



Labouring for global markets: Conceptualising labour agency in global production networks[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 18 July 2012

Keywords:

Global production networks
Garments
Labour agency
Gender
Caste
Tamil Nadu
India

ABSTRACT

This article starts with the recognition that labour has received less than its fair share of empirical and analytical attention in scholarship on global production networks. Little is known about how jobs for export markets fit into workers' wider livelihoods strategies, or how workers react to new employment opportunities available to them. Based on evidence from the Tiruppur garment cluster in Tamil Nadu, South India, the article takes labourers, their livelihoods and their social reproduction as its starting point. It reviews relevant labour geography and GPN literature, and suggests that labour agency has been almost solely conceptualised in terms of collective forms of organised worker resistance. The article then draws on material from South India to examine how people enter garment work as well as the multiple and everyday forms of agency they engage in. We follow a 'horizontal' approach that accounts for gender, age, caste and regional connections in the making and constraining of agency. Such an approach reveals how labour agency is not merely fashioned by vertically linked production networks but as much by social relations and livelihood strategies that are themselves embedded in a wider regional economy and cultural environment. The article argues that labour's multiple and everyday forms of agency not only help to shape local developments of global capitalism but also to produce transformative effects on workers' livelihoods, social relations and reproductive capacities.

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1. Introduction

Labour has received less than its fair share of attention in scholarship on global value chains, and more recently in work on global production networks (GPNs) (Henderson et al., 2002; Coe et al., 2004). Articles on governance or labour standards in GPNs typically end with a paragraph on labour, usually concluding that labour employed at the tail end of the network needs further empirical research (Nadvi and Thoburn, 2004; Coe et al., 2008). Nadvi, for example, in a recent assessment of global standards and global governance, calls for research on labour and work processes that engages 'with the local social context – which includes norms

and values as well as gender and household relations and the ways in which these impact on local work practices and work organization' (2008, p. 340). Here, we seek to build on Nielson and Pritchard's call (2010) to complement the 'vertical' analyses of trade and production networks with a 'horizontal' approach that explores the role of local factors, such as gender, age and caste, and of regional connections, such as commuting and migration, in the shaping of GPNs (see also Leslie and Reimer, 1999). A 'horizontal' approach, we argue, reveals how labour agency is not merely fashioned by vertically linked production networks but as much by social relations and livelihood strategies that are themselves embedded in a wider regional economy and cultural environment.

While most GPN scholarship has similarly paid little attention to labour, there is a rapidly expanding body of literature within labour geography that argues for a more committed study of labour and labour agency within the context of global capitalism (Castree, 2007; Lier, 2007; Coe et al., 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). This scholarship also considers new approaches to the study of labour employed within GPNs, and particularly in the context of neo-liberal labour market restructuring (see e.g. Cumbers et al., 2010). Here, we will not review the labour geography literature *in extenso*, but draw on some themes and concepts that we find particularly helpful for the ways in which we propose to

[☆] This paper is based on joint research carried out as part of an ESRC-DfID funded research project entitled 'Transforming Livelihoods: work, migration and poverty in the Tiruppur garment cluster, India' (RES-167-25-0296). The research would not have been possible without the assistance of our research assistants – most especially Gayathri, as well as Arul, Muthu and Priya. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference, 2010, where we benefitted from comments from participants. We also thank Neil Coe, Judith Heyer, Peter Luetchford, Jeff Pratt, Ben Rogaly and two anonymous referees for comments on earlier versions of this article.

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conceptualise labour and agency in the context of a South Indian garment manufacturing and export cluster.

2. Conceptualising labour in GPNs

A current debate within labour geography relates to labour agency. It builds on longstanding conceptual and empirical research on labour within the capitalist economy, some of which is now exploring labour agency within the specific context of GPNs. In an excellent review article on the place of agency in labour geography, Coe and Jordhus-Lier argue for a re-embedding of labour agency within GPNs, and for a need to 'reconnect conceptions of labour agency into the webs of wider relations with other social actors and institutions in which they [workers] are inevitably embedded' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010, p. 11). GPN literature, they aptly point out, 'has remained notably silent on the issue of labour agency. Labour is, most commonly, simply assumed to be an intrinsic part of the production process and workers are typically presented as passive victims of capital's inexorable global search for cheaper wages' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010, p. 11). For long, both neo-classical and Marxist economic geography, Lier writes, seemed to depict workers 'as an oppressed class prohibited from actively creating the geographies of capitalism' (2007, p. 821). What is lacking, therefore, are more refined analyses that recognise the agency of workers, understood by Coe and Jordhus-Lier as 'strategies that shift the capitalist *status quo* in favour of workers' (2010, p. 8).

This is a recent response to Herod's well-known call 'for a much more active conceptualization of workers as engaged in producing the unevenly developed geography of capitalism' (Herod, 2001, p. 15; see also 1997). While geographers of the capitalist landscape have tended to either ignore the role of labour or merely perceive of it in a passive manner, Herod called for a greater recognition of workers' constant, diverse and manifold attempts 'to shape the landscape of capitalism to their own advantage, in either revolutionary or nonrevolutionary ways (i.e., in ways that may challenge extant class relations but also in ways which may reinforce them)' (Herod, 2001, p. 4). Such an approach, Herod explained, requires radically new ways of conceptualising labour: no longer 'merely in terms of "factors" of production or the exchange value of "abstract labour" but to treat working-class people as sentient social beings who both intentionally and unintentionally produce economic geographies through their actions – all the while recognizing that they are constrained (as is capital) in these actions' (Herod, 2001, p. 15). Herod's agenda for a radical re-conceptualisation of labour not only included a focus on workers as actors rather than mere reactors, but also required a more serious attempt to link 'workers' own economic and social practices to the production of their own spatial fixes' (Herod, 2001, p. 31). Or, as Rogaly puts it, 'yes, capital sought its own "spatial fix", but so did labour' (2009, p. 2). The aim is not to forget about capital altogether, but to reconnect accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism to workers' own practices of survival and social reproduction. We return to these last points below.

But labour agency has been understood in very particular and often limited ways in much of the literature that followed. First of all, much of Herod's own empirical work, and that of most of who responded to his initial call, has engaged with a rather narrow concept of labour agency; one which was primarily conceived of in terms of collective, organised labour activism and formally institutionalised trade unions and workers' collectives (Cumbers et al., 2008; Riisgaard, 2009). Lier acknowledges that such a conceptualisation has tended to 'overlook worker agency that is *not* articulated as collectively organised, political strategies' (2007, p. 829, italics added). Such a limited focus has itself contributed to the under-theorisation of worker agency that labour geographers now seek

to redress (Castree, 2007; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). While this literature has substantially refined our understanding of labour as a collective agent, and of contemporary trade union activism, the study of labour's multiple agency potential remains underdeveloped. Coe and Jordhus-Lier therefore emphasise the need to reveal the 'massively different levels of potential agency *within* functionally integrated economic networks' (2010, pp. 11–12). In this paper we seek to contribute to this wider project by focusing on forms of labour agency that are neither collective nor formally institutionalised, yet reveal labour's ability to act and even shape the landscape within which capital operates.

Secondly, the theorisation of labour agency has been restricted by an approach that conceives of agency primarily in terms of *resistance*, rather than in the much broader sense – initially argued for by Herod – as the ability to shape the geography of capitalism itself. Or, as Herod put it, agency as the practices (spatial and social) through which 'workers themselves actively make space and shape the economic geography of capitalism *in ways not dictated by capital*' (Herod, 2001, p. 31, italics added). Herod defined labour agency in very broad terms, moving away from agency as merely reactive or responsive, i.e. *resisting* or *reshaping* the environments produced by capitalism, and towards a rethinking of workers 'as (pro)active agents actually capable of *shaping* the built environment themselves as part of the process of their own self-reproduction' (Herod, 2001, p. 29). But given the above-mentioned focus on collective agency, even within the more recent GPN literature, little has remained of this broader and more pro-active view of labour. With the decline of formal trade union activism in the global North and its fragmentation in the global South, there is an overwhelming sense that working class agency is increasingly being squeezed under neo-liberal restructuring (De Neve, 2008; Cumbers et al., 2010).¹ As Cumbers et al. point out, 'with a particular time and space contingent form of working class organisation shattered, the implication is that labour (in the broadest sense) has lost the ability to act in its own interest' (Cumbers, 2010, p. 52). Such a conclusion, however, as Cumbers et al. recognise, assumes that organised and collective forms of *resistance* constitute labour's only 'ability to act'.

In a more promising shift of focus, labour geographers have begun to engage with conceptually more disaggregated concepts of agency, building on Katz's breakdown of agency into acts of resilience, reworking and resistance (Katz, 2004; Cumbers et al., 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Katz's aim is precisely to tease apart the many responses to uneven capitalist development and to 'diffuse, if not burst, the romance with "resistance" . . .' (Katz, 2004, p. 241). Seeking to break away from a tradition that reads resistance in every autonomous act, Katz distinguishes between social practices 'whose primary effect is autonomous initiative, recuperation, or *resilience*; those that are attempts to *rework* oppressive and unequal circumstances; and those that are intended to *resist*, subvert, or disrupt these conditions of exploitation and oppression' (Katz, 2004, p. 242). Underlying each of these social practices lies a different sort of consciousness. Acts of resilience build on a limited consciousness of the relations of oppression that shape agency, while acts of reworking, and especially those of resistance, draw on and (re)produce a much more critical and oppositional consciousness of the hegemonic powers at work (Katz, 2004, pp. 239–259).

Katz's broadening of the concept of resistance reminds us that not all autonomous social practices – be they of individuals or groups – can be interpreted as oppositional acts, even though for the individuals concerned such practices aim to improve or

¹ Castree's work (2000) on the Liverpool dock workers, however, points to the multiscale dynamics of labour struggles and reminds us that some forms of unionism might still be effective at a local and national level without necessarily being international or global in nature.

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