ultimately the state's failure to ameliorate the everyday aspects of existence. These rhetorical targets became the substantive basis of many of the conversations I had with people about why they suffered under the current system. The framings could be problematic, insofar as they relied on classic tropes of the difference between Western and Eastern morality, apathy and disengagement from politics, and ultimately an overwhelming sense of hopelessness manifest in a desire to return to a village, where there were few options to survive.

Nevertheless, workers' complaints also indexed the challenges imposed by export capitalism. According to much of the older literature in Sri Lankan studies, the peasantry was drawn to the rural imaginary because of its identification with the Sinhala nationalist program (Brow 1996; Spencer 2000). In the case of the people I spoke to, however, the issue was not that they actively identified with this framework but that it was one of the few ways of articulating the state's obligations to the poor. Critique could take on a problematic character when attacking those who allegedly benefited more, including non-Sinhala ethnic groups such as Tamils. In addition, demanding state support could also imply a conservative ideology of the home in which women stay home and care for children, while men go out and work.

Still, in the case of workers like Vijaya, I realized that by having direct conversations about the issue of inequality, I was able to better understand the animus behind workers' complaints. The question is, what new struggle could anticipate a new order? If the crushing of the General Strike of 1980 signified the closing of the previous order of welfare, the Hartal of 1953 inaugurated it by bringing people from all walks of life onto the street to defend the universal rice subsidy. To an extent, these struggles continue in the form of student strikes to keep public education open and available to all. Perhaps one of the recent struggles with the

greatest potential was a university teachers' strike in 2012 that demanded an allocation of 6% of GDP for education.

In the meantime, the economy continues to change, introducing new groups of workers while remaining rooted in EPZs. Logistics and construction workers, in addition to those employed in service sector industries such as tourism face issues in common with export garment workers. Although workers experience different pressures depending on their occupation, the people I spoke to expressed a broad interest in decommodifying livelihoods, whether lowering the cost of living or identifying alternatives for self-sufficiency. The demand for better public services framed these proposals. Moreover, in the current moment, the debate about debt-driven, mega infrastructure projects has the potential to shift into discussion of publicly-funded infrastructure models.

Scholars such as Scott (1999), Ferguson (1994), and Levien (2013) are right to be suspicious about the grand, totalizing promises of modernity embodied in previous mega infrastructure projects. As Levien (2013) notes:

> …A new regime of dispossession does not neatly supplant the previous one, but rather incorporates and extends it in qualitatively new directions. The fact that Indian states are increasingly acquiring land for privately developed real estate projects does not mean that they have stopped acquiring land for public-sector industry or large dams (though both sectors are increasingly privatized). This spatial 'synchronicity of the non-synchronous' (Ahuja, 2009: 38) is reflected in contemporary politics as the movements still resisting Nehruvian-era dams are now joined by those resisting SEZs and real estate projects. (384)

Similarly, the Mahaweli dam project in Sri Lanka was subject to criticism, both for its Sinhala nationalist implications and its top-down statist attempts to control the peasantry (Tennekoon 1988). Still, Vijaya, among other workers I spoke to, presented a range of themes that implied an alternative vision. To the extent that their struggles were a core part of the critique of export

capitalism, they anticipated a new model that, aware as it may be of the dangers of a totalizing vision, may yet articulate big promises of a policy that provides for all.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE DYNAMICS OF CAPITAL ACCUMULATION IN THE EXPORT GARMENT INDUSTRY

Introduction

When I met a worker named Madhu at Lean Lanka, a plant on the southern coast of Sri Lanka in which I worked, she seemed to embody all the stereotypes managers had expressed about young women workers. She was in her late twenties and had been working in the factory for several years. She was planning to get married and move to another place. Nevertheless, as I spoke to Madhu and we became good friends, it was apparent to me that as much as her life path may have depended on obligations to her kin, her own attitude toward work was determined by the dynamics in the factory. Madhu was especially vocal about what she saw as management's broken promises, including issues such as wages. As she put it to me one day on the line, "If they gave us 5,000 more Rupees [about $34 at the time] a month, it would be okay."

Madhu was a natural leader among her friends. In the case of Lean Lanka, it had adopted the rhetoric of "participation" and "teamwork" that had become prominent within lean management. Nevertheless, workers continued to identify the ways in which this process was extractive. They pointed to the gaps in participation. Specifically, as more than a few put it to me on separate occasions, they had few opportunities for educational advancement. The factory created new hierarchies of staff, and workers chafed against the fact that there were few paths to move up from their own position. Madhu's critiques of management and her identification with her co-workers subverted expectations about lean's ability to strengthen teamwork between groups with mutually opposed interests.

Critiques articulated by workers at Lean Lanka point to the flaws in the dominant image of the inexperienced, young woman worker. Many ethnographers have also contested this image,

pointing to the ways in which femininity is constructed on the shop floor (Salzinger 2003). They have argued that women resist in their own explicit and implicit ways, often drawing from tropes outside the factory to challenge management's paternalism (Ong 2010). Nevertheless, there is a broader reticence to engage with the insights of an older tradition of labor studies described in the Introduction, insofar as the latter sees the factory as dominated by the profitability mechanism of capital. Authors discuss the transnational dimensions of factory work, but much less has been written about changes on the shop floor, especially the adoption of lean, from the perspective of the global South (see, however, Monaco 2017).

In Madhu's and other workers' cases, however, they were explicitly vocal about the issues and challenges they saw on the shop floor. In many ways, these concerns reflected the long-standing problems facing workers everywhere. They may have joined the factory at a later point in the transformation of global production, but digging beneath their stories, I also encountered people who had been working in the export garment industry for decades. Rather than arguing that workers are "neophytes" incorporated into capitalism and unsure of its rhythms, in this chapter I analyze workers' complaints about the factory system insofar as they reveal the specific form of its reconfiguration in Sri Lanka.

This reconfiguration involved especially the consolidation of Sri Lankan Multinational Corporations (MNCs). Companies worth hundreds of millions of dollars, that did not see themselves as small mom-and-pop operations, but competing global suppliers, adopted lean management techniques such as *kaizens* (continuous modifications) and Just-In-Time (JIT) delivery. Although authors such as Gibbon and Ponte (2005), for example, point out that most of the gains are enjoyed by buyers, first-tier suppliers such as the company that owned the factory

in which I worked had managed to gain an increasing degree leverage within the system, including expanding abroad.

As I analyze throughout this chapter, the suppliers consolidated because workers' wages had been repressed over the decades since the Open Economy was introduced by JR Jayewardene. Moreover, the tendency to concentration was an effect of changes within the labor process based on management's adoption of lean techniques and the drive for short-term profit over long-term investment. When export garment companies began operating in Sri Lanka, policy makers assumed that overtime capital would transition to more capital-intensive industry, such as electronics. This outcome, however, has not materialized. The question is, how were export garment MNCs able to sustain business in an increasingly competitive global environment? The answer, I argue, was the intensification of work as expressed by the adoption of lean management pioneered in the North (see Introduction).

Workers accepting lower wages, however, should not be viewed as a sign of their passive acceptance, but rather the difficulties of organizing MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign-owned. I will discuss unionists' strategies for confronting these companies and the Sri Lankan capitalist class that they represent in Chapter Four. In the context of this chapter, it is important to point out that workers themselves, in addition to engaging in "everyday acts of resistance" (Scott 1985), also did not necessarily stay in the industry. The high turnover rate reflected the intensity of work. The management at Lean Lanka, however, despite its complaints about absenteeism, did not see workers' exit as a justification for increasing wages. Thus, the factory system continued headlong into a long-term crisis of accumulation.

Consolidation in the Export Garment Industry

One of the most ingrained assumptions of the scholarly literature on globalization is that the reconfiguration of supply chains determines changes in production. Barrientos (2013) describes trends in the scholarship:

> Two overlapping bodies of literature have arisen to analyse this process. GVC [Global Value Chain] analysis has tended to focus on the commercial relationships between firms. GPN [Global Production Networks] analysis has placed more emphasis on the institutional, societal and territorial embeddedness of those linkages, and on asymmetric power relations between actors. (1064)

The idea that Northern MNCs exploit cheap labor in the global South is an assumption shared both by policy makers and workers' advocates. In contrast, in my ethnography of the factory where I worked, I argue that changes that have occurred in the labor process, especially lean management, are more effective in explaining the consolidation of MNCs, including Sri Lankan companies.

At Lean Lanka, I was introduced to the world of lean production that many scholars have so effectively described (Dohse, et al. 1985; Moody 1997; Parker and Slaughter 1990; Price 1994). Drawing from the Japanese model of lean production, management at Lean Lanka employed its own proprietary system to intensify work. The lean system was developed for small batch orders. When I asked managers both at Lean Lanka and other factories whether they were affected by the withdrawal of benefits under the European Union's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP+), for example, many of them were confident that they were not. Instead, they repeatedly emphasized the success of their enterprises. Or, as the General Manager at Lean Lanka explained in the canteen one day, "I have orders up to here," gesturing to the top of his head.

The debate about whether the globalization of trade agreements or management's adoption of lean techniques determine changes in the global economy risk falling back into the classic debate between Wallerstein and Brenner; whether trade or production determines inequalities at the level of the world system (for an overview, see Song 2015). Still, I argue that in the case of the Sri Lankan export garment industry, the impact of globalization on the reconfiguration of production at the local level is relatively limited in the current moment.[37] Rather, I propose that the primary explanation is the investment horizon of capital vis-à-vis workers' (organized) resistance. In the case of the export garment industry, the issue is not that workers are paid less for producing cheap clothing for a global mass market. Rather, at Lean Lanka, they were paid less for producing the world's top brands in niche "fast fashion" markets.

As one Human Resources (HR) manager from another company who I interviewed in the Katunayake EPZ put it, he and his team focused on "bottlenecks" in the process and identified technical solutions (interview, January 6th, 2016). He emphasized the prominence of "work in progress" and JIT delivery, representing the changes management implemented in the process of production. I asked him if these changes were the result of buyers' demands. The manager went on to explain that buyers only demand several criteria which are quality, price, and speed. The actual process was determined by management. The company where he worked focused on fast fashion garments. They rarely received orders over 2,000 pieces. Accordingly, although Sri Lankan MNCs, for example, faced pressure, many of the decisions they made were at their own discretion.

[37] More research could be done, for example, on the extent to which trade agreements, especially quotas, are vital to the initiation of export industries in Southern countries, but which in time are overtaken by the dynamics of change in the labor process itself.

Accordingly, production for the market depended on the intense work conditions management could impose on workers. After my initial training period at Lean Lanka, I requested to be put into the sewing line. I quickly experienced the challenges of production. One day, I had a testy conversation in English with a production executive about my experience. As we sat at lunch, I explained that the "work is tiring." The executive was abrupt. "That's your mentality," he responded. Taken aback, I pushed forward. "No, it's not just my mentality, it's the experience of the work. Mentality just refers to attitude in general, because in life we always experience difficult circumstances." The executive began repeating no!

Finally, I tried to explain myself another way: "It's definitely repetitive work. Look, I can read a book and that's tiring as well but this is a different experience. Sewing requires a lot of focus." The executive was confident that he could explain away the moment of intense exhaustion I experienced. "You haven't been doing it long enough. See after a month, it gets easier." Later in this chapter, I will juxtapose this claim with workers' experiences. Still, not looking to end the conversation on a sour note, we both reached for compromise. The executive continued: "The buyers say they will pay the SMV [Standard Minute Value], but they don't know how difficult it is." I sympathized and agreed: "[The brand being manufactured at the time] and the other companies get billions of dollars in profit. You all, not just the workers, are working hard."

I was arguing with a staff member from the lower level of management who also experienced frequent stress, although not the stress of production itself. Often, I came across younger staff in departments such as HR who were exhausted. The fact that the lean system put pressure on everyone, however, did not mean stress was distributed equally. Still, there is a deeper argument implied by the production executive's claims. Previously, he had mentioned

that buyers pay for a Standard Minute Value (SMV), which the company reduces to secure its profit margin. Herein lay the secret: "[The company has] a profit margin a 'buffer' which they reduce for the buyer." In the case of Lean Lanka, as he mentioned the primary issue was not that Northern buyers paid less per se; rather, the company that owned the factory was competing with other export garment MNCs across the globe.

The intensification of work was an effect of the classic dynamics of competition between capitalists Marx analyzed. Yet in the case of the Sri Lankan export industry, competition did not necessarily lead to more investment in production. It is often argued that the garment industry, for example, is inherently labor-intensive due to the nature of the product and low investment required for machinery. Still, as Silver (2003) notes, capital, when facing competition, often will move not just to new places but into new product lines to earn more profit. In the case of the big Sri Lankan garment companies, including Lean Lanka, they chose competition with other suppliers over investing in a new industry. Why?

The answer, I argue, does not lie in inter-capitalist competition per se, but what capitalists can extract from workers. In the case of the lean production system, advocates claim that workers in fact participate more; a claim I will scrutinize later in this chapter. The reality, however, was that workers were being forced to work harder for less pay. This process involved incorporating elements of the craft system into mass production. Workers were paid based on their ability to meet "targets"; an implied piece-rate definition of the wage. *The incorporation of craft elements of production did not mean, however, that Lean Lanka subcontracted work outside of the company.*

Many scholars argue that what is novel about the modern configuration of the supply chain is the expansion of subcontracting. In this regard, subcontracting and lean production are

often conflated. As Silver (2003) puts it, “Discarding their early attempts at vertical integration, Japanese automobile producers established a multilayered subcontracting system that simultaneously allowed them to guarantee employment to (and establish cooperative relations with) a core labor force, while obtaining low-cost inputs and flexibility from the lower rungs of the supply network” (42). In my own research in the export garment industry, I instead encountered a pattern of consolidation among garment companies. Rather than facing the pressure of Northern buyers as such, export garment MNCs, whether Sri Lankan or foreign-owned, expanded into other countries in the region such as Bangladesh and Cambodia.

Lean Lanka experimented with new management techniques not because of the pressure imposed by brands per se, but its own desire to stay ahead of the competition; meaning, other suppliers. It could adopt lean, however, because of the relative lack of organized resistance among workers, further reflected in the absence of state-driven redistributive policy, as discussed in Chapter One. This structure narrowed its investment horizon, foreclosing the transition into new industry, while incentivizing wage repression and the intensification of work. Because the factory, among countless others, pushed targets, one of my training school instructors said I would need to pass a sewing test with an efficiency rate between seventy and eighty percent. I realized I had to sew, however, to develop an embodied sense of the changes outlined above.

When I met the HR staff, they acknowledged that they could put me in the lines. They were worried though because I was sewing for research, but workers were doing it to survive. As one of the staff put it, “You know machan [slang for “dude”], it’s not that we will be angry, it’s that they will because you know there’s a line incentive.” I was resigned. “Yeah, I guess I’m on

research so it's different, this isn't for survival." "Exactly, relaxed."[38] Eventually though, I received my wish to go to the lines. I may not have needed to be paid for the work I was doing, but I quickly saw that even for the most skilled machine operator, earning enough to survive was hardly an option.

Determining Pay

As discussed in the Introduction, one of the ways in which the paradigm of labor studies has been operationalized most effectively is in ethnographic studies of factory work in the global South. Much of this work focuses on the relationship between gender and factory recruitment. As Bair (2010) outlines, the first generation of scholarship from the 1970s onward focused on the ways in which foreign companies setting up shop abroad drew from a labor force of young women. The second generation of scholarship focused more on what the construction of gender within the factory meant for people, whether men or women, themselves. Bair writes:

> …what is essential about this process from a feminist perspective is the fact that the relocation of light manufacturing to the global South was accompanied by a widespread mobilization of female labor, since the qualities most valued in export-processing workers— docility, dexterity, and cheapness—turned out to be, in countries as diverse as Mexico and Malaysia, associated with the same population: young women. It is this persistent correlation—simultaneously ubiquitous and imperfect—between the type of work (export processing) and the sex of the worker (female) that feminist analysts of global production in the 1980s and 1990s sought to explain. (211)

Moreover, works such as Salzinger's (2003) offer valuable perspectives into the everyday life of working women and men across the global South.

Despite the depth of this scholarship, though, I argue that there is a tendency to explain the predominance of poorly paid workers who are young women as the direct effect of the gendered assumptions of Northern MNCs, whether buyers or suppliers. Instead, in this section, I

[38] In the line, I later discovered that because I was not being paid, I was cutting the target effectively in half for another worker in my line. Other people laughed. As one person put it me, "Your line likes you."

analyze the ways in which the dominant ideology of sexism is encoded in lower wages for the entire workforce because of *changes on the shop floor*. Pay differentials for men and women are relatively modest at the lower levels. I focus on specific mechanisms such as incentives for reaching targets, which, proponents of lean argued, would strengthen mass production by reincorporating principles of craft production. Accordingly, the specific ways in which wage repression manifested as a gendered issue was the effect of changes on the shop floor.

First and foremost, managers justified lower wages according to craft principles by arguing that women return to the village after five years because they could obtain gratuity from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF). In one instance a manager in the Katunayake EPZ I interviewed revealed the assumption behind this claim. He argued that women who migrated became more "sophisticated" (interview, April 28th, 2015). He compared a woman whose initial National ID photo appears innocent to the more urbane, fashionable woman she supposedly becomes. At the same time, he mentioned the difficulty retaining people after five years, according to the common trope about EPF payments. In other instances, managers claimed that women use the money to pay for dowry and to get married. As a friend in the Katunayake boarding house pointed out to me though, she among other older women workers faced an age limit (*vayasa simava*) in recruitment to the factory.

At the same time, male workers often adopted similar tropes as management. When I spoke with Vijaya, for example, he mentioned that women "change" when they arrive in the Katunayake EPZ, which is close to the capital of Colombo, although they retain the core of their village identity. The fixation on the moral chastity of women is common across the world, perhaps especially in industrial manufacturing. As Fernandes (1997) points out, male workers paradoxically are often complicit in the same tactics that management uses to control the labor

force. At Lean Lanka among other factories, however, they endured similar work pressures along with women.

The managers at Lean Lanka adopted images of young women in a slightly subtler way. They emphasized empowerment, echoing the neoliberal appropriation of feminist discourse that has become common in the portrayal of women in the global South (see Sharma 2008). During a training session for new recruits, the trainer spoke in concrete terms about what workers, both women and men, could expect to achieve. A tall, strapping athlete, he argued that workers could achieve their goals. "In five years, you can get married and start a business." He mentioned the salary of 18,000 Rupees (about $121) but he said that it could increase to 28,000 Rupees ($188) if the workers achieved the targets.

He made an abstract calculation that a worker could save 15,000 Rupees (about $101) from their wage, use the rest for daily life (or as he put it, "beauty"), and still save 150,000 Rupees (about $1005) a year. In five years, he argued, they would have 10 lakhs (about $6700). I was incredulous. In my field notes for the day, I wrote, "I must reiterate, this [calculation] is completely insane and directly contradicts the experience of Vijaya and all [the] other workers in [the] Katunayake boarding house" (field notes, June 2nd, 2016).

The trainer though was charismatic, especially because he incorporated aspects of his own life in his speech. He explained that he completed his A-Levels, obtained an HR diploma, and finally completed a Masters, thanks to his employment at Lean Lanka. As he put, it "I'm telling the truth." Still, despite his own credentials, his speech played on familiar tropes about young women workers returning to the village. He said that he knew someone who started their own shop and became self-employed. According to the trainer, workers would get what they needed, and if they needed more, they could earn it.

Management drew from the discourse of small entrepreneurship both to convince workers that exploitation was legitimate and to reintroduce elements of craft production; mediated, of course, by the structure of an MNC competing in the global market. During another seminar in a training room at the back of the factory, a thin executive explained earnestly to workers why "efficiency" (*karyakshamaya*) was paramount. He outlined the principles of his subject, work study, focusing on two themes: "work measurement" (*kaalaya*) and "method study" (*kramaya*).

About twenty workers, the instructor and I sat at the front of the large room. Next to the whiteboard, he made a gesture touching his nose from behind the back of his head and explained the process of efficiency. He explained why workers should arrange the work space to achieve maximum efficiency. "If you arrange things properly, everything you need to use will be close." The work study executive presented several charts and formulas on a whiteboard, explaining bottlenecks in the production process. He concluded by discussing the formula for calculating the incentive. He explained the ways in which workers could apply the same strategy for efficiency to their own lives. The main goal, however, was to intensify the labor process.

Despite management's explanation of the labor process to workers, it relied on impossible targets and incomprehensible incentive schemes to squeeze every drop of labor possible. Both at Lean Lanka and other factories across the island, workers were given targets few, if any, could achieve completely. In one instance, at another factory, workers mentioned that they were required to sew 1,000 pieces in a given day. Depending on the operation, this target may have been more difficult to achieve. Among all the workers I spoke to, across factories and regardless of task, it seemed impossible to obtain the full incentive advertised by garment companies, even for the most experienced.

In addition, workers could also receive a line incentive, although this bonus was also nearly impossible to achieve in practice. For example, shorts might require the use of a specific sewing machine, with one worker sewing the seam of one side and another worker the other side. Workers sewed in a line, meaning each one was dependent on what the other sewed. If another worker slowed down the line, the entire line would lose the line incentive although they may still receive their own individual incentive. In the case of Lean Lanka, management also required all workers from the same line to attend work each day, with only two days of leave per month allotted *for the entire line*. As Madhu put it, "Every two weeks one person can take leave, at the end of the month then we each get 2,000 Rupees [about $13]."

These incentives could occasionally motivate workers, but in other cases they did not. One day nearly half the factory failed to show up because management required workers to come in on a Poya (full moon) holiday because an order needed to be filled. I stared around the factory and saw the empty lines and thought to myself, "This is what a strike must look like." Madhu enthused, "Good job, isn't it?" (*ee vaeda honda nee*). I asked though, why was she still sewing? "We want to get the line incentive." Again, if any of the workers in the line had not showed up, they likely would have not received the line incentive for the month. Miraculously, my entire line of fifteen people showed up to work. For the rest of the factory, however, even the outside chance of 2,000 Rupees extra at the end of the month could not persuade them.

Accordingly, management's framework for incentives did not explain why workers did or did not show up to work. In some cases, as a friend put it, workers did not mind working on Poya day because of "double OT [overtime]." Others said that they had better things to do. One young man reiterated he would take a trip on a Poya day for which work had been scheduled, because he had planned it earlier. Regardless of workers' individual choices, the incentive scheme in

general worked to management's advantage by inculcating the belief in people that indeed, as the athlete-turned-trainer had mentioned during instruction, workers could earn "as much as they want." Pay, however, was not based on workers' skill, seniority, or any other standard criteria, so much as their ability to push themselves to their physical and mental limits.

Flexibility on the Shop Floor

One of the most prominent tropes to emerge in the reconfiguration of lean production is the discourse of flexibility. According to managers at enterprises across the export garment industry, the goal was to achieve maximum efficiency by having the unilateral ability to move workers between different areas of the shop floor. As Silver (2003) notes, flexibility implies management's capacity to dominate labor. Thus, the analysis of flexibility on the shop floor is not about efficiency so much as power. Edwards (1980) argues that so long as capital employs labor, it must find ways to make profit. This process implies a constant struggle over work rules. At Lean Lanka, flexibility, as a description of the apparatus of lean management, was a weapon in capital's arsenal.

Much of the critical literature on lean management notes the constant struggle that has occurred over attempts to implement new techniques in industries such as automobile manufacturing, where workers have a greater degree of what Wright (2000) refers to as structural power. Scholars also recognize that different national contexts imply differences in labor's ability to negotiate the transition. Implementation of lean in Japan depended on maintaining a structure of seniority that entailed job security for those who worked at the core of the enterprise. In contrast, in the US context, the emphasis has been "management-by-stress," or "lean and mean" (Parker and Slaughter 1990). To the extent that lean is adopted by garment enterprises in Sri Lanka, it incorporates the characteristics of the latter.

Moreover, workers from different historical and geographic backgrounds respond to the imposition of flexibility in different ways. Classic writing on the formation of the working class focuses on the ways in which artisanal labor was incorporated into the factory system in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As Thompson (1967) famously wrote, this process required disciplining the labor force according to a capitalist conception of time. The battle over lean production since the 1970s is the latest phase of the conflict between capital and labor, because workers accustomed to standardized mass assembly are now required to perform multiple tasks on the shop floor.

The question is, how do Southern workers, who may proceed directly from villages to factories, negotiate lean? Ong (2010), for example, describes the fate of Malaysian women in the semiconductor industry in broad strokes. She argues that "besides Taylorist techniques which rigidly enforced control through the repetitive performance of decomposed tasks, surveillance as a modern form of power was pervasive within the electronics environment" (Ong 2010: 161). Her ethnography implies a broad shift from Fordist mass assembly production to post-Fordist, or late capitalist, production based on outsourcing. In this section, I analyze changes at the level of shop floor organization to develop a more fine-grained appreciation of historical and geographic differences.

Workers at Lean Lanka may have come from rural areas, but they confronted management's understanding of flexibility within the structure of a modern production facility. Workers recognized that the system was stacked against them. The discourse of flexibility did not enable the advancement of workers in their careers at Lean Lanka, among similar factories in the export garment industry. Instead, workers shouldered more of the burden while management deepened its control over the labor process. Many workers' critique of this process was

accordingly expressed in class terms. Specifically, workers complained about obstacles to career advancement. To understand this critique, we must analyze management's definition of job categories.

One of the first things I noticed when surveying the shop floor at Lean Lanka was the presence of women wearing headscarves of different colors. I had seen the same pattern when I made brief visits to other factories owned by different companies, but I had the opportunity to learn the specific grades when I did my research at Lean Lanka. One worker explained the colors of the different bandanas: "The purple ones are jumpers, they can work anywhere; the blue are training; green are regular members; orange are not yet permanent; dark blue are pregnant women, and yellow are more experienced, they can perform operations on about four different types of sewing machines." Although the colors referred to different types of work, they did not signify trades as such.

Instead, at Lean Lanka, among other factories owned by different companies, management expected workers to be able to perform any operation. A specific piece of clothing might require ten operations, but no single person in the lines had a monopoly on knowledge of any specific task. People generally performed operations for which they had the highest efficiency rate. Management could also transfer them within and between lines to do different operations. Thus, people who sewed were generally classified as machine operators. Similarly, in the context of the maquiladora system in Mexico, Shaiken (1994) argues that:

> [The] innovative form of work organization stemmed from managerial fears of being vulnerable to skilled workers in a tight labor market… Moreover, the U.S. managers who initially set up Azul disliked the power of skilled workers in conventional factories. One industrial relations manager emphasized, "Managers in this plant hate the [old] skilled trades. To them, the very mention of the term is like running your nails down a blackboard." (61)

In the case of Lean Lanka, although there were more experienced workers who had moved between different factories, none who I met asserted a self-identity as a skilled worker as such. For example, someone might move from a garment factory that produces shirts to one that produces shorts, but they would still retain the same classification as a machine operator.

Managers categorized the redistribution of tasks according to workers' ability to follow the procedure, rather than their identity as a skilled worker as such. Moreover, the components of the manufacturing process were designed in such a way as to complement the approach to flexibility that enabled management's dominance of the entire process. As Dohse and others (1985) mention in the context of Japan: "…The line workers are themselves responsible for defects. They have to inspect and correct their own work, and any defects subsequently discovered are attributed to them as a performance deficiency" (132).

The same was true at Lean Lanka. In addition to likely losing the individual incentive, workers who sewed a garment incorrectly were required to reassemble the same piece. This tedious process meant pulling the threads out before sewing the damaged piece again. The factory in which I worked placed a heavy emphasis on environmental "sustainability" and avoiding waste. This ethos of responsibility, however, meant that workers experienced greater pressure to sew everything correctly the first time.

When managers explained the process to workers in training they argued that workers were themselves responsible for the outcome. During the mechanical training for new workers, for example, an experienced mechanic reiterated the connection between the technical process of learning about the sewing machines and achieving production targets. As he put it, "The needle can become loose, and you will not reach the target." The mechanic gave the example of failure to anticipate the breakdown of a machine, which in two hours could set a line back by five

hundred pieces. Like the work study executive mentioned in the previous section, he explained that breakdown would delay the shipment, and force more expensive methods of transport, such as by airline. He emphasized that the delay, in turn, would affect workers' pay.

The mechanic drew diagrams on a whiteboard labeling "sugar" (*seeni*) and "rice" (rice) boxes, carried by a truck. If fifty per cent fell out in the process, that was the amount a worker would lose. The mechanic was soft-spoken but no-nonsense. As he put it, "That's how it is" (*ee vagey thamay*), implying it would be the workers' problem in terms of lost pay if production was impacted in any way. Workers' responsibility for delays in production and damaged goods, however, did not mean that they received a proportionally higher pay for the risk. Capitalist ideologues often portray markets as lean and efficient based on the risk entrepreneurs take. In practice, however, at places such as Lean Lanka, the managers tried to offload as much of the responsibility onto workers as possible.

The training instructors' lessons had the function of both explaining the practicality of sewing for production, but also to internalize in workers what Burawoy (1985) refers to as a "micro-apparatus of domination."[39] The concept of the micro-apparatus of domination helps us understand the significance of the debate that has occurred within critical studies of lean management. Some authors argue that lean shows that workers can also be identified as participants, thus breaking down the separation between mental and manual labor (Krafcik 1988; Sayer 1986). The scholarly consensus though is that lean easily coexists with extreme

[39] As he notes: "Yet too often that importance is mystified by a certain impatience to discover an actor here and now without examining its basis in micro-apparatuses of domination, the relationship of the latter to state apparatuses, and the barriers that capitalism poses to the transformation of these forms of domination" (Burawoy 1985: 9).

standardization because workers do not ultimately have a say in the way in which production is carried out, and for what purpose (Dawson and Webb 1989; Price 1994).

Instead, to manage the implementation of lean, factories in the Sri Lankan export garment industry, including Lean Lanka, rapidly expanded production staff to handle problems that were deemed beyond workers' knowledge. Whenever we were sewing, executives would stop by the floor to verify targets and to ensure the smooth running of the system. On one day, a few executives came and watched my line. A young professional stood right behind Madhu and watched her sew. They took a garment she sewed to measure it, to determine the "efficiency" of the process. Madhu seemed to be jovial, joking with the executives. After they left, though, she complained. "I can't sew." I had also noticed the constant pressure of the surveillance. I went over to one of the executives and inquired about what they were doing. She said one of the managers had asked them to observe our line because of our high efficiency, and to figure out what to do in the event of breakdown.

The results of this investigation may have been useful, but the question is who appropriated the knowledge. The emphasis on efficiency meant extracting more from workers. Moreover, the outcome of lean management was the expansion of a layer of production staff, with their supposedly unique access to technical knowledge. When I spoke to an older worker, she commented about the extent to which the process had changed over the decades. As she put it, "We didn't have all these things. There was just the mechanic, the sewer and the supervisor." She also mentioned the machines did not have blades to cut the thread. Most of the operation was done manually. She added, "I can sew everything: your trousers, boxers, shirts, all of it." Her comments also indicate that although it is often seen as "low-tech," the tools of the garment industry have also changed significantly.

Regardless of their official position then, some workers had a tremendous amount of experience that unified conception and practice. One quiet woman in my line sewed the hardest operation. She had been working at Lean Lanka for over a decade. Dasuni was a professional in the truest sense of the word. One day when I accidentally did not spot the change in thread color required for a new batch, the eagle-eyed Dasuni quickly identified the problem before many pieces had been passed down the line. I was embarrassed, but she was not bothered. The quality inspector for our line though came over and watched over my production carefully in the following days.

Dasuni, like the older lady who had worked decades in the industry, had a tremendous amount of knowledge and skill. The question was whether the company recognized it as such. Dasuni received a meager wage despite her years of experience. Although she did not complain openly, however, others were vocal. One older woman pulled me to the side one day: "I've been working here for [so many years]…and this is how much I get. It's unfair (*asadharanayay*)!" On another day, near the end of my research period in the factory, a staff member confronted me in the training school. "You know, I've been working at this company for [so many] years, and still I have not moved up to a management position. That's not fair (*eeka asadharanay*)" I prompted him to explain. "Why is that?" "If you go to a smaller factory, say [Local Lanka], those people go from the bottom to the top."

The staff member continued: "I have a friend who works in one of the factories and is now a manager…For example, if you work on an estate, picking tea leaves (*te dallo*), eventually you move up." He identified the root problem. "Here because it's a big company with a 'reputation,' they just want graduates (*upadhi*), so we don't have an opportunity (*avasthavak nae*)." The staff member identified the same educational issues that had impeded so many others

from moving up within the export garment industry. Like Vijaya, back in the Katunayake EPZ, he observed inequality in educational opportunity as an obstacle to career advancement.[40]

According to the people I spoke to in the lines, the problem was not that they were not skilled. It is that they were not recognized for the knowledge that they had obtained. Thus, they continued to be dominated by the managers who claimed to understand the entire process. The company's goal, of course, was profit for the owners, which did not necessarily require reinvesting in capital-intensive industry. Management, however, could not control the most basic variable: workers' ability to opt out of factory employment entirely.

"Like Eating Salt"

Thus far, in this chapter I have focused on the ways in which management imposed its understanding of production on workers. How was the exhaustion inevitably entailed by this process embodied by workers? Depending on a variety of factors, workers might decide either that they must stick with the job, even for the meagre pay, or that it was not worth it. In my experience at Lean Lanka, I found physical and mental exhaustion were perhaps the most important factors for determining the high rate of labor turnover. This incontrovertible fact provoked a steady debate among policy makers and managers about stabilizing the supply of labor to the export garment industry.

Given that I only worked in the factory for three months, and I was accorded the privileges of an outside researcher, it would be impossible for me to say that I truly grasped the experience of work in the factory as a necessary part of my own survival. Nevertheless, there

[40] For example, despite the creation of vocational training institutes by several of the major garment companies in collaboration with the government, they could not overcome the retreat of universal education.

were moments when I approximated the sensation. I wrote in my field notes on one particularly exhausting day:

> We returned to the line and I began sewing as usual. We've been sewing the same [pieces of clothing] for [the same brand], which is good because we don't have to change the threads, so I'm hitting targets of around 220 pieces an hour, but on the other hand it's extremely repetitive. My eyes are starting to hurt from focusing, and I end up spending more time in bed during the mornings, just resting. Also my back is hurting. I tried adjusting the cushion, and even stole a chair from the other line, but it doesn't help much. Later I went to find the tall guy from [another village], [another worker's] friend, because he stuck out like me and he said that his back hurts a lot too. He said though "you get used to it, like eating salt" (*lunu vaedi wela purudu wenawa*). (field notes, June 30th, 2016)

The response of the man I spoke to was telling: one must put up with the stress of work, but eventually it kills you.[41]

The experience of overwork was especially burdensome for women, who often worked two jobs: one in the factory and one at home. When I came into the training school one day, a young woman who had just turned eighteen had bloodshot eyes. I asked her what happened, and she mentioned that she had spent the whole night cleaning. Even more experienced workers were likely to be burdened with work at home. One of the training instructors mentioned that she produced slippers for a local shoe company at home. She was usually taciturn, but she mentioned once that she managed to get more sleep—five hours—because the electricity had gone out at her house. She played it off with her trademark dark humor. I could tell though the extent to which she was exhausted because of her generally curt responses.

Each time I had a moment when I began to feel exhausted, I was forced to recognize what workers endured. Coming to work on a Poya day, people asked me how I felt. I replied, "I'm sick of this (*epa venawa*)." Most laughed. At one point when we were having tea I mentioned

[41] I thank Purnima Mankekar for pointing out the significance of this remark to me.

that I was sick of Sri Lanka, but especially of work in the factory. A pregnant worker wryly noted, “If you’re sick of this place, imagine how we feel (*koccara durata apitat epa vuna*).” Workers at Lean Lanka, like those back in the Katunayake EPZ, struggled to make ends meet. More importantly, their sense of exhaustion represented a concrete physical limit to the work any human can perform. As Braverman (1998) points out though, capital chooses to ignore reality until it becomes problematic for making profit. An obtuse manager at a smaller firm in the Katunayake EPZ, for example, referred to “lazy” workers who failed to show up to work.

The managers at Lean Lanka tended to be more tempered in their claims. They promoted the corporate image of empowerment. Still, they struggled to grasp why workers were not showing up to work. One woman mentioned at tea time that she would try and find alternative employment in a government youth agency. When she failed to show up to work, the young HR staff tried to convince her to return. Eventually, she did. In this sense, management invested time and energy, even calling workers by phone to convince them to return to work. They posted performance indicators for variables such as absenteeism. As one of my friends in HR put it though, they had missed the indicators for several months by the time I obtained my posting in the factory. Moreover, based on a recruiters’ estimates of how many workers had come and gone since the factory opened, I calculated an average annual turnover rate of nearly 25%.

Despite some managers earnest appeals that I should explain to them why workers were leaving, I realized that on a fundamental level Lean Lanka did not need to change its policy by paying workers more or moderating the intensity of work. It had a captive labor market. Workers could move between factories, but they were unlikely to find work that paid a wage that was

even remotely competitive outside the export garment industry.[42] As Wright (2000) puts it, "Employers face a trade-off between spending more money on improving the effectiveness of monitoring or paying higher employment rents. Such efficiency wages are a form of negative class compromise insofar as the higher wages are an alternative to more purely coercive strategies by employers in the face of strategies of resistance (shirking) by individual workers" (966). Managers at Lean Lanka decided monitoring was more effective for the bottom line.

The relatively lower rate of investment in other industries meant that the export garment industry specifically retained its position as the leading edge of private enterprise in Sri Lanka. It was one of the few options for stable employment for workers coming from poor areas. Instead of supporting state policies that would tighten the labor market, such as public investment in universal education, however, managers attempted to convince workers rhetorically that employment in the factory was worth it in the long term. They did so by invoking the trope of participation, a common instrument in lean management for securing workers' consent. Even though workers did not necessarily get paid more, however, they could also use the rhetoric of participation and teamwork to secure informal rights and claims—however modest—that made the work environment slightly more tolerable.

Participation and Resistance

One of the most common aspects of the literature on labor studies is analysis of the ways in which rules play out in practice (in the context of lean, see Vallas 2003). Because, as discussed in the Introduction, the literature emerged at the height of Fordist mass assembly production in the US and UK, authors tend to look at the advent of lean as a reaction to business

[42] At the time, the official minimum wage was 10,000 Rupees (about $67). Workers in smaller private establishments, or the informal sector, were even less likely to receive legally-mandated benefits such as the EPF.

unionism, based on contracts between big unions and big employers. Burawoy (1985), for example, examines the ways in which "bargaining over 'custom and practice' rather than consent to bureaucratically administered rules shaped production politics at Jay's" (132). At the same time, authors also noted the resemblance of mass assembly to older traditions: "The modern American system of shop-floor control in mass production had produced a parcelling of de-facto rights to property in jobs [based on seniority] that would bring a smile of recognition to the lips of any historian who had studied the struggles between lords and peasants in medieval Europe" (Piore and Sabel 1986:115).

Lean Lanka, of course, was a modern production facility that was directed under the relatively new principles of lean management. Workers at Lean Lanka did not necessarily arrive from a craft background. Many came from families engaged in farming. Still, in the Sri Lankan export garment industry, it appears, after a relatively short period of time, workers identified the scope for negotiation. In the case of Lean Lanka, because workers did not have unions, they had to rely on other tactics to moderate the pace of work, or at least to make the work environment tolerable, such as engaging in socializing. This process mirrored Scott's description (1985) of "weapons of the weak." Instead of being in a small village undergoing the Green Revolution, I observed these tactics in a factory that had fully embraced the techniques of a modern supply chain.

At Lean Lanka, buyers' audits were relatively common. The company assured buyers it maintained the highest standards of production. For workers, of course, this meant the intensification of work, as Lean Lanka sought to improve its position vis-à-vis other competitors in the export garment industry by imposing more rigorous standards. One of the most basic rules, however, that food could not be brought onto the shop floor, was often ignored by workers.

When I first moved into the lines after the training school, a worker came by and gave me *jambu* (a local fruit). I quickly realized that this exchange was a way in which people injected social interaction into the work process, stopping by different lines and sharing stories and small snacks.

In the case of our line, Madhu laughed when I snuck a small fruit, because as she put it, we had to hide snacks from the managers. Initially, I did not fully grasp this deception because I did not understand the importance of the buyers' audit. One day, I brought unopened snacks to the shop floor thinking that I could distribute them later. A young HR staff member eager to demonstrate his authority, though one who I had known well and joked with at earlier points in my research, came over: "Devaka the team members aren't meeting their targets because they are coming to talk to you." I replied: "That's something I can't control." I then explained that I was focused on learning the process of sewing, and my priority was my research. The HR staff member concluded the conversation: "Ok, you talk to them at tea time then. Also, you can't eat on shop floor. We are producing garments. Please take your food to HR room."

After he left, the workers were sympathetic. You must eat secretly, they advised. Another young staff member came over and demonstrated his rapport with the workers. He ribbed that "[The other HR staff member] doesn't know how to make friends!" It was clear that eating and hiding food on the line was part of what Burawoy refers to as a "work game." There was always an element of danger.

On another occasion, a line supervisor from the previous shift found guava in a packing case where our line had been hiding fruit. She mentioned it to the floor manager. Madhu was fuming. The same HR staff member who scolded me came over and explained that if anyone was caught eating they would be sent home for three days. As Burawoy (1985) writes: "In any shop

there are ‘official’ or ‘management-approved’ ways of performing tasks, and there is the workers’ lore devised and revised in response to any management offensive” (41). Sharing food though remained one of the many ways in which workers strengthened rapport with each other.

Another method was conversation throughout the day. Each eight-hour shift had two meal breaks: a fifteen-minute one for tea and a thirty-minute one for breakfast or dinner. Time was shaved off because people had to run from the workstation to the queue in the canteen, hoping the day’s special “treat” would not run out. At meal breaks though, we also had more opportunities to talk and socialize. Workers informally divided themselves among tables by gender and occupational category. The male mechanics and cutters sat at their own tables, while predominantly female machine operators occupied the rest of the spots in the canteen. I circulated among different groups of people, who asked me about everything, from my ethnic background, to living in the US.

Occasionally, the conversation was risqué. One mechanic held up his fingers and demonstrated a sign for sexual intercourse and asked if I had met anyone on the shop floor who I was interested in. Women workers as well were curious, and they often made jokes that I could not fully follow (given my moderate ability in Sinhala). Still, our conversations echoed an observation Peiss (1985) makes:

> In mediating the relationship between the wage-earner and the labor process, work cultures involved not only informal efforts to control work but also the daily interactions that helped pass the long hours. While women characterized the workplace as tedious and demanding, a necessity to be endured, most tried to create places of sociability and support on the shop floor. (46)

As she puts it, “Risqué jokes, swearing, and sexual advice were a common part of the work environment in restaurants, laundries, factories, and department stores” (50).

Management attempted to draw from workers' practices of sociability to strengthen its own framework for persuading people to work harder. One of the most obvious examples was the training school. During the first few weeks I was at Lean Lanka, on several days I participated in camp-style events where new workers could meet each other and learn more about working as a "team." These included setting up sports teams with a leader (*nayaka*), a slogan (*jayagoshana*), and a song (*sindu*). We played small games, such as cooperating to pass a ball over and under team members. The goal of the exercises was to teach workers basic concepts about production, including the importance of speed, quality, and cooperation; the concepts of production mentioned earlier in this chapter. The athelete-turned-trainer interspersed throughout the lessons: "[The point is] the first issue is producing quality." He reiterated, "If you work too quickly, you may undermine quality."

Lean Lanka also attempted to entice workers by hosting activities, from sports' tournaments to Buddhist religious festivities. One night I attended an all-night *pirith* (spiritual protection) chanting ceremony in the factory. The entire factory had been reconfigured to set up a *mandape* (a small structure in which Buddhist priests sit) at the center, with white sheets creating an enclosure inside the factory. Before the festivities, the canteen was set up to serve a *dhansala*; the practice of giving free food I describe in Chapter Three.

I went with the younger HR staff to a meeting area in the nearby town where we participated in a ceremonial parade by the sea. Each grade of worker and staff was present. They were assigned different roles: some of the younger female machine operators carried baskets of flowers, while the mechanics twirled fireballs. The parade was thoroughly entertaining. Nevertheless, as I sat with my line throughout the rest of the night, over the chanting pumped

through loudspeakers, I struggled to reconcile the enjoyment we had been having with the everyday reality of the work. Even occasional festivities could not dissuade many from leaving.

Conclusion

Previous ethnographies of Southern factory workers have conveyed usefully the centrality of the idea of gender to the production process. As Bair (2010), citing Wright (2006), summarizes, "Discourses of disposability differ, but in each case they serve to devalue female labor power and to naturalize that devaluation through culturally specific idioms" (222). Nevertheless, in addition to analyzing the construction of workers as female subjects, the question I have asked in this chapter is, how does the reorganization of the shop floor materialize this process?

When authors look at issues such as the consolidation of global manufacturing, many emphasize the presence of Northern buyers that they argue achieve a monopsony in the supply chain, putting pressure on suppliers (see, for example, the comprehensive analysis of Collins 2003). The tendency in the literature to focus on the role of small subcontractors, however, means we need a different framing to identify the trend of consolidation among major suppliers in places such as Sri Lanka. Further inquiry must be done statistically on the degree of concentration among suppliers, but my point is that the global garment industry cannot be represented in one way. The dynamics of lean adapted from the North operates and has a significant impact on workers in the Sri Lankan export garment industry.

Subcontracting, like precarious work, has its role to play in the global garment industry. My remarks though are confined to my experience in Sri Lanka, especially insofar as the export garment industry is seen as the "ethical" representative in the region. Workers may have used their skills outside of the factory, to run small shops. Companies may have hired more contract

workers, as I will discuss in Chapter Four. But, in addition to the fact that they negotiated relationships with buyers, Sri Lankan MNCs, for example, had the resources to portray themselves as global competitors while maintaining their position as members of the Sri Lankan capitalist class. Their self-representation included awards and ceremonies in which they were celebrated as leaders of industry in the mainstream press.

Corporate leadership of the Sri Lankan economy depended, however, on wage repression and the intensification of work. In the case of Lean Lanka, its parent company emphasized incentives to supplement base pay by appealing to workers' lives outside of the factory. The process implied that there were few concrete opportunities for advancement within the industry itself. As discussed in Chapter One, the discourse of small entrepreneurship is central to the Sri Lankan state's own articulation of the mass benefits of export capitalism. Nevertheless, these opportunities are foreclosed by underfunding of public services such as education. Thus, one of the concrete issues that came up in the factory was the fact that even those who may have had years of experience were not necessarily identified by the company for promotions within a well-defined career track.

My analysis of the shop floor not only reiterates the critique of the dominant images of female passivity and submission in the scholarly literature, but also points to workers' own critiques insofar as they anticipated an alternative to lean. Workers established their own informal limits, such as sharing snacks during worktime. The export garment industry, on the other hand had, accepted a certain rate of turnover. These dynamics represented challenges for organizers, who I discuss in Chapter Four. Moreover, job turnover is another aspect of the broader challenges authors in the North are discussing more, as the decline of full employment reinforces the idea that precarity defines contemporary work (Standing 2014).

In the case of workers like Madhu, though, the organization of the shop floor also informed her own critique of its ideological justification, including rhetoric such as teamwork and participation. Madhu's and other workers' criticism of managerial justifications leads me to question the "neophyte" factory worker emphasis in the broader literature on Southern factory workers. While some young women workers may have had little personal experience previously working in a factory, its centrality to Sri Lankans' decades-long understanding of export capitalism meant that a class of workers had emerged who identified the ways in which the system operated. The challenge, as I argue throughout this dissertation, is, how do we identify their role in the making of the Sri Lankan working class?

The problem is that the same gendered ideology expressed by management was also accepted among many workers, especially men (Fernandes 1997). Because women are often viewed as "homemakers," as Fernandes, Chhachhi (1999), and others note, they are marginalized as factory workers. The struggle over the definition of the occupation points to the representative limits of their authority on the job. As Davies (1999) puts it, "Policies can support implicit gender definitions, such as defining women not as 'workers' but as 'mothers earning a second income', as reflected by lack of bargaining for and institutionalization of maternity leave and daycare" (400). To analyze the ways in which women workers critique this ideology, however, requires dissecting tropes about global feminized labor and focusing on the specific ways in which Sri Lankan working women, for example, are interpellated by the state and employers.

Workers like Madhu knew that they were part of a global supply chain, but also that the factory in which they worked was owned by a Sri Lankan MNC. Ultimately the target of their critique was the class of employers. The global discourse of gender, on the one hand, was appropriated by management, using terms and concepts such as empowerment to neutralize the

exploitative effects of employment. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan state had a policy of re-emphasizing women's non-worker, maternal role by, for example, prohibiting employment abroad for mothers with young children.

Many workers I met at Lean Lanka also had worked abroad. Their experience reinforced the idea that the specific job they worked was one aspect of their location in the class structure. Yet to understand the ways in which export garment workers represented the working class requires contextualizing the trope of the feminization of labor within global supply chains. We must continue to analyze the ways in which Sri Lankan capitalists and the state operationalize gender as a variable of labor force participation. I will return to this issue in Chapter Four when I discuss the Sri Lankan labor movement, insofar as it attempted to recruit from diverse groups of workers.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE IDEOLOGY OF RECIPROCITY AMONG WORKERS

Introduction

When I met Sithumini in the boarding house in Averiwatte, adjacent to the Katunayake Export Processing Zone (EPZ), I could see why she was the boarding house's informal leader. Funny and charismatic, we often joked about what I was doing during my long research periods when I had nothing else to do. Whether we bumped into each other at the well or on the way back from the market, Sithumini was always quick with a joke. She noted that I had comforts others did not have, such as buying food from *kadees* (small shops). Although she was the "leader" though, she occasionally struggled to manage different relationships in the boarding house. Initially we had become close friends through Vijaya. We went on trips to different places, and I experienced leisure from workers' perspective. I treasured these opportunities for the relationships I could build. Inevitably, however, conflicts between people emerged, and we stopped going on trips.

The tentative nature of community in the boarding house, in addition to Lean Lanka, reflected challenges for people living at the edge of survival. As much as people needed to rely on each other, even the slightest perceived insult could morph into antagonism. In the boarding house, for example, water usage became an issue. Sithumini fell out with another mutual friend, Hirunika, over who was using more water at the common tap. Still, I kept wanting to look for hope in community. It was the only alternative that I had seen up to that point to the everyday drudgery in the factory. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I examine the tensions and contradictions of community to try and grasp collective practices that could be incorporated into organizing, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

In the previous chapters, I looked at the relationship between export garment workers and the working class. For workers, their concerns were not just confined to workplace conditions and poor public services, and vice versa. Instead, issues intersected, reflecting the specific location from which they understood and critiqued the structure of accumulation that I have referred to as export capitalism. Nevertheless, as I discussed in the Introduction, the fact that workers produce more value than they receive in the form of a wage or services become what I refer to as unrealized demands. These demands are hard to measure. They can appear from the smallest instances of frustration, such as lack of time for oneself, to bigger issues, such as lack of decent housing.

One of the ways, however, in which workers in general overcome or at least attempt to manage this gap is by participating in community. Changes in export capitalism are reflected in greater emphasis on practices of community. As authors note, the impact of budget cuts mandated by structural adjustment in many Southern countries incentivizes informal relationships and self-help networks to manage the gap in livelihoods (Du Toit and Neves 2014; Harris and Scully 2015: 427). The history of practices of reciprocity highlights workers' location in the class structure, enabling us to identify the ways in which what appears as "culture" is the outcome of a hegemonic process.

At the same time there are universally observed codes that appear to manifest institutions that do not necessarily have their origin in capitalism, but which reinforce hierarchy within community. From studies of the working class in the US and Europe at the turn of the century, to contemporary studies of workers in the global South, authors recognize that women are often burdened with daily reproductive tasks. Parratt (1998) writes:

> Like many aspects of married women's leisure, these were at one and the same time elements of the social, cultural and economic mechanisms which women used to fulfil

> their roles of managing households on limited means, and potential sources of real enjoyment. This permeability of the lines between leisure and labour certainly meant that the one helped to lighten the other, but it also makes it difficult to find much that can be clearly distinguished as leisure in the sense of a discrete inviolable period of time in which women could, to modify Roy Rosenzweig's phrase, do what they willed. (46-47)

The question of interpersonal relationships, then, is the scale at which I examine challenges engendered by community. Gendered relationships are critical to understanding why and how export garment workers mobilize. I examine this dimension further in Chapter Four when I look at the challenges of women's participation in the labor movement.

Authors see reproductive work and the structures of support established within local communities ambivalently. On the one hand, some argue that unremunerated work done in households subsidizes capital. This argument was central to the "capital needs" school and is part of the general argument that life outside of work is inherently reduced to the functioning of capitalism (for a critique, see Sanyal 2007). Wolf (1994), for example, argues: "The extraordinarily low cost of labor in this part of Indonesia reflects the fact that daughters living at home can be paid a wage that is below the level of subsistence precisely because many parents are subsidizing their daughters' earnings (and thus their employers' wage bill) by providing money for transportation, lunch, and so on" (215).

On the other hand, authors focusing on the rise of social assistance programs discussed in Chapter One envision the potential decommodification of livelihoods: "Along with decommodifying households through reducing dependence on paid labor or raising the reservation wage, social assistance programs can affect labor force structure in other ways: children and the elderly stop working while formerly unpaid care workers can garner income outside of the home" (Harris and Scully: 430; see also Klasen and Woolard 2001). How do we analyze these contrasting possibilities?

Rather than providing an unequivocal answer, in this chapter I analyze the moments in which community can be both enabling and constraining. Moreover, export garment workers' communities in the boarding house, the factory, and the village remained tentative and unstable. The challenges became apparent in the drive to migrate. To the extent that unrealized demands become more extreme, the only option becomes escape. Finally, the inevitable social disaffection entailed by a lack of options means we must examine practices of masculinity, especially violence within and against workers' communities. This pressure reflects the way in which community itself is often hierarchized, and thus becomes aporetic for those trying to survive under the current system.

Practices of Reciprocity

If capital does not pay workers enough to survive, the question is, how do workers reproduce themselves as a class? The idea that the wage must cover workers' reproduction is central to Marx's analysis of capital. As scholars have shown over the past several decades, however, throughout the global South people who have been dispossessed are not necessarily integrated into capitalist production. From the 1970s onward, the debate shifted from the question of dualism, meaning, whether capitalism coexists with a parallel, non-monetized agrarian economy, to a focus on the informal sector (Berger and Piore 1980). As Sanyal (2007), one of the leading theorists, puts it, capitalism has in fact excluded a vast surplus population that survives in a "need economy."

Although inspired by these studies, my analysis in this section, and throughout this chapter, takes a different approach. Export garment workers earn a wage and therefore they are subject to the dynamics of capitalist exploitation, like any workforce across the world. According to our understanding of "need," however, people must rely on connections and support outside

the factory. I argue that this feature is not unique to workers in Sri Lanka or elsewhere throughout the global South. It defines the fate of workers under capitalism as such.

Even in the North, for example, many young adults have been forced to move back home with their parents. Despite the "self-made" myth of American capitalism, people have always depended on family connections to survive. If we go back to our reinterpretation of Marx's understanding of the value of labor power, the gap between what workers receive in the form of the wage and public services represents unrealized demands that are mediated by community. The fact that community in turn reproduces many of the contradictions of capitalist society has been the subject of debate and criticism within cultural studies.

To begin, in this section, we must theorize the social networks that people rely on in the Sri Lankan context, prior to analyzing the tensions and frustrations they engender. When I was doing research, I saw that one of the main ways in which people depended on each other were recruitment networks for factory jobs. During my stay in the boarding house, for example, I eventually became aware that most had some prior connection with each other. Speaking to different friends, they would identify cross-cutting connections, from sisters- and brothers-in-law to cousins who stayed in the same places in Averiwatte. In many ways, the social ties from the village that are reproduced in the Katunayake EPZ echo observations in places such as India and China. As Zhang (2014) puts it in the context of the study of workers' conditions in Shenzhen:

> Rural migrants rely heavily on their guanxi to obtain employment in the city. Guanxi could be understood as social ties of various strengths that are cultivated and maintained through the continued exchange of favours between different parties to achieve instrumental purposes in Chinese society…Channelled through guanxi, women migrants from the same sending area via the same guanxi network tend to cluster in the same work place. This is especially the case among rural migrant factory workers. (19)

In the Sri Lankan context, this process reaffirmed workers' identity as villagers (*game minissu*) first and foremost. Because people depended on their connections with others from rural areas to

find employment and housing, they were more likely to maintain their identity as people from the village, rather than integrating into the urban. This process was reinforced by the pattern of urbanization in near the Katunayake EPZ discussed in Chapter One.

The fact that employers and boarding house owners did not share the same connection meant that workers felt more at home back in the rural areas, even when work was hard to find. As Vijaya often put it to me, people from the village had more "heart." At the Lean Lanka factory in the south, where workers traveled to-and-from their own villages each day, stereotypes abounded about the cut-throat environment in the Katunayake EPZ. One friend in the line one day mentioned that in Katunayake people would steal the clothes drying off the hanging rack if left unattended.

Village connections were often mediated by kinship. In a classic work, Scott (1976) examines the ways in which the articulation of kinship between people engenders an understanding of a "moral economy," or what rights and obligations people have in a class-divided rural context. As Scott puts it: "This inverse relationship of reliability and resources presents the peasant, on the one hand, with a brother who would give him the shirt off his back but is more likely than not to be as destitute as he and, on the other hand, with a state which could more easily help but is far less likely to recognize his need as its responsibility" (28).

Export garment workers emphasized the role of family, but friends could also be important. Rather than focus on the household as the unit of analysis (Munck 1989: 63), in my discussion of the ideology of reciprocity, I prefer to look at the ways in which it cut across different relationships. Still, there was no hiding the fact that family tended to play a predominant role in defining people's understanding of community. Export garment workers depended on family especially because it often had more leverage over resources. Friends might

be able to provide emotional support and, in some contexts, labor, but family tended to take on the main burden.

First and foremost, depending on the location of the factory, workers could live at home. When I visited Vijaya's family in their village in the central hills of Sri Lanka, I learned that his sister's son had left the army and was working at a nearby EPZ from home, like the workers at Lean Lanka. Vijaya's nephew had left the army because of ragging. He had few other options for employment. His father was generous, and it was clear that even though the family had little, by sticking together they had enough to survive. Vijaya's brother-in-law pursued small agricultural activities such as milking cows. Their family represented the nexus of relationships that provoke Webster, et al. (2008: x) to comment on the relationship between workers' employment and their households, as mentioned in the Introduction.

In addition to providing a place of residence, people also shared labor within the family. The most critical function, of course, was women's reproductive work in the household: from cooking, to cleaning, to washing. The dependence of the family on women's role meant female export garment workers often had to decide whether to continue their employment in the factory or return home to sustain the work of others. The decision to leave was compounded by the stress and exhaustion discussed in Chapter Two.

I became more aware of the challenge when I met a worker who I had chatted briefly with in the training school, located on the side of the shop floor at Lean Lanka. One day as I was heading to a *dhansala* sponsored by the factory, I saw her heading off. She said that she left because she had to take care of two kids at home and there was no one else to look after them. I did not know what else to say, so I just asked her rhetorically whether we were not meeting

again. She said no and headed off. In this instance among many others, women shouldered the burden of work in the factory and at home.

In addition to childcare, there were other types of labor distributed in families. In Vijaya's case, he called on Piumi's brother-in-law to help him build their house in Piumi's village. I spent a weekend with them as we carted gravel from one area to another, to begin making cement. The process was arduous, especially for Vijaya and his brother-in-law who had begun early in the morning. I was able to participate at my own leisure. Still, I could see the extent of labor that was involved in building a house, because Vijaya could only afford to pay a part-time contractor. Back in the Katunayake EPZ, Piumi's brother would also travel from the village to help Vijaya with small business ventures such as selling flowers. These many acts of labor constituted the framework in which people understood why family was critical to survival.

Friends could also provide critical labor in specific contexts. In the boarding house, for example, workers often looked after each other's' kids. One woman specifically, Muthumali, watched another woman's, Anusha's, kids while she was away at work. The lack of state-provided childcare meant people had to rely on each other when they did not have family present. This could extend to taking other people's children on trips. When a group of us went on a pilgrimage for Poson, a religious festival that marks the arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, for example, two parents sent their child so that he could enjoy the holiday. Later, on the way back, a friend received a call from the parents scolding them for returning late. Given the nature of the roads and the length of the trip, it was unsurprising we returned far past the scheduled time. Others took the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction. As one woman put it, "We took [the kid] out of compassion (*ape manussekama*)."

To the extent that friends ultimately did not determine others' survival as such, they were mostly an emotional outlet, rather than providers of labor critical to survival. Still, friendships were important for many export garment workers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, socializing in the factory was often expressed as support, keeping people on the job when other production-related stresses intervened. In the boarding house though, people could come and go without notice. Having travelled several times with a married couple from the boarding house on various outings, I was sad one day to find out, after I had a brief rest in Colombo, that they had left. The community of the boarding house was precarious, like much of the rest of workers' lives in the Katunayake EPZ.

In general, though, I became accustomed to the ideology of reciprocity that permeated people's relationships with each other. It was commonly understood, for example, that one must share everything, from food to cigarettes. When I started eating a guava during the all-night *pirith* (spiritual protection) ceremony in the factory, discussed in Chapter Two, the workers from another line who I was visiting laughed at the way I was eating. "We take a bite from the same side of the fruit. That way you can share it." Similarly, when I passed *thalagudi* (sesame candy) to my own line on a different occasion, people split a small piece into even smaller pieces to share between five people. In these small ways, the act of sharing was central to workers understanding of what it meant to enjoy social activities.

These practices represented an understanding of community that was both protective but also potentially insular. Above all else, people who relied closely on each other for support felt suspicious about "outsiders." For example, when I went to Vijaya's village, he mentioned not to walk around without him because I was not familiar (*andurana gate nae*) with the people and, therefore, they might take advantage of me. Similarly, when I visited Sithumini's village the

following April New Year, as I walked past a house, the people on the porch yelled, “We saw you at the river yesterday.” They appeared suspicious of my presence as an outsider.

People’s suspicion was aroused in Katunayake, but perhaps to an even greater extent when I lived in a small village while working at Lean Lanka. Often when I walked home at night people would be watching from their porches. One evening I came across a drunk man on the dark road. He belligerently asked me, “You Pakistan?” When I challenged him, in Sinhala, he replied in broken English, “You can’t Sinhala!” Nervous because of the recent spate of anti-Muslim attacks sponsored under the previous government of Mahinda Rajapaksa, I was relieved when his friends appeared from behind and explained that he had just come from his mother’s funeral and meant no harm. Still, the experience bothered me. I asked my friends in the factory, “Why are people so afraid?” Dasuni gently put it, “They are scared because they don’t know who it is.” Nadeesha, a training instructor, was less conciliatory: “It’s right for people to be suspicious (*saekaya sadharanayay*). If you come here, you must first build trust (*vishvasaya goda naganna oona*).”

One of the ways in which fear and anxiety were acknowledged was in the tradition of *yaktovils*, or “demon dances,” that still occurred occasionally in the south. A friend from Lean Lanka invited me to one near his village, and I boarded the same transport home with him and his friend. When we arrived, it was around 11:30pm. The *tovil* had already begun. One of the masters (*aduras*), an elderly man with streaming white hair, a bald patch on top, and a big belly, asked the spirit of the man who was ill—an uncle who had died and had taken over his body for ten days, my friend explained—to “get out, and promise you won’t come back (*ayet enne nae*).” The man collapsed onto a mattress by the doorway, under an open-air steel roof garage.

A crowd of people from the village was huddled around in chairs watching the whole ceremony, and there was another old man beating a *bera* drum. People watched with rapt attention as the *aduras* blew fire. The ill man was guided through various rituals, including drinking the blood of a chicken.[43] A structure made of palm fronds was set up. At various points the participants carried objects, including the body of the dead chicken, to an area near a crematorium that was cast pitch black in darkness against the backdrop of the hilly southern interior.

When I spoke with the other person from Lean Lanka who attended the *tovil* the following day, he explained, "These things happen less because the village has developed. There are more lights, so people are less afraid." His comment implied an alternative understanding to the practice of rituals. He did not focus on people's religious beliefs but rather the collective function of coming together and taking shelter in each other's company at night. Given that the village had changed, however, because people migrated for work, the tacit bonds were strained. Workers' precarious community could be both enabling and exclusive, especially given the attitude toward ethnic "outsiders." This begged the question: what happened when tensions manifest within the community itself?

Tensions within Community

Community was instrumental to workers' self-valorization. But, in addition to its frequent ethnic framing, it could also become a site of frustration, and even violence, for its own members. In this regard, I answer Chakrabarty's question (1989), one of several points of

43 My friends in the factory the next day laughed when I expressed my shock, claiming that the blood was fake.

departure for Subaltern Studies, in the negative.[44] I draw instead from the British paradigm of cultural studies that theorized working class culture as a potential tool of solidarity, but also one that contained contradictions. Clarke (1980: 36), for example, notes that communal connections are in tension with universal identities, such as that of the working class, that could potentially challenge the capitalist system. The location of British cultural studies within the politics of the Labor Party is crucial to understanding the aim of the intellectual project (also see Hall 1988).

The challenge I observed in the Sri Lankan context is that the remaining left parties, located mostly in Trotskyist and Maoist traditions, had abandoned mass membership rooted in the working class. Critiquing the cultural politics of workers' community, then, requires cautious acknowledgment of the political context. Nevertheless, as Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011: 218) write, "We would clearly do ourselves a favour if our discussion of structure and agency in labour geography not only escaped the narrow understanding of the 'agent' as being the unionized workforce, but also problematized the view of 'structure' being identical to the capitalist system."[45] They cite other institutions that are not necessarily capitalist in origin, but which nevertheless impose constraints on workers. In this section, I examine the interpersonal dimensions of these institutions.

In the case of workers' relationships, one of the most frequent causes of instability were "love cases," or affairs in which people married others who were not approved by the family. On a brief walk to a nearby shop at the top of the road of the family's house tucked into the central

44 "The question is this: Can we bypass all these dilemmas in third-world countries like India and build democratic, communitarian institutions on the basis of the nonindividualistic, but hierarchical and illiberal, precapitalist bonds that have survived and sometimes resisted—or even flourished under—the onslaught of capital?" (Chakrabarty 1989: xiv)

45 Ortner's classic article (1995) on "ethnographic refusal" is also a pertinent example of the refusal to flatten the traditions of resistance of "others" by ignoring their inconvenient aspects.

hills, Piumi's brother-in-law who I met several times when visiting Piumi's village, mentioned that he had run away with Piumi's sister. Her mother did not approve of their marriage. Still, the fact that I saw him I assumed meant that he was quietly accepted into the family, thus avoiding a rupture.

When I spoke to Piumi's father with Vijaya and a few other members of the family, he explained that he himself had married Piumi's mother in secret (*horen baendala*). He mentioned that he used to be a heavy drinker. He gave up drinking when his son, Piumi's brother, was born, to set a better example. In either case though, he had not asked his relations for help (*illuwe nae*) in starting his own small vegetable stand, which the family continued to run. Reciprocity could be both a tool and accusation, reaffirming workers' ties to other people or engendering frustration.

People split from family for a variety of reasons. When I spoke to Nimal and Anusha in the boarding house, Nimal, who I mentioned in Chapter One, revealed that he did not get along with Anusha's elder brother. Similarly, other workers mentioned that they had split up with their respective families. One unionist, Rohana, whose case I discuss in Chapter Four, mentioned that he was from the south. He had stopped talking to his father because he was "staying with another person (*wena kenek innawa*)." Rohana in turn had met someone, but they were forced to split when the family did not approve of Rohana's political activities. Although arguably politically motivated, in many cases the basic pressures of survival meant that even the family unit, supposedly the most durable core of social solidarity, could not withstand the pressures of export capitalism.

Friendships did not necessarily fare much better. In addition to the fact that people frequently left, even those who stayed behind in the boarding house near the Katunayake EPZ

did not necessarily get along. Hirunika happened to be the target of much of this frustration. Although she was interested in organizing, she often framed her conflicts with people as issues of moral turpitude. When I went to the nearby shop with a few friends, for example, she told me to "be careful (*parissamen*)", implying that the people at the shop were trouble-makers. Vijaya, who was close with Hirunika, eventually became frustrated. As he put it during a trip to his village during the April New Year, "you should make friends with everyone (*ashrithaya wena oone*)." The situation boiled over in Hirunika's case when she fought with Sithumini over alleged misuse of the common tap in the boarding house.

The number of times people mentioned that they got into fights with others, whether family or friends, would be impossible to document in a short amount of space. What matters for the purposes of this dissertation is what these fights revealed about export garment workers' ability to sustain themselves. Fights were emotionally taxing. They revealed the limits of a culture that placed a heavy emphasis on obligation without necessarily recognizing personal boundaries. Peiss (1985) notes that women workers in the US at the turn-of-the-century, for example, had "the reciprocal expectations of mutual aid and sociability among female kinfolk—offering assistance during illness and pregnancies, attending funerals, celebrating weddings and christenings, exchanging Christmas and Easter gifts, organizing family dinners during the holidays, and visiting for extended periods among relatives" (26). As she adds, "The intensity of these obligations was such that failure to follow social forms could cause ruptures in kinship ties." To the extent, that export garment workers relied on each other, they could similarly experience ruptures in their relationships.

To understand why workers put so much pressure on each other to fulfil obligations, we must analyze the trajectory of disputes. In the case of many workers, the way people framed

fights involved four inter-related tropes: 1) neglect of obligations (*amataka venawa*), 2) interpersonal comparison (*irshyava*), 3) arrogance (*gaanata waedi*), and 4) cunning (*kapati*). Workers at Lean Lanka were especially worried about whether I would forget them. I personally felt an obligation to the workers because they had trained with me and helped me in many ways. While we untangled the elastic to practice sewing, I stood next to one of the boxes with a few people. One short woman with freckles asked me whether I would forget them. She put it bluntly: "We're poor people" (*api duppat minissu*).

Given my position as an apparently rich outsider, one could argue that the fixation on forgetting applied to me specifically. Still, as was often the case, what was said to me was often reiterated to other people. On another occasion, I sat with the mechanics during break in the canteen and I explained that I was exhausted after a trip because I had brought back a local treat to share with others, but people kept asking, "What did you bring us?" (*apita monawa da genawe*). The mechanics, typically cracking jokes, were unusually contemplative. "They do that with everyone. If I bring something, all my friends ask me to share." As one mechanic explained, "In America there's law (*nithiyay*), everyone's the same (s*amanyay*). Here they aren't. That's why people are troublesome (*karadaray*)." Anxiety about inequality drove people's fears of others forgetting them and ignoring obligations.

On the other hand, fears and anxieties became the basis of accusations of each other. Workers did not restrict their critique to people at the top. When I brought some chocolate to share with the training school instructors, one of the younger quality inspectors was miffed when I did not have enough to share with her. It was impossible to give anyone anything without becoming the subject of accusation. Still, I asked one of the training school instructors.

"Priyanthi was jealous because you gave me the chocolate. That's how some people are." The concept of jealousy was applied to every exchange, regardless of how small it was.

Near the end of my research period in the factory, I offered to take the workers in my line out for a lunch in the nearby town. Word quickly got to the other lines. One woman came up to me. "When are we going to [the restaurant]?" I had become increasingly frustrated, so I went to her line and asked her to come over. She looked defiant. "Look, I'm not a manager, I'm just saying that everyone asks something from me. The reason I'm taking the folks from my line is because I usually work with them. Otherwise it's impossible to give everyone, I'm just a student." I asked her why she mentioned the name of the specific restaurant that I had said I would take other workers. "Because the food's good there." I immediately felt a pang of guilt. Although I had briefly snapped, I realized that going to a small café for a lunch that could have cost at most three dollars per person was one of the few opportunities to "go out" that most people had.

Despite the constant pull of different obligations, I tried to be patient. I focused on building relationships with people. In the end, most of the workers appreciated my presence in the factory. We became friends outside of the context of research. Still, I encountered another accusation: arrogance. Priyanthi, the quality inspector, often appeared insecure about her position in the factory. She came by my line several times and claimed that I had "forgotten them [people in the training school]." As she put it, I had become "too much" (*gaanata*). I had no idea what inspired this claim, as I had not changed my behavior since arriving to the factory. When I leaned over and asked Dasuni what the word for "too much" in Sinhala meant after Priyanthi left, she matter-of-factly replied, "She's no good." I found camaraderie with the people in my

line. The accusation though, that people become arrogant, was a common reproach among workers. It was one of many "small arms" in the class struggle (Scott 1985).

In this regard, people were acutely aware of their positioning vis-à-vis others. This process manifested in surveillance. Moreover, policing behavior often had a gendered dimension. When having one of my daily conversations with Nadeesha, a training instructor, she asserted, "In Sri Lanka, you don't live alone, you live with a family (*pavula*). The husband goes to work and the wife cooks (*waedata gihilla, uyala*)." Confused by this claim given her own status as a widowed worker, I tried to put a more positive spin, arguing that one could live alone and be happy. We continued the exchange. I asked, "Do you live with your family?" "No, I live alone *(taniyen*)." "So, what's the issue?" I asked. "Other people look around and talk (*balanawa*)." The idea that women workers especially must be watched echoes what Mills (2017) writes: "Consequently, the failed motherhood of Singapore's mobile and desiring women offered a convenient figure of blame for the unequal effects of the neoliberal state's own policies of stratified social and economic development" (325).

Surveillance, however, could also be resisted. Workers argued that one must become "cunning" (*kapati*). When I spoke to a line supervisor about my time in the factory, she argued "You must be cunning here." Similarly, when I had gotten into a fight with a young HR staff member—the same one who reprimanded me for bringing food onto the shop floor in Chapter Two—near the end of my research because he kept hovering over me, I asked Nadeesha why she had become suspicious. I explained that I always meant what I said. "You can't here. You have to be different with different people." Nadeesha among others embodied the anxieties of working in the factory and being under constant surveillance by managers, workers, and residents of her village. Cunning implied a strategy to evade control by dissimulating one's intentions.

The question is, why across many different places, did the social context often become suffocating, to the point that people could not express their honest opinions? Mills among others explains the ways in which single women workers embody the anxieties of the neoliberal economy. In the Sri Lankan context, we must also analyze the history of violence as revealed in the most intimate details of people's lives. Being accused of many things, from forgetting social obligations to being arrogant, could be symptoms of universal anxieties associated with global economic change. Little by little, though, I learned about specific patterns of abuse.

Domestic violence is not often addressed in the literature on Southern factory workers explicitly (see, however, Salzinger 2016), but it came to the forefront on more than a few occasions. Abuse was compounded by the fact that because victims were often workers or their relatives, they could not expect justice mandated by the state. For example, once I showed up to the factory and saw a woman who was filling in for a worker in my line who was out for the day. She had stuffed cotton into her ear. Immediately it became apparent that she had been the victim of domestic violence. I was infuriated. When the woman left our line, I turned to Madhu and asked, "Why can't she go to the police?" Madhu was world weary. "The police are men (*pirimi lamay*), they aren't going to do anything." In comparison to my impotent anger, Madhu was resigned to reality. She knew how the state worked, or rather, did not work, to ensure justice.

I experienced the issue even closer to home in the boarding house back in Averiwatte. One night, I woke up at midnight. I had heard a slap and then a child crying. I came out of the room on the second floor and saw people gathering in the dusty courtyard. When I began walking down the stairs in my sarong, a man in the boarding house, who later, during another incident, I inferred had ended up hitting his own wife, saw me. "Ah, *sudu puta* (my nickname,

meaning “fair son”)” He commented. I asked what happened because people were congregating. A few tried to manage the situation discreetly.

Since Sithumini and others intervened, I assumed that she had the situation under control. I was nervous though, as I interacted with Muthumali and her husband, Jayasinghe, often. When I asked Vijaya in the following days, he mentioned, “Muthumali’s OK (shape).” Apparently, there had been a fight over Seetu funds, a small loans scheme, and, although no one said it, Jayasinghe had hit Muthumali. I did not know how to react, other than to keep my distance from Jayasinghe. The boarding house though was a small space, and people inevitably had to interact with each other. I wondered though: even if the state intervened in this situation, what would have happened to Muthumali and her child?

I received an answer when, on another occasion, drunk plainclothes police officers showed up to the boarding house. They immediately started scolding the residents, using words in Sinhala I had only begun to understand, but which I knew were inappropriate. As one of the women in the boarding house later put it, “They were saying filth (*kunaharupa*) in front of the children.” Apparently, there had been a robbery in the area, and the police were looking for an unmarried couple. It was unclear to me what the connection was between the crime of stealing and cohabitation. In Averiwatte, though, the latter was frowned upon as “amoral behavior.” Sithumini briefly stopped outside the boarding house gate to speak with the police.

In each of these instances, workers were subject to violence, and it often impacted the most vulnerable within the community, especially women and children. Although, as mentioned in the previous section, workers relied on each other for support, surveillance paradoxically meant hiding patterns of abuse to maintain the appearance of unity. Problems though were not

unique to communities of export garment workers. Violence was reinforced by their class location. They bore the brunt of state repression.

Vijaya, for example, recalled times of terror when he was a child. He remembered state-sponsored death squads torturing and shooting people around the village bend during the second insurgency by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or "People's Liberation Front"), a Sinhala Marxist party, in the late 1980s. The stories he told were chillingly intimate. Neighbors turned on each other. Members of the state continue to cover up the massacres.

Although it is a dark point to end this section, the unacknowledged memory of violence prevents an easy transition. I turn now to look at the examples of times when workers engaged in leisure activity, reiterating the fragile potential of community, and identifying what these moments mean for our understanding of workers' collective mode of consumption.

The Context of Leisure

Many studies of the formation of the working class in the global North have been written on the topic of leisure (Hunt 2011; Parratt 1998; Peiss 1985). The narrative attempts to explain the rise of mass consumerism. Similar material has also been written on the global South. I draw mostly from cases in the North, however, insofar as authors frame their examination as studies of *working class* leisure. As Parratt (1998) puts it: "Two factors have been taken as central to the late nineteenth-century expansion of working-class leisure: leisure time and leisure money, the growth of which are assumed as concomitants of declining work hours and rising money and real wages" (22). Although this claim could be made for workers in the North, the opposite formulation was more applicable to the situation of Sri Lankan export garment workers: "Long work hours were the inevitable corollary of miserly rates of pay and wages, and in many

occupations the most powerful impetus for women to work excessive hours was 'the pitiful smallness' of their average earnings" (Parratt 1998: 30).

Workers had a long way to go in their struggle before they would be able to demand a shorter work week and higher wages. These demands, among others, will be discussed in Chapter Four. In this section though, I ask, how, even under relatively arduous conditions, did people still manage to enjoy leisure? Workers had several options: local festivals, pilgrimages to religious sites, and small parties. In each case, the fact that workers did not have enough time or money meant they often enjoyed these events as collective activities, rather than as individual consumers. The collective aspects of workers' enjoyment lead me to question the bourgeois model of the creation of public spaces. Since Habermas's (1991) pioneering study, others have examined the formation of "counter-publics" (Warner 2002). The trips workers went on and the parties that they enjoyed were not articulated in direct opposition to the system. Still, they implied an alternative to the ideology of capitalist consumerism.

Day after day living in Katunayake during my first few months in the boarding house I became fed up with the poor choice of options to eat out, and general lack of public spaces. As mentioned in Chapter One, Averiwatte, the town next to the EPZ, had few facilities such as parks. I would walk along the road past the chain-link fence behind which the factories stood, and onward to the town for a meal at one of the small cafes. The cafes were one of the few areas to "hang out," but there was not much other than a selection of the same fried foods and tea. Annually though, local temples had festivals. These events offered a schedule for leisurely activities.

The festival at the temple near the boarding house was an opportunity to meet people from the local community, and to watch different parades and ceremonies. During the spring, I

went with Vijaya, Hirunika, and others from the boarding house, and we enjoyed the carnival-like atmosphere. There were stalls selling small treats, including popular drinks. We went to the temple, and watched people undergoing trance-like states. It was an engaging performance. The celebration ended with a *perahera* (parade) on several nights. Elephants proceeded from the temple to the town, and different groups of fire walkers, fire-ball spinners, and dancers passed by the onlookers.

I did not see any foreign tourists at the festival. In this instance among many others, local celebrations reflected the diversity of the surrounding community rather than stereotypical images in media advertising for the purposes of attracting tourists. Dancers put on traditional vestments and there were many different rituals. I felt though, for the first time in my many visits to Sri Lanka, that the festival was a space where people could just "hang out," rather than watch solemnly aestheticized performances. Vijaya and I hung off to the side, as other friends from the boarding house and the factories were introduced to me. We had tea, and we toured the small shops which sold miscellaneous items, from plastic bins to toy guns.

The harsh reality though is that much of what people could buy was cheap plastic ware. Most items were priced under one hundred rupees (less than one dollar at the time), reflecting the meager budgets of both the workers and other members of the local community. The fact that we did not pay to enjoy the performances though was reflected in the practice of sharing during many of the communal events that occurred. For example, on Buddhist holidays such as Vesak, the day on which the Buddha's birth, death, and Enlightenment are celebrated, and Poson, people from the community set up *dhansala* to share food. During the first celebration of Vesak I attended in May in Averiwatte, I was amazed by the sheer number of *dhansala* stands. A group of workers and I traveled in a friend's lorry. We stopped by the stands dotting the side of the

road. They served everything, from manioc with *pol sambol* (chopped coconut and chilis), to coffee. After a certain point, we had lunch from one of the many *bath dhansalas* (serving a meal of rice and curry). The line took us an hour to get through because of the number of guests.

Although we enjoyed ourselves, many of the activities were more difficult than I expected, especially visits to pilgrimage sites. One of my first excursions with workers from the Katunayake EPZ was to Sri Pada, a mountain in the central hills that is a pilgrimage site for several religions. We left the boarding house at 9 PM, after people had gotten off work. Workers' friends, family, and I, about ten of us, rode through the hillside in a small van. Along the way, we stopped. The visibility of the stars off a bend in the road overlooking a valley was impressive. By the time we arrived at Sri Pada it was 11 PM. Stalls lined the entrance, humming throughout the night. We began climbing the large, rocky steps. I chewed *bulat vita* (tobacco wrapped in betel leaf) along the way to stay alert.

When we neared the summit, we became stuck in line for several hours. Tourists who had stayed at nearby hotels managed to see the sunset from the top. Since we had come from Katunayake, we began climbing later. One person standing next to me on the stairs, which became progressively narrower, yelled "Hey, you devils (*yakko*) at the top, get down, we also want to see the sunrise!" When we finally arrived at the top, it was 11 AM. We had climbed all night and I was about to pass out from exhaustion. The monks chanted *gathas* (verses) and I began swaying involuntarily. Luckily, the gates opened, and we finally arrived at the top. The way back down was equally difficult, but the friendly company made the journey easier. We stopped at tea stalls on the way, and I had chats with different workers. One man mentioned that he had worked in the Middle East, but, as he and his wife put it, people were mean (*saeray*) to migrant workers.

If I thought climbing Sri Pada was difficult, I was not prepared for more excursions to religious sites. Traveling with Vijaya, Hirunika, and others, we visited other places such as a famous temple in the central hills and Punchi Dambadiva, a small religious site modelled after the pilgrimage site in India where the Buddha was said to have attained Enlightenment. We bought rice packets on the way, but we did not stop to eat them until, having woken at 4 AM, we finally had our meal at 5 PM. The fasting alone was a challenge for me. I pushed myself to keep up. I could not imagine how people who worked six days a week could consider the trips restful activity. Still, many workers' felt a sense of relief from the oppressive day-to-day environment in the factory and boarding house. Vijaya sighed upon the return from another trip. "The village is freedom, isn't it" (*game nidahasa, nee*).

Pilgrimages had many functions, from building friendships to celebrating religious activities. Still, even though these were ostensibly devotional activities, I never felt that they were separate from people's everyday experience. In most cases, workers just wanted to have fun. Going to the temple could be like going to an amusement park or fair. The main distinction is that we did not have to pay to enter religious sites. Travel offered opportunities to explore, to experience something new, without forcing workers to spend their meager wages, beyond transportation and food. Even after we visited Punchi Dambadiva, for example, we stopped at a waterfall and drank Lion Strong beers. The usually austere Hirunika laughed and took a sip. It was an opportunity to be carefree.

Still, the trips often required performing rituals. These rituals were not necessarily performances sanctioned by the dominant religious orthodoxy. They were part of people's everyday routine. Accordingly, workers had multiple, conflicting interpretations. When I visited Tissamaharama, a famous temple in the south, with friends from Lean Lanka, my friend

Priyantha asked me questions. “What do you think about when you are praying?” I mentioned, given my own upbringing in the Diaspora, that I often just repeated a standard Buddhist prayer in my mind. Priyantha shook his head, “No, when you pray you should be thinking about why you are there, not reciting things mechanically.”

I was taken aback, but apparently Priyantha was fed up with the idea that one must go to religious sites and perform chanting. As he put it, “When I perform *puja*, I think about the smell of the flowers, and the merit I am receiving.” I mentioned that some people might think they are making wishes. For example, when I had gone with Muthumali, Jayasinghe, and others to the Sri Maha Bodhi, another famous religious site in the north central dry zone, Muthumali encouraged me to give *paduru* (a donation) and make a wish; for example, if I wanted to pass a special exam. Priyantha disagreed. He argued, “Those things aren’t relevant to Lord Buddha” (*buduvahanseta adala deval neve*). His conflicting interpretation was an example of the many ways in which, although we went on pilgrimages together, people experienced their meaning differently. Accordingly, I argue that pilgrimages did not have an agreed-upon religious framing. Rather, they were an example of the kind of leisure activity workers enjoyed collectively.

If there were no events scheduled, and workers could not enjoy the rare trip, people often congregated in the boarding house or villages to share a drink. Men often drank, reinforcing the perception of the industrial worker as male, “blowing off steam” while women remain in the background. As Hunt (2011) puts it in the British context,

> Some of the reasons for the strengthening of the labour movement, such as rising living standards and shorter working hours, also explain the expansion of working-class recreational opportunities in the early twentieth century. Whilst, however, men’s leisure time was built in to the working day, women were constrained by a combination of low and unpaid work, attendant long hours, and domestic duties. (108)

This hierarchy was expressed as masculine identity: "The public culture of workingmen was not only a potential bulwark of solidarity against the ravages of capitalism; it was also a system of male privilege in which workers' self-determination, solidarity, and mutual assistance were understood as 'manliness.'" (Peiss 1985:5)

In the case of drinking, I usually joined a few men who pulled up a few plastic stools at a table. When I visited Sithumini's village during April New Year, for example, her brother-in-law and a friend's husband and I sat in the jungle shade and drank Lion Strong beer. We talked mostly about what life was like in the army, because Sithumini's brother-in-law was in the military. We joked about phrases and expressions in Sinhala. Although I enjoyed my time, I was acutely aware of the fact that the space was sharply divided by gender; especially when one man's aunt came looking for him and he tried to hide his drink. Sithumini, though, made jokes as usual. When I headed back to the small outside kitchen for dinner, she ribbed me: "You'll fall!"

On the other hand, drinking could cause domestic conflict. As mentioned in the previous section, alcohol could be linked to domestic violence. Even on innocuous occasions it could become a potential source of anxiety. When I visited Vijaya while he was building his house in Piumi's village, we shared a bottle of arrack with one of the contractors and Piumi's brother-in-law. Over shots of arrack, they told me stories about the history of the village, including the second JVP insurrection. The discussion was mostly about the challenges workers faced. Vijaya encouraged the contractor to describe the pressures of the increasing cost of living. We sat in the dark on a log near the unfinished house, on the terraced land overlooking the plains below.

Piumi's mischievous, kind-hearted sixteen-year-old brother paid us a visit. Piumi's mother, however, found out and headed over to where we were drinking in the dark. Perhaps because I had already been introduced to the family and visited their home before, she did not

have any compunction about scolding the teen in front of all of us. “What do you think you’re doing? Putting on a party? Have you no shame (*laejja naedda*)! Get out of here (*palayan*)!” The teen escaped. When I went back to the room where we slept, he was fed up. “I can’t stay here.” Perhaps Piumi’s brother did not know his own father’s history of alcoholism, but it was clear that even though Vijaya and I moderated our drinking, it was a potential source of conflict, and therefore anxiety, for women such as Piumi’s mother.

Drinking could be a convenient excuse for fighting. When I worked at Lean Lanka, one of the staff dropped by my line and we had a chat. He mentioned that a factory on the western coast owned by the same company would host musical shows for workers, but they would not perform in the south because men got into fights. He mentioned the last time a show was held, three were suspended from work the following day. Fighting was often attributed to southern culture, but there was a clear nexus with alcohol abuse. When I spoke to a young woman in another line at the Lean Lanka plant, she mentioned she had a boyfriend, but she “dropped him” (*at haerila*) because he drank and smoked. When I asked why fighting appeared more common in the south, she and her friends replied, “fisher folk (*dhivara kattiya*) drink,” implying that it was a caste issue.

Across the island though, whenever I met male workers, I felt unease in the context of drinking. Back in the boarding house in Averiwatte, Nimal became inebriated one day, and reinforced the message of a story he once told me when sober. A man had grabbed his wife’s arm. He went back to the man’s boarding house and smacked him in the head with his motorcycle helmet, causing the victim to lose an eye. He was later jumped and beaten by the man’s friends. He spent six months in prison, while Anusha took care of their young child. I was taken aback by Nimal’s candor and apparent lack of remorse about the incident.

As he put it when he was drunk, "I get into fights (*randu wenawa*)." Drinking was a constitutive aspect of *chandi* (thug) masculinity. In the context of workers in the US Midwest, Walley (2013) writes:

> Masculinity, middle-class commentators have often implied, was at the core of the old steel mill neighborhoods. Yet that masculinity was inextricability [sic] bound up with a particular class position and entailed vulnerabilities as well as privileges. Deindustrialization had exposed the often unsuspected fragility beneath the bravado of men like my father. (75)

Similarly, Nimal's sense of vulnerability as an export garment worker was implied. His response was to aggressively reassert his ability to defend himself and his family.

Despite the hegemony of patriarchy, leisure could also be reinterpreted in more gender inclusive ways. In other instances, the entire boarding house or communities near the plant I worked at participated in celebrations. On these occasions, the gender divide started to break down. During one party to celebrate a worker's wedding in the boarding house, for example, people laughed and shared drinks. Muthumali gave her daughter a sip of beer to try. She asked if I felt uncomfortable, but I said that in many places and cultures, including my Cuban mother's, preteens could have wine at the dinner table. We enjoyed many of the same conversations, from music to politics, that I typically had with small groups of men. Similarly, in the south, Lean Lanka workers invited me to a party with a DJ, and everyone, regardless of age or gender, danced the entire night.

The question is, how did working class culture contrast with the dominant culture? As Parratt (1998) puts it in the context of British workers:

> But income level, occupational status, notions of respectability and responsibility, and, no doubt in many instances nothing more than individual predilections, were all factors which influenced the leisure of married women, and some were not prepared to accept any curtailment of the pleasures they had come to enjoy in their youth. Those of the poorer classes seemed to be more inclined to drink in public houses, to participate in the

> leisure culture of the streets, and generally less likely to let their social life be bound by material want or ideological strictures. (44)

Given the politics of respectability among members of the Sri Lankan upwardly mobile middle classes, informed by the colonial legacy of the Victorian value system, Parratt's quote seemed to apply to export garment workers as well. Ultimately, working class culture was the terrain on which unions and managers fought a battle to win the hearts and minds of workers. I discussed management's attempts to curry favor in Chapter Two. Similarly, I will focus on the practices of unions in Chapter Four. The question is when and under what conditions workers articulated collective practices to challenge export capitalism, or to critique the gendered and ethnic hierarchy within their own communities.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this chapter, because people had so little to survive, the everyday way in which export garment workers managed to make ends meet was via community. At the same time community engendered interpersonal tensions, whether in the same family or the same boarding house in which people lived together. Given subtle yet pervasive forms of domination, many studies of export workers in the global economy, or the Southern working class in general for that matter, identify avenues of escape through people's embrace of the "aspirational" qualities of capitalism (Cross 2014).[46] The search for a subversive internal critique of the system means that authors reaffirm the emancipatory possibilities of capitalist consumerism. As Freeman (1998) puts it in a foundational study:

> As an incentive scheme to promote high levels of production and reliability at work, highly productive informatics operators are rewarded with bonus pay and special 'thank you cards', redeemable for airline travel (compliments of Data Air's parent company). With such vouchers, women fly between Barbados, San Juan, Miami and New York on

[46] For a comprehensive overview of this and other currents in the anthropology of "hope", see Ortner (2016).

> weekend or weeklong shopping sprees, sometimes specifically orchestrated by local travel agents, and including inexpensive motels and ground transport to convenient shopping malls. In their travel, they are both generating income through the re-sale of goods, and 'checking styles' as they scour department stores and fashion books. (253)

I critique the idea, however, that the only alternative is within export capitalism, as workers articulate "counter-identities" in which they become subaltern consumers that express difference in opposition to the monotonous regime of factory work.

In this chapter, I have argued that community has emancipatory and repressive tendencies, which are overdetermined by export capitalism. The fact that people had so few options to survive in places such as the Katunayake EPZ and at the factory that I worked at in the south meant that under duress, people were forced to migrate for work, including abroad. Although authors have attempted to articulate this process as an escape from tradition-bound community, it overlooks workers' critique of the current system. Instead, young women's access to income specifically is seen as embodying the potential of export capitalism and what makes it so persuasive to workers themselves. Ngai (2008) writes:

> Why then were these young Chinese girls so eager to leave their parents and their homes so that they might enter the world of consumer capitalism? How was it possible that their individual desires were actually in harmony with social demands? More specifically, why did Jin's desire coincide so happily with the demands of global capitalism? Could the desiring machine of consumption provide us an answer to all these questions? (480)

Focusing on workers' identities as consumers conceals, however, those intrinsically unfree aspects of labor under export capitalism (see, for example, De Neve 2014: 1328). Moreover, in this chapter, I have focused instead on the ways in which material constraints on workers' lives required them to engage in collective modes of consumption.

Even though there was no obvious alternative to the system, workers' practices of reciprocity implied a critique of the system. The problem was it was manifest on an interpersonal level, making it impossible to identify community alone as a structural alternative to export

capitalism. Still, these problems have existed since the dawn of capitalism. Just like Silver (2003), for example, returns to the question of building workers' associational capacities in a context in which much of their structural power has been undermined by the transformation of industry, we could point out that workers, especially women, have always had challenges sustaining relationships under capitalist constraints.

The possibilities that I saw when I went on trips with workers or engaged in everyday practices such as sharing food reminded me of their potential articulation with a big vision of social transformation, as mentioned in Chapter One. How are workers' practices and identities articulated in a bigger movement? In the next chapter, I explore the role of unions. As Hunt puts it, "Rather than creating an 'alternative' culture of trade unionism to rival the favourite pastimes of the period, organizers sought to incorporate elements of 'popular' entertainment into their events in order to appeal to as wide a group of women workers as possible" (2011: 116). The collective mode of consumption discussed in this chapter implies the creation of a field of possibilities for collective action.

In the next chapter, then, I look at the ways in which these practices could potentially be rearticulated within the labor movement. The challenge for people like Sithumini, though, is that even as they gained status in the community, they were inevitably subject to pressures from both the top, capital and the state, and the men in her own community. The same could apply to non-Sinhala workers and their status in a place where they were often perceived as "outsiders." As implied by Sithumini's position, transforming this structure required challenging export capitalism itself.

In this chapter, I have returned to the insights of cultural studies of the working class, especially as it was located in the Labor Party's dominance in Britain in the 1970s. The coming

assault under Thatcherism, a popular expression of neoliberalism in the North, meant that authors had to acknowledge the fact workers might not identify as working class, but myriad other identities. Still, the field of cultural struggle remains open, and one that necessarily involves conflict between different perspectives on the role of community in challenging the dominant order.

CHAPTER FOUR:
EXPORT GARMENT WORKERS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Introduction

When I was living in Katunayake, I often attended events hosted by Wimal's union at its drop-in center. In the small office, I met more politically active workers. Although Wimal tried to sustain relationships with workers, however, over time many of them left. The difficulty could, in part, be attributed to the high turnover in the EPZs, as discussed in Chapter One, and the intensive nature of work, as discussed in Chapter Two. As an organizer, though, Wimal nevertheless felt compelled to identify issues within the process of organizing itself. As mentioned in the Introduction, Wimal's union, like others, had lost much of its membership across the island over the decades since Sri Lanka underwent liberalization, dipping below ten thousand. Consequently, he searched for answers.

Because I spent time speaking not only with Wimal, but other trade unionists as well, I could see the incipient ways in which organizers attempted to revive the labor movement by focusing on the everyday issues raised by workers in the EPZs. On one occasion, I attended the fifth anniversary of the death of a worker, who was killed by security forces during a mass, spontaneous protest in 2011 that came to symbolize a moment of resistance against the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa. Workers had come out to protest a potential bill that would prevent them from withdrawing their savings from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) for a period longer than the five-year limit that was mandated at the time. The protest appeared to be a struggle over the "politics of livelihoods" (Menon and Sundar 2018); not necessarily a direct critique of employers.

As Burawoy (1985), Seidman (1994), Nilsen and Von Holdt (2018) argue, however, because Southern states often use authoritarian means to impose capitalism, the protests

opposing the EPF bill became a lightning rod for workers' struggles against the system. The memorial of the slain worker was an opportunity for those who opposed the ruling order to participate in a united front. At the memorial, one representative from a different trade union had arrived from Colombo. He spoke passionately about the need for justice to be done for the workers' family, if the government that replaced Rajapaksa's wanted to claim the mantle of "good governance."

The memorial was held at the roundabout that leads off the main road from the international airport in Katunayake to Colombo. Although traffic passed by less than a mile away, Averiwatte, the town where many workers lived, remained out of the way. A local government representative wearing the national dress—a freshly-pressed, white shirt and sarong—came and made a few obligatory statements. At the memorial, the worker's family spoke. The unionist from Colombo along with a few other actors from civil society sympathized. The memory of the protests of 2011 faded, however, as unions struggled to capitalize on workers' anger. No more than fifty showed up to the memorial.

Although during the memorial unionists such as Wimal articulated a political critique, Wimal continued his day-to-day activities of applying for grants from international organizations and demanding that international obligations be fulfilled by the Sri Lankan state and employers. When I was doing my research, the International Labor Organization (ILO) had a central role to play in framing debates about unionization in the EPZs. It took a distinctively apolitical approach, however, by emphasizing the role of "alternative disputes resolution (ADR) mechanisms" between workers and employers, to avoid the "intervention of a third party" (Corbanese, et al. 2015). At the memorial, it seemed, the third party of the public had materialized, however fleetingly, to unsettle this narrative.

For Wimal and other organizers to take long-term advantage of spontaneous eruptions in the EPZs such as the protests of 2011 though, they required a stronger membership base. Since 1999, organizers have been allowed officially into the EPZs, but institutional obstacles remain. For example, although Board of Investment (BOI) policy states unionists have a right to enter the workplace, the BOI requires gate passes that must be authorized by employers (BOI of Sri Lanka: 11); effectively creating a space in which unionists are barred from entering. The Labor Department, suffering from under-staffing and lack of direction (or, if one takes a more cynical view, political interference), often relinquished its role of guaranteeing workers' rights to BOI officials.

On the one hand, Wimal and the workers he tried to organize while I was doing research experienced these constraints as conspiracy among individual employers and officials; not necessarily as institutions that showed the ways in which the state is the "performance of a contradiction" (Hall 1985). When I asked Wimal, what would be his alternative to the current system, for example, he mentioned workers could gain vocational skills through the union, which they could apply back in their villages to start small shops. He struggled to differentiate his demand from state and employer rhetoric of creating small entrepreneurs, as discussed in Chapters One and Two.

On the other hand, Wimal's parent union was led by an older generation of predominantly male leaders who took a directly political line, challenging the government on its bias toward capital, and demanding the deepening of democratic reforms. The paradox, however, was that even many of the workers Wimal hoped to organize did not necessarily agree with the union's demands when expressed in concrete form. Vijaya among others supported Rajapaksa. He chafed against Wimal's parent union, insofar as it was openly critical of Rajapaksa. The

challenges of building an electoral alternative meant that few workers were willing to take seriously the claims made by the union, especially when it claimed to be "independent." For workers in the Katunayake EPZ who did not see alternatives to the government at the time and the previous one led by Rajapaksa, the unionists' rhetoric made them appear irrelevant at best.

Scholars frame questions raised by workers about the political limits of "actually existing" unionism in different ways. On the one hand, some scholars shift from focusing on the relationship between national parties and movements to emphasis on the transnational dimension of organizing (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ross 1997; Siegmann, et al. 2017). Scholars identify the potential of buyers' audits and international agreements negotiated by Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Global Union Federations (GUFs), although they also note constraints in the absence of organizing on the ground (Anner 2015; Armbruster-Sandoval 2004; Ruwanpura 2015).

On the other hand, political mobilization of workers in the informal economy is often framed as a question of livelihoods, rather than building union power per se. Hussain (2018), paraphrasing Agarwala, notes that "The objective for such participation…is primarily the fulfillment of reproductive needs (housing, food, healthcare and education) through claims as workers and citizens in the informal economy. Their structural power is derived from the collective recognition of their own importance as constituents of the neo-liberal regime" (116).

In this chapter, I shift the focus back to the structure of unions, insofar as people such as Wimal who organize in EPZs attempt to recruit from a workforce gendered as female, but struggled to change how the union itself operates, especially in terms of male bias. If, in the absence of a viable mass party, unions take positions that they cannot necessarily win, then the main possibility, as many workers I met indicated, would be to attract members by broadening

the space to participate, deliberate, and challenge those decisions made by leaders. In effect, the process of making unions more democratic determines their capacity, and vice versa. This debate appears in the everyday interactions between unionists and workers, beneath the mainstream narrative of the decline of the labor movement. In the rest of this chapter, then, I identify the ways in which the concept of unionism remains crucial to understanding workers' political engagement.

Buyers' Audits, Global Framework Agreements, and International Law

Having mentioned Wimal in the Introduction, in this chapter I delve into the specifics of his work to understand the challenges facing organizers in the EPZs. Although Wimal had claimed he had experience advocating on workers' behalf, it was clear that organizing was a different challenge entirely. Due to the lack of resources of his parent union, he had to maintain a small office on a meager salary. The task was daunting. Wimal was happy then when I arrived to stay longer in the Katunayake EPZ, as it gave him a chance to access the resources of a researcher with international connections. When we discussed the work though, it was clear that Wimal and I had different understandings of what organizing entailed.

Soon after the English class in which I participated ended, an incident occurred at a factory in which several of those who attended worked, involving the food poisoning of several hundred workers. Wimal asked that I write a report. I obliged since I was using the office for my own research. Eventually, it became difficult to access workers in the factory due to management's restrictions. Wimal narrowed his sights on the case of one worker who had passed away, and whose family had not received sufficient compensation. There was no Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) in the factory, symptomatic of the apparent fact that there were no established procedures for providing compensation in the event of death on the job.

I did not have a legal background, but it was clear that Wimal valued my English skills above all else. He wanted to coordinate with a European NGO focusing on labor rights. While I was writing the report, I met Wimal's comrade in a women's organization, Nelum. She introduced herself, and we had a chat with the workers' family on plastic chairs in the courtyard of the office of her local labor rights NGO. Overtime, I saw how Wimal and Nelum's approach was indicative of a broader strategy to focus on creating "cases" for international donors.

Wimal did not have an organizing plan, but neither did his union's leadership. If anything, in this dissertation, I have recorded the massive challenges faced by export garment workers. Similarly, Wimal found it difficult to convince workers to risk their jobs to join the union. Nevertheless, at a certain point, even I, with my basic knowledge of unions at the time, asked Wimal how he planned to recruit more members. During one conversation Wimal mentioned his goal was to provide workers vocational skills which they could use back in their villages. I was unsure of the way in which workers returning to the villages would inspire activism in the Katunayake EPZ, but Wimal's belief implied a common front of workers and peasants; or to use the slogan in Sinhala, "*govi kamkaru anduwa*" (peasant worker government).

This slogan was a point of departure. The everyday practice of the union, though, involved writing cases and applying for grants from international donors. One day Wimal took me on his motorbike to Nelum's office, where she offered me a rice packet and we discussed their next project. Her goal was to apply for a grant from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). I suspected this decision since the USAID promoted soft imperialism abroad; it was not in the role of organizing workers for militant activities (at least not against governments it maintained a friendly or neutral stance toward). There is of course a darker history of US imperialist involvement in places such as Latin America (Armbruster-Sandoval

2004). In the case of Sri Lanka, though, Wimal and Nelum's wish to apply to a generic development grant appeared more as an act of securing their own survival.[47]

Wimal ceaselessly asked me to update the cases, including the factory food poisoning incident. Eventually I became frustrated. Just like the expectations and obligations analyzed in Chapter Three, Wimal believed that I had more than I let on—to use the local turn of phrase, that I was a "money man" (*salli kaarayek*)—and that I could in fact get him access to the international contacts he required. Without a clear plan for organizing workers, most of his initiatives and proposals became dead-ends. Still, I learned more about the concepts and ideas that drove advocacy on workers' behalf in the EPZs.

As authors such as Anner (2015) note, in different countries, different strategies, such as boycotts and Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) signed between Global Union Federations (GUFs) and Northern buyers, are required to support workers because they may not have basic rights such as freedom of association (292-293). One of the constant complaints among Sri Lankan unionists, for example, was that the ILO Acts 87 and 98 guaranteeing freedom of association and collective bargaining had not been guaranteed definitive legal status in national law. Thus, in addition to the accumulation of cases and smaller campaigns, the general orientation of unions in the EPZs, not only Wimal's, was to demand that the government follow international law. In many ways this legalistic approach reflected the fact that unions had so few members. Nevertheless, legal obstacles themselves were not the cause of the decline.

[47] Unionists also frequently criticized each other for accepting money from international donors, implying, like much of the nationalist rhetoric of the time, that they were pawns. The reality was often much more mundane, although I focus here on the ways in which applying for funding narrowed the horizons of activists.

The idea that international law was workers' best option for redress was the hegemonic assumption not only in the labor movement, but among the government and employers as well. This apparent consensus was problematic, insofar as the rhetoric of "social dialogue" and "tripartite mechanisms" obscured what appeared to be basic mechanisms of exploitation discussed, for example, in Chapter Two.[48] As Taylor (2009) notes:

> Unsurprisingly, in the context of intense cost pressures within hierarchically organised supply chains, there is significant concern within the literature over the ability of corporate-sponsored labour codes to adequately protect labour rights. Teri Caraway, for instance, has provocatively suggested that the global labour standards promoted by corporations and international financial institutions represent something of a Trojan horse. They attempt to depoliticise the question of labour rights by institutionalising a liberal form of labour relations in which unions suffer from a systematic lack of power. (447)

International law framed the question of organizing. It was also adopted by Sri Lankan employers, who claimed that they were "ethical" representatives of garment manufacturing in a region that had very severe problems. The most shocking example perhaps was the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 in Bangladesh, in which over one thousand workers died due to the collapse of a poorly constructed factory.

Employers and their representatives contrasted these incidents with Sri Lanka's own image as an ethical destination for garments. When I spoke to one former member of the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC), he stressed that social dialogue was a way of resolving workers' issues without necessarily involving unions. Unions are often portrayed by employers as interlopers. Even in the case of Sri Lanka, though, this claim was difficult to justify, weak as the unions were in terms of membership. Instead, employers' domination was reflected in the

[48] Nevertheless, some union leaders also drafted critical statements of labor law reform sponsored by the ILO, the state, and employers, although these too occasionally became heavy-handed in their allusions of "conspiracy."

prominence accorded to other mechanisms, from buyers' audits to employees' councils, which, they argued, represented workers fairly.

In the case of buyers' audits and consumer campaigns, authors have argued that these mechanisms create potential space for organizing. Nevertheless, as Armbruster-Sandoval (2004) points out in a representative case: "[NGOs] could not directly pressure [the company] on the shop-floor nor could they negotiate and sign a contract for the factory's workers. Those tasks were the union's responsibility. Without a strong local union or domestic non-state actor, the results of this campaign probably would not have been as far-reaching" (25). In addition, audits and even GFAs required an active organizing presence on the ground to implement mechanisms outlined on paper. Still, Siegmann and others (2017) argue that the Freedom of Association Protocol in the Indonesian sportswear industry, for example, illustrates the potential sanctions that can be employed effectively to strengthen organizing.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the global garment industry's negative image as a "sweatshop regime" meant employers were on guard against workers' claims. On the one hand, Sri Lankan MNCs especially are widely recognized for implementing basic health and safety regulations. On the other hand, they did not acknowledge raising workers' wages, the right to organize, the intensification of work, or the myriad other issues that workers raised. Employers' anxiety about sweatshop claims was reflected in the difficulty I initially faced in trying to identify a factory to do my own research. As one English woman who I met through a network of expatriate friends put it, "the garment industry has been heavily scrutinized."

I encountered this issue within my first few weeks of working at Lean Lanka. I had become friendly with a few young HR managers, and one of them explained to me why they were offended by sweatshop claims about the Sri Lankan industry. As we walked along the

beach, one argued that at Lean Lanka employees had the facilities they needed. Nevertheless, negative news items that had been cropping up about the garment industry in Sri Lanka put managers on the defensive. They felt threatened enough to comment on the news. When I asked my friend, what should be done, though, to ensure workers' substantive rights, he did not have an immediate answer.

In contrast, many unionists argued that employees' councils, foremost among the "alternative disputes resolution mechanisms," had become tools to undermine independent unions. The BOI, which oversees the EPZs in Sri Lanka, promotes employees' councils but claims unionists still have the right to organize. The ban on unions in the EPZs was lifted in 1999. Nevertheless, the employees' councils continued to offer employers a justification for claiming that "outside intervention" was not necessary.

At Lean Lanka, when I attempted to attend the monthly employees' council meeting, an HR manager pulled me to the side. "To be honest with you Devaka, the reason you can't join the [employees' council] meeting is because [Lean Lanka] has a policy not to encourage unions, and the [employees' council] is a place where the management and workers discuss issues, otherwise a third party gets involved." Knowing my political sympathies, perhaps—although I always stressed my objectivity as a researcher—the manager was polite, but to the point. The conversation with the manager was illuminating, though, insofar as she genuinely believed that the employees' council provided sufficient representation.

Nevertheless, her pointing to features of meetings held at other factories owned by the same company, such as putting "covers on chairs" as a sign of respect to workers, implied that the councils had no real power. As Madhu put it to me one day when the workers were called in

on Poya day—as discussed in Chapter Two—despite management's previous promise to follow the official holiday, "Now you understand. It's only the things they want (*nikan eyalata*)."

Still, the employees' councils could be potential tools for workers, insofar as they came to realize that they had no teeth, and therefore needed to organize their own unions. Several years later, I learned that at a factory owned by the company where I worked, the employees' council president had been fired for joining a national union. The branch committee was dissolved. The union had not apparently considered the raw strength and power of the employers. Wimal, understandably, was afraid of organizing because, as he quickly learned, workers jobs were at risk.

Political Divisions

During my research period, Wimal eventually became emboldened to try organizing in the Katunayake EPZ, though, because a GUF began supporting the union. Wimal arrived at the office one day ecstatic: "We now have money for pocket meetings." I was happy myself, because it seemed to inspire a sense of purpose and direction in Wimal. Nonetheless, organizing in the EPZ was never easy, as I soon became aware. A few months later, on another day I was in the office, Wimal came in with a worker who had just been fired from the factory. The workers had organized a branch committee, including a treasurer and president, but they were discovered quickly by management and removed.

I helped write a brief narrative, which Wimal submitted to several organizations, including the GUF that was sponsoring the organizing campaign. It soon became apparent to me, however, that Wimal and the rest did not have basic information about the factory: its setup, where people worked on the shop floor, and so forth. Wimal's union had not mapped the factory. As I was not a unionist, I did not grasp the depth of planning organizing requires, but getting

basic information appeared to be a crucial step that had been overlooked. In the meantime, the GUF's coordinator from abroad came to visit. Wimal discussed the workers' cases. All the fired workers happened to be men; another issue that I analyze in the next section.

The case continued for years thereafter, and slowly the original workers drifted apart. Still, a nucleus of people remained, even though they had few options of surviving in the Katunayake EPZ. The factory that fired them had allegedly put them on a blacklist, which made them un-hirable in the EPZ. One of the fired leaders named Rohana and I hung out. He was formerly employed in the military but began working in the EPZ before he was fired. Rohana was enthusiastic and committed, but he also revealed the frustration at the heart of organizing. As he and another fired branch member put it, Wimal appeared to work more closely with another worker from the factory. They felt excluded. Nevertheless, Rohana and the other branch members eventually put their differences aside, becoming active members of Wimal's union.

Vijaya back in the boarding house remained neutral. "Please ask them what the steps are (*monawa da piyawara*)." As Vijaya put it, if he tried organizing and was fired, the union would no longer have a connection to the factory he was in at the time. Wimal, however, did not anticipate all these issues, which I found surprising, because I initially took his claim that he had been working on labor issues in the Katunayake EPZ for a decade at face value. On the other hand, when I spoke to other unionists, it became clear that failure—in this case, management busting the union and firing the workers—was a routine part of organizing. Across unions, many frequently requested international funding support.

This approach may appear cynical, but in many ways, it was because unionists struggled to identify the best way forward after the long collapse of the left movement in Sri Lanka, as discussed in the Introduction. For organizers trying to survive on their own meager salaries,

starting unions without the required, long-term effort to build power was simply an inescapable aspect of the "real" organizing that required international involvement. Still, the type of pressure that international organizations, including the GUFs, could apply was limited because they framed their organizing vis-à-vis Northern buyers, as opposed to the Sri Lankan suppliers, or even foreign ones, for that matter, that had gained considerable power in the export garment industry.

As a result, it took several years for Rohana and the other workers' cases to be heard by the Labor Department. Although the BOI is the statutory authority that oversees EPZs, the Labor Department theoretically handles workers' cases. After years of neglect and under-staffing, the Labor Department itself did not have the required capacity. This neglect is reflected in national statistics, which show a sharp decline in the number of court cases heard. In 2016, for example, only thirteen court cases were filed and only five were concluded (Labor Department 2016: 93). Instead, the Labor Department offered the fired workers a tribunal for arbitration. This mechanism, however, involved significant delay, as employers did not show up or provide documents on requested dates.

Accordingly, unionists had to become creative. When I met an organizer in the Biyagama EPZ, close to Katunayake, who had decades of experience in the labor movement, she reiterated her own ability to solve workers' grievances using different forms of pressure. The unionist in Biyagama was a talented organizer, and one of the few female staff in largely male-dominated unions. As she put it to a friend and I on a rainy day, in the context of one case, she had "won the compensation for workers whose factory had closed." Her approach was based on building support and goodwill among workers by processing their grievances. Still, she struggled to

overcome the structural obstacles posed by employers and the state. As even she put it, the Labor Department was often unresponsive, which she attributed to corruption.

The question is, what other methods were available if ILO-sponsored social dialogue was ineffective, and unions were barred effectively from organizing openly? The conflict between the perceptions of international donors and politically-minded unionists became clear to me when I attended a discussion at Wimal's drop-in center with an auditor from the ILO, which had funded Wimal's union's workshops. In addition to Wimal, other members of his parent union had showed up. In addition to having years of experience, they had a militant understanding of the goal of organizing with workers.

As the chairs were arranged in the room, I felt awkward sitting up front with the auditor, a white woman, a local translator, and the several union leaders, as I, of course, was an outside researcher. Still, I knew Vijaya and a few others sitting in the back of the room, so I felt more comfortable knowing that friends were also in attendance. Each worker was asked to explain their experience and the benefits that they received from the ILO leadership training program. I identified gaps though in the translation. Workers explained management's bad faith at different factories, from failing to pay wages and bonuses on time to harassment, but many details appeared to be lost on the ILO auditor.

Near the end of the meeting, one worker—who incidentally became a leader during the organizing in the factory that resulted in the dissolution of the branch—stood up and described an incident in which he and other workers were locked out by management over a labor dispute. They had rushed the gate and began pelting it with stones. When I looked over at the auditor, her face had slowly become grey. She coolly turned her head to a union leader and asked, "And do you think this is a good idea?"

The staff member responded unabashedly: “Yes, it demonstrates the collective strength of the working class.” In that moment, it became clear to me what I was observing was nothing less than the basic gap between international donor rhetoric and the reality facing workers on the ground. The final nail in the conversation occurred though at the end, when the auditor thanked on the basis of gender the three women—in a room of twenty people—who had arrived at the meeting. The male translator appeared confused and did not translate what she said; an issue I address in the next section.

To the extent, however, that Wimal and others did go to the streets, literally and figuratively, I felt emboldened by the potential of the labor movement despite the apparent repression it faced. At the annual May Day rally, we marched down a street parallel to the main road, Galle Road, in Colombo. As we passed by workers from other unions though, including the union of the ruling party at the time, Vijaya and others who supported the deposed president, Rajapaksa, became dismissive. “See how they’re always talking about corruption (*dushana vancha*)? Isn’t that corruption?” He pointed to members of the union sitting on public buses.

Even though Wimal’s parent union was led by organizers with militant sympathies, the trajectory of the labor movement was dominated by electoral politics rather than strategic considerations of uniting workers. Vijaya and others supported Rajapaksa, even though their leaders obviously did not. This tension arose again when we arrived at the gathering point and speakers talked about the political issues of the day. Vijaya and other people from the boarding house made snide remarks in the bleachers, as speaker after speaker lambasted the corruption and dictatorial abuse of power by Rajapaksa.

The crux of the issue was that political education had disappeared. There was no “line,” not only on the practical aspects of organizing, but also its theoretical and political implications.

Even though there was no pro-labor electoral option on the table, the question was, how did debates about politics remain central to organizing? Sri Lanka's predicament is not unique. The roots go back to issues in the global labor movement. Lambert and Webster (2002) reflect on the challenges of building GUFs with unions coming from different tendencies. They point, for example, to the apparently irreconcilable fact that China's state-backed union is included in a supposedly independent global labor campaign.

The question of political perspective, however, requires analysis. In the case of labor movements in the North, for example, there is increasing debate over the need to organize by bringing bigger issues onto the table, such as austerity. Because some unions, for example, supported centrist candidates and others supported anti-austerity candidates in recent British and US elections, it is becoming clear that the internal structures of unions are changing. In the case of Sri Lanka though, among other countries in the global South, the question of how to confront the structure was yet to be raised explicitly by organizers.

Leaders in Unexpected Places

Beyond the inherent limitations of relying on cases and processing individual grievances, challenges organizers faced revealed the need for patient work among diverse groups of workers. My critique of the Sri Lankan labor movement is sympathetic, but also returns to the basic questions scholars have asked about the general lack of representation of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups within the unions themselves. Although there were many "organic leaders" who I met throughout my research in the EPZs, from Madhu and Sithumini, to countless others, why were unions dominated by men?

In this final section, I reflect on the ways in which Sri Lankan unions often unwittingly embraced the same patriarchal structures that they needed to challenge to recruit from factories

in which, in many instances, most workers were female. Because this process has not occurred, some authors dismiss unions as inherently patriarchal. I argue, however, that this claim is also problematic. From the scholarly side, for example, Caraway (2007) argues that jobs in industrial manufacturing are dominated by men, and that the primary reason women are represented in the global Southern workforce is because they do not require access to male-dominated institutions such as unions. As she puts it, "The repression of labor in Asia is therefore an inseparable part of the explanation for women's impressive presence in manufacturing work in the region" (Caraway 2007: 4).

Similarly, Freeman (1998) argues that women working in call centers in Barbados enjoy the supposed empowerment that comes from negotiating directly with HR. She writes, "The trade unions are seen as offering nothing that the human resources and employee relations departments of the firms do not already provide" (Freeman 1998: 251). Women, however, are most likely to be targeted by sexual harassers in the workplace. In my research I came across many instances where having a union would have in fact encouraged women to raise their complaints, including changing restrictive policies such as the lack of maternity leave that forced many off the job and into early retirement, as discussed in Chapter Two.

The export garment industry reproduced sexist practices, but employers claimed that theirs was the response to, not the cause of, predominantly young women working on the lines. The women I met, argued to the contrary. As one woman in the boarding house in Averiwatte mentioned, factory recruiters imposed an age limit (*vayasa simava*). This evidence echoes Chhachhi's (1999) claim that management actively seeks out non-unionized young women because they do not have access to the same resources to confront management. In her study of Indian factories, she writes:

> It is women in their late thirties and above who are losing their jobs, and they are under threat, not so much due to their age as due to their high degree of unionization and politicization… But while employers would ideally like to have young unmarried women workers, they are not averse to also employing married women as long as they can treat married women as though they were unmarried. The lowest in management's continuum of preferences would be the most inflexible workforce—married older women who are also unionized. (Chhachhi 1999: 344)

At the same time, I am wary of relying too much on the idea that young women are inherently vulnerable. As Madhu showed me, organic leaders come from anywhere. The issue is that they were not necessarily recognized by the unions themselves.

At the core of the challenge were unions' logistical capabilities, especially for planning activities. In the case of Wimal, he often worked alone in the Katunayake EPZ, which perhaps made it more difficult to meet women workers. At the same time, basic issues could have been resolved, such as having a schedule for weekly activities, and holding meetings at times amenable to women workers. If meetings were held at night, for example, women would have trouble attending because of the lack of lighting and safe public access. Eventually Wimal began to experiment with other options once the GUF provided support, including hosting meetings at boarding houses. Without a comprehensive plan, however, these activities did not lead to a more representative group of workers joining the union.

Activists, of course, also often self-select. Still, among workers who were women who I spoke to, however, they often voiced frustration with many aspects of work in the export garment industry. Unionists claimed that organizing in export garment factories owned by MNCs was difficult because they provided transport, meals, and so forth, which apparently secured workers' consent. Because organizers did not fully grasp the conditions of the factory, or that if they did, they had no way of organizing on this basis, indicated the flaws in their own recruitment strategies. When it came to the process of identifying and recruiting leaders among

under-represented groups such as women, it became evident that applying for funds from international donors and hosting brief workshops was insufficient.

The same could be said of unionists' attempts to reach out to precarious workers, also known as manpower workers in the Sri Lankan context. Although as I argue in Chapter Two companies in the export garment industry have tended to consolidate, this process entails multiple dynamics. During my research, I came across reports within other factories that companies employed casual workers via manpower agencies. Unionists who I spoke to saw the spike in manpower employment as another example of employer domination. Nevertheless, they struggled to bring these workers on board as well. Manpower workers tended to be younger people with fewer ties, who appreciated the flexibility of working on contract (also see De Neve 2014).

This relative freedom highlighted the need for unionists to explain, rather than take for granted, why permanent jobs were necessary. Especially in the high turnover export garment industry, workers did not necessarily see their employment from a long-term perspective. To recruit manpower workers to the union, unionists would have to demonstrate that they were organizing from the bottom-up. This strategy is not impossible. As Taylor (2009) notes, "For Chun these new union movements have been particularly successful in incorporating an irregular and highly feminised workforce into collective organisation and this highlights the inability of established union movement to adapt to the changing nature of the Korean workforce" (446).

Because Sri Lankan manpower workers were not immediately attracted to the union, however, unionists took their alleged apathy as a sign that the structure foreclosed success. To contrast with neoliberal rhetoric about self-responsibility, however, it is important to analyze the need to develop labor's associational capacities (Silver 2003). The shift in perspective requires

focusing the ways in which workers can maximize their leverage, rather than assuming precarity inherently dominates employment (Standing 2014).

Bringing in manpower workers, however, would also require transforming the structure of leadership. Because Wimal's union was smaller, the rank-and-file had relatively easy access to the leadership. Vijaya, for example, could meet the president of the union. The question was not only one of democracy, but organization. The union struggled to rebuild an organizing culture after the decimation of its power on the shop floor after the defeat of the General Strike of 1980. Other remaining unions tended to be dominated by strong personalities, with constitutions that operated in the breach. Even the famous unionist Bala Tampoe, for example, was known for his authoritarian tendencies. In the case of Wimal's union, its organizational weakness made it harder to reach the unconvinced.

Unionists like Wimal, however, were transformed by the experience organizing in the EPZs among women workers. Unlike the older male Sri Lankan trade union leadership, Wimal seemed to appreciate the fact that, at least as a basic concept, women must drive the movement. At the May Day rally he pointed to Nelum when the shouts of workers began to drown out her voice. Wimal exclaimed, "We need a women's voice (*kanthavage handa*)." Wimal had developed a brotherly relationship with Nelum. Although Nelum adopted an NGO-style of organizing, they seemed to share understanding based on their marginalization within the union gerontocracy.

To this extent, scholars argue that unions have also been transformed positively by grappling with a broader range of issues within communities of workers. As Hart (2002) notes in the case of South African struggles, "Yet the ways particular groups and classes in different communities forged outside connections, and the sorts of opposition they were able to mount,

were shaped by locally specific histories, class configurations, and social dynamics" (102). Social movement unionism has become especially prominent in Southern countries because, as Burawoy (1985), Seidman (1994), and others note, the labor movement must confront the state to challenge capital. State-sanctioned authority for development projects such as EPZs and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) means that organizing often means tackling a wide range of issues, from environmentalism to community development.

Nevertheless, Rutherford (2010) also cites another scholar regarding social movement unionism: it "may be read as labour's abandonment of difficult workplace issues in favour of less confrontational forms of resistance (e.g. promoting a play versus striking in the workplace)" (773). Because of the challenges discussed above, Wimal struggled to organize with a more representative group of workers, even though he, along with Nelum, were more likely to raise women's issues in meetings and workshops. If Rohana and the case of the workers fired from the factory demonstrated anything though, it was that unions had to become more representative of the workforce to succeed, especially by grappling with gender issues.

Conclusion

By looking at the representation of workers in the union, we see that the question of union democracy is inherently gendered. Although scholars have pointed out that women often are excluded, the analysis of the ways in which workers critique this process is often pushed aside, emphasizing instead the multiplicity of workers' identities. As Arruzza (2013) among others have pointed out, however, women have been central to the formation of the most successful labor movements and parties in the global North. Similarly, Bair (2010: 213), Chhachhi (1999: 344), Fernandes (1997: 119), and Mills (2017: 322) insist on analyzing the

political construction of the labor force in the South as, in large part, an effort designed to exclude those women most likely to organize.[49]

Scholarly focus on gender intersects with the critique of traditional industrial-based unions. The question, however, is whether Community Based Organizations (CBOs), for example, align with the neoliberal discourse of self-help, as opposed to confronting the structure. As Armbruster-Sandoval (2004) notes:

> …Labor unions have sometimes criticized community-based organizations for focusing on 'limited goals' rather than broader ones like negotiating collective bargaining agreements. CBOs, in contrast, have attacked some unions for ignoring and/or excluding women and bypassing their gendered and sometimes racialized networks. (16)

More generally, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, export garment workers themselves demanded bigger social changes. The politics of their livelihoods meant that they were central to a broader working-class critique of the retreat of the welfare state in Sri Lanka.

To analyze alliances across different groups, the central focus in the scholarly debate requires a shift to re-examine the organizations—trade unions—that attempt to universalize the demands of different constituencies. Recent work has identified the different scales at which unionism operates. One fruitful area of research analyzes the dominance of national ideologies that create "cellular" spaces, while activists attempt to overcome local barriers to build movements (Nilsen and Von Holdt: 10-11). In the case of organizing export garment workers, the challenge, as I have argued in this chapter, is not the novelty of the transnational dimension per se, but how it operates vis-à-vis the national, especially the diverse lineages of the labor movement in Sri Lanka and its responses to more recent political and economic challenges (for an overview, see Biyanwila 2010).

[49] This point echoes Salzinger's (2003) work on shop floor changes: "Docility, no matter who exhibits it, is produced on the shop floor, not acquired ready-made" (10).

Other new scholarship on Southern workforces anticipates the reconfiguration of the labor movements in their respective countries. How might we benefit from more scholarly analyses that track the changing representation of workers within labor movements? Lee (2007) offers a crucial example, looking at the ways in which the different demands posed by Chinese workers in the northern and southern regions of the country reflect their own unique labor histories. Her work is linked to a bigger debate in China about the consolidation of the workforce in southern export zones such as Shenzhen, and the shedding, to an extent, of its precarious characteristics (Frenkel and Yu 2015: 278; Siu 2015: 44).

In this chapter, I have pointed to the ways in which Sri Lankan export garment workers are central to export capitalism but have struggled to find a movement that articulates their demands vis-à-vis employers and the state. The unions that are rooted in the history of other sectors are changing, intentionally or not, to engage these demands. A more explicit debate about this process requires theorizing the labor movement in terms of historical changes in the composition of the workforce. This perspective requires identifying the ways in which these changes are reflected in the representation of the working class.

More abstractly, scholars argue that tension exists between Polanyi-type struggles against commodification and Marxist struggles against exploitation (Burawoy 2010). As Brookes and McCallum (2017: 206) note, it is difficult if not impossible to draw up a balance sheet on a global level, especially given the tendency to focus on "successful examples." Pointing to a less successful example in the Sri Lankan case, on the one hand, I agree that perhaps simply accumulating case studies cannot conclusively prove whether a global counter-movement against neoliberal globalization is taking place. On the other hand, though, the goal of this chapter has been to highlight processes that may anticipate such a counter-movement.

Above all, in this chapter, I have argued for a return to the study of union structures, especially among newer groups of workers the extent of whose engagement scholars have yet to determine. The question remains the conditions under which workers participate, and, for organizers, how to increase their participation.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have concentrated on the challenges of the export garment industry in Sri Lanka from the perspective of its workers. Although workers' demands have yet to be incorporated into a successful political campaign, their underlying critiques of the system shed light on the effects of export capitalism in the global South. As Scott (1985) argues, the hidden transcripts that are the stuff of bigger movements become visible only in moments of historical rupture (288). By looking ethnographically at the everyday critiques articulated by workers such as Vijaya, Madhu, Sithumini, and others, I have tried to identify the tensions of a system that requires "cheap labor." Workers critique the assumption that their labor is inherently cheap. They search, as I have tried to document throughout, for alternative explanations and possibilities.

Recent studies of key moments of labor upsurge in the North analyze the ways in which workers in automobile factories, for example, fell back on a moral economy to resist employers' attempts to encroach on their livelihoods (Murray and Schwartz 2015; Smemo, et al. 2017). These struggles were articulated as part of a diverse range of trade union actions that eventually became the basis both for the transformation of industry and the consolidation of welfare states in Northern countries. By the time of the neoliberal assault on organized labor in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the industrial working class in factories appeared to be on the decline, not just politically, but numerically as well.[50]

More recently though, with the wave of protests opposing austerity in Northern countries, Eidlin and Kerrissey (2018) note that the intellectual agendas of studies of trade unions and

[50] Authors such as Panitch (1986: 52) and Kelly (289) cautioned, however, against seeing organized labor's setbacks as demonstrating the permanent irrelevance of concentrations of workers in capitalism.

social movements are converging. Authors writing about movements in the global South have struggled to identify a single target of opposition for forces of resistance.[51] By generalizing from export garment workers' experiences in Sri Lanka to the rest of the global South, I have tried to identify the ways in which export capitalism engenders resistance among workers, insofar as they are also part of a broader constituency.

Although movements of opposition in the North and South may have different targets, scholars and activists appear to have arrived at a consensus that unions must engage different groups of people to be successful, including those who may not self-identify as an industrial proletariat (Moody 1997). Over the past several decades, the concept of social movement unionism has become central to activists' attempts to articulate opposition to capitalism in diverse periods and places; from studies of South African unionism during and after apartheid (Dubbeld 2015; Hart 2002; Seidman 1994), to recent protests opposing austerity (Della Porta 2015). In addition, the expanding definition of the working class is also an opportunity to document a broader range of struggles beyond the classic battles that defined the labor movement in the global North (see Fleming and Soborg 2014: 56 on van der Linden's work).

In Sri Lanka, despite the centrifugal forces resulting in the disorganization of the labor movement, many labor leaders have begun to recognize that the vast challenges facing export garment workers, among others, requires a more holistic approach. Unionists participate in national Cost of Living protests. The annual budget for public services has become a consistent part of the political drama. Still, unions struggle in the absence of a viable mass party that expresses working people's hopes and frustrations. The shift in South Asia, for example, has

[51] In the context of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), Nilsen and Von Holdt (2018) also note that ruling state ideologies continue to define the terrain on which many movements of opposition operate.

been, as Herring and Agarwala (2008) put it, away from programmatic battles over policy, to a clientelist politics of patronage in which issues are disguised as personalized differences between rulers. As they write, "Nonprogrammatic parties have great latitude in adopting symbols to mobilize support, deploying social identities rather than class-relevant programs" (Herring and Agarwala 2008: 5-6).

The effects of this process are evident in the most recent constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka that is pitting members of the government that replaced Mahinda Rajapaksa against each other. Many in Sri Lankan civil society, for example, fear a return to the authoritarianism that defined Rajapaksa's regime. Yet the struggles and everyday challenges faced by workers are often neglected in local debates about political alternatives. The debt-driven mega infrastructure projects introduced by Rajapaksa have been continued by the previous government and will likely continue under the one that replaces it. Colombo's skyline expands.

Whenever I spoke to Vijaya, Sithumini, Hirunika, or other workers for that matter, though, and they mentioned their options were returning to the village or migrating abroad, I thought about the paradox of a system in which the state tries to attract capital while masses of people try to leave. The generalized economic pressure export capitalism creates is one way in which people from different backgrounds sympathize and identify with others, regardless of their geographic location, or economic background in the formal or informal sector. Nevertheless, even if a party emerges from movements fighting on a range of issues, from workers' rights to land dispossession, the question of who represents the working class is a structural feature of the debate.

Given this acknowledgment, perhaps there is no need to return to the many discussions of whether the decline of the industrial proletariat in the North and its apparent failure to arrive in

much of the South means the concept of the working class itself is irrelevant. Drawing my conclusion from the many conversations and experiences described in this dissertation, I see the tension between new, diverse groups of workers and the working class as an inescapable aspect of any mass party. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001) might put it, the articulation of disparate elements means hegemony is inherently contingent.

Fleming and Soborg (2014) anticipate the practical challenges of this project by referring to the fact that workers must inevitably target the state: "The reason is that only the state, *by legislation and regulation*, could eliminate precarious and vulnerable work…" (61-62; emphasis added).[52] Lambert and Webster (2002) further note that the first wave of labor internationalism was defined by a movement that saw organizing workers as central to the question articulated by Lenin, "What is to be done?" (339): a question inherently concerned with the capture and transformation of state power. In my dissertation I have tried to interpret political mobilization ethnographically by focusing on cases in which the organizers and leadership of unions had to reckon with the changing views, orientations, and backgrounds of its (potential) membership.

At the same time, organizations also require a vision, or program, that makes goals practicable. For earlier authors writing in the North in the wake of labor studies inspired by Braverman's (1998) monograph, it was clear that the major shift since the 1970s was not necessarily a numerical decline in the industrial proletariat, but the labor movement's strategic weakness in articulating a vision beyond capitalism (see Panitch 1986: 4). Wright (2000) notes that as the associational power of workers increases, they may forge class compromises with

[52] Although I have focused my analysis on the effects of export capitalism, I also accept Mann's (1984) critique of economic reductionism and his call to analyze the "autonomous power of the state." For the purposes of this dissertation, this approach implies identifying the political leverage of workers' movements.

capitalists. Inevitably, however, an upper bound is reached in which working class organization threatens the core of capitalism itself: profit, especially its ownership and redistribution.[53] Failure to tackle this issue head on meant that Northern workers eventually faced neoliberal counter-attack.

For authors writing from the perspective of the global South, it often seems we must explain the deviation of labor's trajectory from the normative assumptions of the experience of workers in the North. The paradox though is that the labor movement in the North, regardless of its previous victories, has ended up on the backfoot. On the one hand, Lambert and Webster (2002), for example, argue that, "In Asia, both authoritarian and democratic regimes are committed to global engagement based on cheap, controlled labour" (351). On the other hand, Burawoy (1985) notes the ironic outcome of labor's attempts to win concessions from capital in the North: "The hegemonic regimes which established themselves after the Second World War…undermined labour's strength on the shopfloor and led to its present vulnerability." (143) The paradox is that even though Northern workers may have overcome their historical status as "cheap labor," capital attempts to hit the reset button; an equalization in theory, if not in material living standards, with the predicament of Southern workers.

[53] He writes:

> As working-class power extends beyond corporatist associative practices, the immediate realization of working-class interests again decline. This region of the curve defines the 'transition trough' between capitalism and socialism discussed by Adam Przeworski. Capitalists respond to the threat of losing control over the allocation of capital by disinvesting, shifting investments to other places, or by more organized forms of a 'capital strike.' This has the effect of provoking an economic decline, which hurts workers' material interests. It is only when workers' associational power increases to the point at which investments can be democratically allocated (in the sense of democratically imposed direction on allocation) that the working-class interest curve once again turns upward. Once there is a full realization of hypothetical democratic socialism, the interests of workers and capitalists are once again maximally divergent. (Wright 2000: 990)

Accordingly, a moment of crisis, the Great Recession, reveals a new period in which the outcome of workers' struggles is not predetermined either from the perspective of the North or the South. As mentioned in the Introduction, Silver (2003: 123) argues that in many ways Northern workers must rebuild their associational power to stem the rising tide of precariousness that has been a definitive feature of Southern workers' lives (Harris and Scully 2015). If there is hope though in the case of Sri Lanka's export garment workers that I have discussed, it is that the current global context is inherently experimental: successful strategies have yet to coalesce in an explicit ideology.[54]

Perhaps, then, we can rethink the narrative of Northern countries sharing capital and technology with Southern countries; one of the core justifications for policy that embraces export capitalism. We can focus instead on the open-ended moments of cross-learning and collaboration that will define the future of labor movements across the world. In this regard, there is still much to learn from the experiences of people like Vijaya, Madhu, Sithumini, and Wimal.

[54] I note here more recent attempts to articulate "theory from the South" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

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