

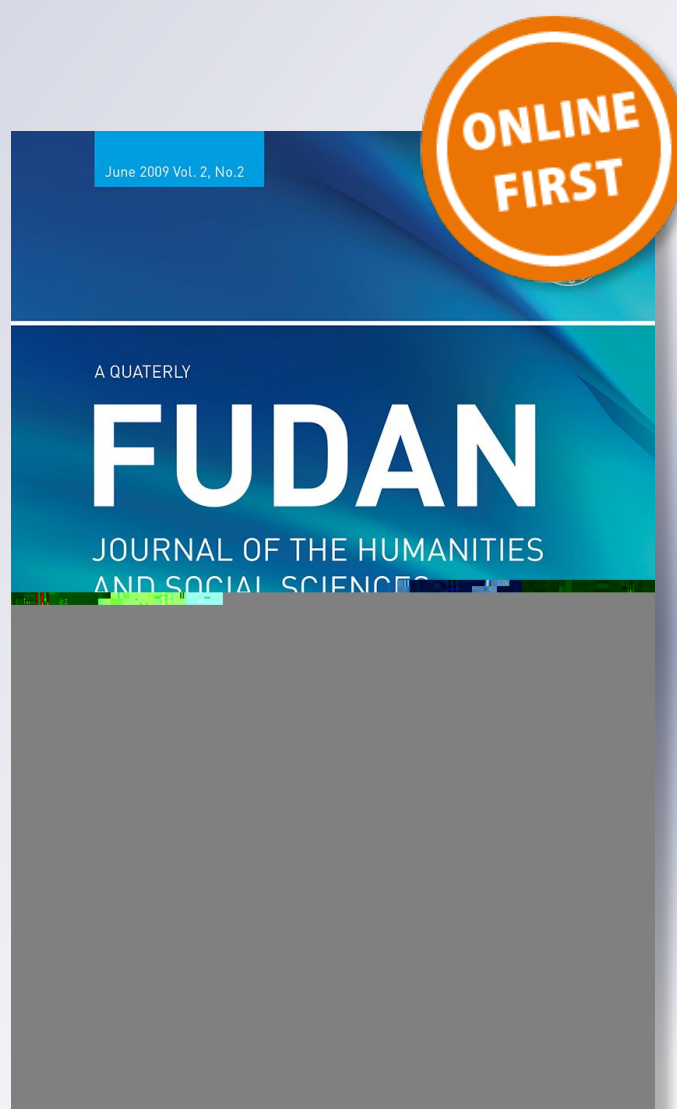
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The Sweatshop Workers of Nicaragua: Subjectivity, Labor, and Domination

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Abstract This essay is based on an approach that addresses the relationship between work-related domination and the subjects who are submitted to it. This reflection arises from research undertaken in Nicaragua, among workers from the international textile factories known as *maquiladoras* (or *maquilas*). Men, but mostly young women, work and live here under particularly difficult conditions. The constraints of work and domination invade the recesses of their existence, and their power is such that it seems to annul any proper subjectivity. Although it may seem easy to locate the effects of work-related domination in the very intimacy of the subjects' lives, it also appears as if part of themselves remains unsubdued. Dominated subjectivities can only rebel for failing to do it would be to condemn their beings to inexistence. What sense can be given to this gap in domination? Does it preserve the domination by preserving the subjects from the invasion in their own beings by this very domination? Is it only a resource of the submission? Those are, between domination and subjectivity, some of the aroused interrogations.

Keywords Labor · Domination · Subjectivity · Sweatshop workers · Nicaragua

Nicaragua can become a whole country of free zones.
A Nicaraguan manufacturer.¹

¹ G. Cuadra in *El Observador Económico* (2001–2002), “Las nuevas inversiones están en manos del sector privado,” n°119, diciembre-enero, p. 22–25.

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Free Zones have become an economic patrimony of the nation.
The government, 2002.²

The work presented here is the result of a greater endeavor, a product of years of research that leads to the writing of a book called *Dans les failles de la domination* [In the Cracks of Domination] published in 2009 by the Presses Universitaires de France, in the collection headed by Christophe Dejours and Francis Martens, called *Souffrance et Théorie*.

As a sociologist by formation, the reflections that I share in these pages are inextricably linked to the empirical work conducted with workers—mostly young women—from the international textile factories (*maquiladoras*) installed in Managua, Nicaragua's capital. These reflections are the fruit of long hours of biographical interviews about their work, history, family, daily lives, desires, and dreams. Guided by these narratives and guided by numerous readings from the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature, and philosophy, I developed a personal reflection of the relationships (variable and incomplete) between work, domination, and subjectivity. As such, self-centered, this reflection may seem detached from the two greatest sources of inspiration, without which it would not have existed: the workers who, in the flesh, endure the harsh and repetitive work conditions in the *maquiladoras*, and the authors who have inspired my thoughts have enriched and guided it, opening my mind to new ways of understanding and questioning. Here, I summarize the results of my research and my personal reflections of the relationship between domination and subject, and though these authors are not cited as they would in the more usual form of a scientific article, the reader will recognize the stamp of Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault, Hanna Arendt, Judith Butler, Cornelius Castoriadis, or, in the human and social sciences field, Christophe Dejours, Alain Morice, Robert Castel, or Alain Cottereau.

However, the text presented here does not completely lack empirical data. Prior to discussing the central elements of the reflection—the subject's construction, the role of defenses in the context of domination, the idea of consenting to domination, and subjects who construct themselves within and against the realm of domination—and in order to have a better understanding of its significance, we propose to make a detour through Nicaragua, where this sector of employment was built from scratch, so paradigmatic of the globalization of industries and the employment (of mainly women) in service of neoliberal capitalism.

1 What *Maquiladoras* for Nicaragua?

The empirical research was conducted in Managua between 2002 and 2004 with workers from the international textile factories known as *maquiladoras*. All types of clothing are produced here: shirts, evening dresses, shoes, underwear, and especially jeans. There is a wide variety of industries that benefit from Nicaragua's export processes. Most of the production (textile, tobacco, electronic assembly, and

² *cnzf.gob.ni* (2002). CNZF is the governing body of the industrial free trade zones regime, of which it draws the policy. It is integrated by representatives of the public as well as the private sectors.

furniture) requires very little investment and minimal technology, leading to poor infrastructure; the labor force is abundant, cheap, and poorly trained. Today, the textile sector represents 65% of working posts in the free trade zones and 50% of total exports.³

A great amount of my fieldwork included interviewing workers from the textile industry in factories located in Managua and Tipitapa. At Managua, most of these factories were established within the oldest free zone of the country, Las Mercedes, where almost 20 companies were settled at that time. There were more than 30,000 direct jobs, two-thirds occupied by women (most of them under 30 years old). In 2011, the number of free trade zones had risen in the country, with 160 companies established within them and 100,000 direct jobs.

The *maquiladoras* in Nicaragua have different origins. At the time of my investigation, Taiwanese, Korean, and American companies had the largest share of the market. Ten years later, Americans and Koreans still own more than 80% of these companies and 54% of direct jobs.⁴

They import everything they need (machines, fabrics, yarn, buttons, etc.) and export all production to their clients in the USA. They may have multiple clients—especially the big Asian consortiums—but can also be extremely dependent on one or two main customers who are then able to exert a strong constraint on the company and the production.

The companies benefit from very important tax and customs exemptions.⁵ In addition to these tax exemptions, and the close proximity of these two nations, the benefits associated with the Free Trade Agreement signed with the USA in 2005 (textile quotas), above all, offer a very abundant and inexpensive labor force that makes this country very attractive for foreign investors. For example, according to the Nicaraguan Association of Textile and Apparel Industry, which seeks to attract new investors, its workforce is the country's most important asset:

What does Nicaragua have that other countries don't have? One of the comparative advantages of Nicaragua is its labour force (...) Five million inhabitants, 65% of whom are less than 25 years old, 15% unemployment and 40% of underemployment rates (...) The minimum wage is US\$ 0.37 per hour while wages on the market are US\$ 0.67 per hour.⁶

³ Information from the National Free Zone Commission internet site (CNZF) (<http://www.cnzf.gob.ni>, 2015).

⁴ These countries are actually followed by Nicaragua (25 companies but 3.7% of working posts) and Mexico (10 companies for 7.5% of working posts); Taiwan is now in fifth place after El Salvador.

⁵ With the Law of Free Industrial Zone, the six most relevant benefits for both "operating" and "users" companies of the Nicaraguan Free Zones were: 100% exemption of import taxes on the benefits; import taxes exemption on the goods, equipment, etc.; also for the creation or transformation of the firms; total exemption for the transmission of real state goods affected to free zone; total exemption for indirect taxes yield from sales; and total exemption for municipal taxes. All these exemptions were initially thought for a 15-year period. Later in 2001, with the agreement of the WTO, Nicaragua was allowed to offer, before 2008, an extended benefit of 15 years to another country's request. See www.czf.gob.ni.

⁶ *anitec.net* (2004). In relation to the countries near Nicaragua, the average salary paid here is, clearly, the lowest. According to the report by the Nicaragua Central Bank issued in 2007, the minimum monthly salary in Central America countries was: Nicaragua: 98.6 US\$; Costa Rica: 484.5 US\$; Salvador: 174.3 US\$; Guatemala: 202.7 US\$; Honduras: n/d.; Dominican Republic: 198 US\$. Banco Central de Nicaragua (2007),

In addition, the massive creation of jobs—although precarious—remains the central and unquestionable argument to legitimize the presence of these industries in the country. To potential investors, the “abundant, competitive and young workforce” provides them with a comparative advantage, especially with respect to neighboring countries. The number of industrial plants built or to be built is systematically accompanied by the number of jobs created or to be created. Companies also use and raise this issue when threatening to close factories and move out of Nicaragua, leaving dozens or hundreds of workers in the lurch. These threats, whether or not they are real, have a very real impact on workers. The workers’ narratives are impregnated with the idea that this is the only employment they might find—“there is nowhere else to drop dead” (Yolanda, female worker, 29 years old)—and the fact that they do not really have a choice.

The exponential development of the *maquila* industry throughout the Nicaraguan landscape began in the 1990s with the artifice of *maquiladoras* as the “only employment alternative.” This serves as evidence of the ideological transformations—not just economic, but social and political ones, too—that were starting to be imposed during those years by discrediting the previous Sandinista regime.

2 A Sector Created from Scratch

The aim of this paper is not about the history of Nicaragua. I would only like to stress that the *maquiladoras* expanded along with the regime that took place at the end of the Sandinista revolution (1979–1990)⁷ in which the actual president played an important role. This historical fact has proven to be important to the extent that can be noted, for the Nicaragua prepared itself to occupy its place within the international division of labor and resources.

At the end of the revolution, the country and its economy were exhausted. As Nicaragua turned over a new leaf, the country opened itself to neoliberalism and applied the structural adjustment policies in exchange for financial assistance from multilateral lending agencies. Nicaragua welcomed the *maquiladoras*, attracted by the enormous tax benefits, and provided them with a cheap and abundant labor force that was now “liberated” by the fall of an employer State that threatened to sink the country into poverty. For all, 1990 represents a turning point: all workers who

Footnote 6 continued

“Nicaragua en cifras,” www.bcn.gob.ni, p. 4. According to the CNZF (2015): “Nicaragua has a large qualified labor force ready to be employed by international investment companies willing to establish in the country (...) The Labor Market Risk, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2014, places Nicaragua as the Central American country with the lowest investors’ risk, after Costa Rica. This report takes into account several issues as: Union’s power, work suits, salary restrictions’, contract restriction and workers dismissal (...) the comparison with the minimum salary for the free zone companies in Central America, Nicaragua is the most competitive country in the region. These conditions allow investors to establish operations with intensive labor and highly profitable.”

⁷ The first textile *maquiladoras* appeared in Nicaragua in the mid-1960s. On the eve of the Sandinist revolution (1979), they were about a dozen. Under the Sandinist government, they were no more than five and were nationalized. Not until the end of the revolution and the liberation of the economy will the sector stand out as a State policy.

worked for the State at this time lost their jobs. Among the many issues that had to be resolved—between domestic employment, precarious informal work, and work in the *maquila*—the latter imposed itself up to the point to seem indispensable in the eyes of all: Government, workers, trade unions, media, and the academics. Renewed by the creation of jobs, the legitimacy of the *maquila* presence could not be subject of any discussion.

The Government promoted an image of a flourishing industry, one in which young people coexisted with very different political ideas, yet opposed to the “Government regime of the 1980s” which had unleashed a fratricidal war and blocked all economic growth. The *maquila* became an “economic asset of the Nation.” The legal frameworks for the opening of free trade zones were established rapidly. For instance, there were no less than four new decrees and laws during the year 1991 (Borgeaud-Garciandía 2010).

The *maquila* quickly became the leading provider of new working posts in the country.⁸ In a country where one-third of the population was less than 24 years old, 8 out of 10 people lived with less than two dollars a day, half with less than a dollar a day, and where a third of households are run by single mothers, the *maquila* was presented as a blessing. No actor could “reasonably” question their presence without taking into account the disaster that would result for the tens of thousands of families if those companies decided to leave the country. As Christophe Dejours says, “the choice is not between obedience and disobedience, but between realism and illusion” (Dejours 1998: p. 134).

3 What Industries and What Employment Conditions?

These companies show some diversity. Generally, they are characterized by the strong horizontal division of duties, the chain, a vertical control mode, combined with the demands of total quality and a “just-in-time” production model. The minimum salary is to be completed by extra labor in order to receive production incentives, presentism, and punctuality retributions. Despite wage increases that took place since my time in Nicaragua, in 2012 salaries rose to 130 USD, equivalent to 30% of the household minimum needs basket, placing the *maquiladoras* among the economic sectors whose minimum wages were the lowest.⁹

Apart from the working conditions, most of the workers are women, many of them single mothers responsible for their children and their extended families. It is a precarious job, where the threat of dismissal and resignations are commonplace: working 5–7 days per week, and from 2 h a day or even a whole night as overtime, were mandatory. Unions are threatened, the physical movements of workers are controlled, and their bodies palpated several times per day as a checking practice. Labor relations are limited between workers, inexistent between workers and high

⁸ They went from 1000 in 5 companies (1992) to 37,000 in 45 companies by 2001 (representing approximately a 32% of national industrial employment), which represents 37 times growth. This continued to grow in such a way that by 2006 there were 95 companies offering more than 80,000 jobs posts.

⁹ <http://isacc-instituto.org/media/pdf/informe.pdf>.

hierarchy employees; a supervisors' presence and speech is both arbitrary and overwhelming. The terms of the control, coercion, and arbitrariness properly describe life in the factory. These harsh, physical conditions are also accompanied by a constant feeling of threat and fear¹⁰. In order to preserve their posts, but also obtain a proper salary, workers have to: work overtime hours, maintain a smooth relationship with their supervisors (who hold the power of referral to be used discretionally), meet the requirements of production, and endure various humiliations.

As a rule, workers do not stay more than a few months, or even a few years, before being dismissed or resigning when the pressure and boredom becomes unbearable. After a while, they start looking for a job in another factory. Many of the workers I knew through my research have had 6–9 different jobs in the free trade zone during the latest 10 years.

4 From Labor Constraints to the Invasion of the Whole Existence

As I started my research on the subjective relation to work, the narratives of the workers testified eloquently of the immediate interpenetration of the multiple layers of life: from the working mother concerned with whom to leave her child with to the invasion of domestic, personal, and family life by the constraints related to the work in the *maquiladoras*. And it is in all aspects of life—in their apprehension, both synchronic and diachronic—that the subjective stories narrated by workers about themselves are pierced by the effects of their work in the *maquila*. They are not only pierced: the stories are constructed and reconstructed in relation to the needs and the constraints that come with the work, even though the *maquila* appears as the only possibility of employment, leaving workers vulnerable and devoid of “autonomy and independence support” (Castel in Castel and Haroche, 2001).

When analyzing work by the *maquiladoras* and the stories told by the workers, I could identify three essential elements of domination exerted through work: the idea of *lack of choice*, the *instability* of the situation at work and in life, and the *necessity* of making a living, for the worker and his or her relatives, without the reassuring certainty to be able to achieve this goal. The discipline moves away from the submission of the worker's body, even if this kind of control remains deeply powerful. It appears more as a way of weakening and conditioning the worker through insecurity and uncertainty. This is felt both inside and outside the factory: at home with the family, in their future opportunities, in their autonomy and that of their families, in the possibilities of developing an affective relationship, and even in raising their children.

I could quantify the examples that will illustrate how the constraints imposed on the workers in the *maquiladoras* pierces up to the lightest details and damages the lives of these families. I will give just a few examples:

The family organization The workers' family life is strictly organized and centered around responding to labor duties. A large number of workers are single

¹⁰ Concerning the role of threat and fear in situations of domination, cf. Morice (2000), Dejours (1998).

mothers who live with their extended families (parents, brothers, and sisters—often with their own families, too—and perhaps someone else). This family structure is widespread in Nicaragua, where it is extremely difficult for young people to have an independent place to live. Workers expressed their desire for independence, although they cannot afford it. This family organization is not strictly related to working conditions, but it is common among the poorest families. However, it turns to be of service to the *maquila* worker, as it is essential to be able to respond to additional hours—or any unexpected issues—imposed by the factory. Let's take, for example, the case of a child who falls ill. If the worker has no one to take the child to the clinic, the worker would have to do so during the working hours. For the worker, an absence results in lost economic incentives for the day's production, as well as a substantial salary reduction, which is economically unaffordable for the family.

Moreover, there are entire families of women that are organized as a result of their need of ensuring an income and needing caregivers for their children, while maintaining a workforce in good working condition. The worker who is dismissed, or resigns when she feels unable to cope with the pressures or troubles of her workplace, will often take some time off in order to rest her body and mind before returning to the factory. While at home, she will assume the custody of the family's children, while a mother or a sister takes her place in the factory, thus ensuring the home income. This rotation in workforce assures these companies that their factory workers are “in conditions to work”; when the moment comes for these workers to leave, they themselves assure their own replacement. Obviously, this family organization is not a particularly smooth one; because of its constraints, labor pierces the most intimate parts of life. Unable to repay the favors for which they feel indebted, it becomes almost impossible for these workers to become independent outside of the extended family. These imposed conditions likely accrue to more tension and frustration.

Similarly, the constraints caused by factory work, along with their dependence on this work, equally affect the *love relations* between existing couples and those looking to strengthen their relationship. Workers are forced to stay and work late at night at the factory, and when coming home, they will face accusations or fatigue from their partners, annoyed by their absence from home. For some female workers, working at the factory and living with a partner is not conceivable. Many of them, forced by daily difficulties, decide to sacrifice a life of love for a life alone, choosing the unique support of their close ones to cope with work constraints, childcare, and their homes.¹¹ Others dream of an ideal man, who will be the one willing to accept and respect her children, and if the ideal man does not appear, she better cope alone.

¹¹ Violeta, for example, is a 27 years old worker. Mother of two children at the time of our interview, she tells (September 15, 2002): “When I met him—This was my second love experience, my daughter was then 2 years old. He is a very nice person and had given me his support, I think he also loved my daughter, but I said to myself: ‘I need a man’. (...) Some of my experiences have not been good for me. Now I’ve made a decision and hope God will help me: it is best for me to stay alone, to stay with my children, because with men...I didn’t have good experiences...I don’t want to get involved in a new relationship, I prefer to stay alone.” Giovana (September 22, 2002), who is 32 years old and mother of two children, also states “I’m on my own. I’m single. The three of us live together. Sometimes is not possible for me as a woman to find a relationship, to build a relationship with a man, mainly because of

Even women with partners anticipate the possibility of separation. Women workers then become more attached to their work, which allows them to earn their own money to support the family. The companies can count on those women who, regardless of what they think about the *maquila*, will do everything to ensure the minimum vital needs of their children.

Apprehension of time bears the trace of this work and life situation, which does not allow these women to discern a future relieved from everyday requirements. Therefore, this “big present time” that is being imposed rules the situation—that of the necessity of children to be fed and protected. Then, *we’ll see*. For the working women, the present seems to be the only time possible, while the imagined future seems to be that of children, far away from the machines.

5 The Subject of Domination: Between Reproduction and Dissonance

Thus, even when the workers I interviewed are away from the factory and labor, many aspects of their life still reveal deep traces of working conditions. It is here, regarding the complex, ambiguous answers of these subjects to domination by work, where my questions are born—a domination that extends to the organization of their entire life, that pierces their lives to the most intimate and private retreat, which, in turn, will be also structured and revolve around these requirements.

I was interested in the worker’s narrative, what his work and life story was offering me, while I analyzed the domination that was being exercised through employment and the constraints related to it. This led me to think about some other topics that revolve around these issues, such as “voluntary servitude,” or consensual domination, the role of fear and implementation of defenses that deliberately hinders the subject’s ability under domination, or even the political meaning of the analyzed gap. The aim was not to give “final responses” to these extremely complex questions, but to develop reflections based on my empirical research.

5.1 About the Subject and the Narrated Story

Schematically, it is said that in situations with these levels of constraint, workers should be completely broken, or mentally ill. Yet they cannot sink into madness or escape easily from the living situation.

The interviewees do not present themselves as heroes or victims, but rather as workers and parents grappling with the difficulties of everyday life. Through the construction of their stories, they are willing to present a coherent narrative belonging to a consistent self. The idea is, that somehow, workers must recognize themselves and accept the life experiences they are living and that their work (as activity, as employment, but also as value) allows or interferes with this recognition. Each individual, with his story, his ideas, his way of being, with

Footnote 11 continued

the respect I owe to my children, to my daughter, I can’t meet a man and start dating, so I chose to stay alone living with my children.”

personal gradations, undertakes certain recognition of his own self and seeks to be seen as a whole person, even though he finds himself living in a situation that absolutely inhibits his possibilities of autonomy. But how could he continue if he admitted to be broken? His claimed position, brought here by language, reveals the need to be consistent despite all constraints; this is what caught my attention.

Not being completely overwhelmed by the insecurity and fragility of his work-life situation allows the subject to identify himself within, despite his situation. It is not a mere option, but a vital necessity because the worker depends on and fits into a daily reality from which he cannot escape; this situation damages his being, his desires, his values, his morality, and a vision of the world he defends. Obviously, the individual does not construct his story and does not develop this approach of himself from outside the power; this would be impossible. On the contrary, severe constraints penetrate these postures adopted by the worker who situates himself in relation to them. He will thus be compelled to use many strategies to “adapt” reality in a way he can cope with his awareness of the situation while keeping to his own posture. He should appropriate, reshape, conceal, and find short ways to bypass the numerous contradictions between the need to build and preserve a self-image, which he can claim and defend, despite a reality that constantly damages him. In this way, speaking is a way of objectification, allowing him to assert himself. But it also implies taking the real risk of revealing these contradictions and being completely destabilized.

It is not about taking note of the presence or absence of awareness. They do not expect anyone to come and enlighten them on the difficulties of everyday life, insufficient salaries, the impossibility of taking a holiday, or the insufficiently protected children. The postures adopted by workers do not exclude criticism or lucidity. Adverse conditions can support the construction of a self that locates in relation to them, while an excess of lucidity can be equally destructive. Denial and lucidity alternate and articulate. Moreover, it is possible that the problem is not so much the awareness of domination, but rather choosing to ignore it—not be overwhelmed by constraints, nor prisoner of subjugation—and to be able to build a self and recognize oneself despite the domination.

The construction of coherence, beyond the fact that it allows to attend the factory, day after day, fits into a more extensive order of human behavior in which being recognized as “good worker,” “fellow worker,” “exemplary practitioner,” transversely gives sense to the entire life.

Upon the instability of his background, the worker builds a definition of self that makes sense to the subject, and it gathers values and rules of conduct extracted from a shared culture, although it does not crystallize permanently. It is an ongoing process that adapts, reconfigures itself, strengthens, or moves—with the assistance of others (workers, family and friends)—as long as they do not betray this crack.

Araya (female worker, 47 years old) describes herself as a “good worker” due to the values inherited from her father. Wherever Araya is, whatever the conditions and her own situation is, she shows herself as a good worker, with pride, dignity, and the seriousness that her work implies to her eyes. She is a “good worker”; she claims to be so and this should be how she is seen by others. Whatever the attitude of her employers are, she works well, produces a lot, and is faster, because this is

how she can respect herself. Araya must show herself as a “good worker” not only in the factory, but at home where she also does everything with perfection, in the same way that, as a young adult, she resumed her studies. Frani also makes a big effort: her whole life, her behavior, her job, and her family revolve around the aspirations and values she adopted with her conversion to a Jehovah’s Witness. Responsibility, respect, discipline, but also solidarity with her job fits perfectly with the way of life she has adopted. And her family must do so as well. So does Giovana, “liberated” by a women’s association, invested in new values that she shares at the factory where she “liberates” other women, and at home with her children. Roxana and Corina express the values of solidarity and struggle that corresponds to their militant selves. What matters to Enrique and Sara is their honesty as workers and parents, etc.

5.2 Thesis (Insufficient) of Consent to Domination

If we begin from the observation that, whatever happens, companies do operate, the workers go to work every morning and stay extra hours or weekends, it is possible to pose the question regarding “voluntary servitude” (de La Boétie 2002 [1574]), or— if we would prefer a much modern definition—the role of consent (Dejours 1998). What seems to me to be important is to ask the question, to see what we can extract, more than trying to bring a reply, positive or negative. I believe that there is certainly a part of “consent” (in the sense of *acceptance*), but the question to ask is what would happen to individuals who, in the described situation, are in a position of total denial.

We can advance a few important observations regarding these issues.

The first concerns the idea of *lack of choice*, which was omnipresent in the stories. This statement applies to everyone: (1) there is no employment, and work is what allows me to have an income and meet the needs of the family; (2) the *maquila* industry offers work. This reality might be a construction; however, it is not less *true* and *verifiable* by any individual—whether he adheres *or not* to the values conveyed by this work, this working activity, and these dominating forces. It is reality “at home,” “for himself.” Created, built, developed, it is a “reality” which one cannot simply say that it is only an illusion, being so powerful its instruments of intimidation, threat, and verification. And this description of reality relies on the situation of the fragility of life and labor of the workers, as well as the continual fear of losing his work and then being unable to ensure the needs of his family. This description finds its limit in the idea that if these direct jobs are a good thing, they are a good thing for others or for “the poor,” not for herself, and even less for her children who she wants to see away from the *maquiladoras*.

First, therefore, and according to Dejours (1999) and Morice (1999), we are facing a reality that has the means to demonstrate that it is “true.”

A second point concerns the definitions. Rather than resuming the problems posed by the idea of servitude, especially when it is coupled with “voluntary,” we will question the idea of “consent.” Consent, as defined in dictionary, implies a “free act of the mind by which one commits completely to accept or do something,”

and it is precisely this concept of freedom that causes problems in this context. The will that is expected from individuals who consent can itself be heavily constrained. In the analyzed situation, there is no choice exercised freely.

Consent is “acceptance, agreement, adhesion, acquiescence, approval, permit, consensus, even sympathy” (Hamraoui 2007: p. 292). However, to use only two of these synonyms, to “accept” does not mean to “adhere.” When reality is imposed as the only way out, we might ask ourselves what does “adhesion” mean and especially what it would mean “not to adhere.” Within the verb “to consent,” it is necessary to distinguish, within consent, unconstrained desire and adhesion with the idea of giving up to what prevails in a way that cannot be denied, when being an opponent is condemning oneself.

It seems very difficult to speak of “free” consent when refusing it is being condemned. This danger, which can be felt individually, sensed, is certainly largely concealed from his everyday consciousness. But the risk of losing this precarious balance is never completely stolen from consciousness: there it is when wages do not seem so fair, in the need to beg for an unsatisfactory job, in the humiliation suffered by a work mate, the leaving of a man, or in the vagrancy of a child who no longer accepts to be always watched.

It seems rather difficult to understand servitude or consent when domination is, as a fact, a daily, physical and psychological challenge. Despite constraints, this work is still better than nothing; it removes the spectra of unemployment and poverty, and it proves its own belonging to the real. In addition, working hard does not necessarily lead to zeal or respond to domination. This may instead help prove to oneself that one is a good worker, cement one’s own values and self-image, and make a better salary. This means that the same zeal can integrate the strategies of resistance to protect the workers, to preserve their mental health, to allow them to recognize themselves in and within their work, and preserve their dignity despite—and perhaps even against—labor constraints.

Therefore, and without going any further, it seems that the themes of servitude, and voluntary servitude, and consent are problematic, but also pose some interesting problems. One among them, which I address, also concerns the idea of *defenses*.

I chose, as a first step, to locate myself in the perspective of workers who—by several individual and collective defense mechanisms—are obliged to preserve themselves from the frail and precarious conditions in which they are in. Then, secondly, I lean on the stories the subjects create to narrate themselves, which emerge, or mark, a gap toward the place assigned to them.

5.3 The Role of Defenses Between Protection and Reproduction of Domination

Following the psychodynamics of work, workers elaborate strategies of collective defenses to cope with the fear and the risk of the suffering generated from work to protect their mental health (Dejours 1980). If masculinity, “virile courage,” the denial of fear, etc., are some of the strategies that structure collective defenses for the group of male workers (Ibid.), we can observe others mechanisms which are

implemented as well.¹² We can mention, for example, some parameters that define what is considered “normal” (as in working late at night), or leaving the *maquila* when boredom takes over (which is not seen as a sign of weakness by the other workers).

The problem for the psychodynamic approach of work is that these defenses, allowing subjective relief from domination, make work bearable and contribute to the perpetuation of the exploitation system. And it raises new questions regarding the theme of voluntary servitude as these defenses subdue the psychic's autonomy of those under domination, thus limiting the scope of their subjective approach to reality, and allowing them to function within a system in which the perception of the weight of constraints is altered.

When the worker talks and narrates his story, he is also defending the consistency of the story and his self-image. Hence, there is danger in making contradictions evident because it will threaten his mental balance. As Amadeo, a 35-year-old male worker, that—in this constrained environment—defended aloud a rigid moral stance: “who does not work, will not eat,” “a man must be strong and responsible,” “one is required to achieve his goals.” Yet when the reality around him—the tiny little room someone lent him, the job he despises, a pregnant partner, and the desire to migrate—was contradicting all those statements and the demands he had imposed himself. The interview could not continue, and it had to come to an end.

All the strategies displayed by the workers, individually or collectively, aim to domesticate a reality (which is for them entirely out of control), thus preserving them from the invasion of dominance. These strategies are inspired, according each case, by resistance, submission, concession, or even opposition. By analyzing what workers claim as their being, we are faced to the fact that dominations and defenses explain only partially the relations they establish with the subjects. Workers have the narrative they have because they are in this particular situation; the perception they have about themselves and their actual experiences is also constrained. However, even if dominance can sustain damage, subjectivity is not permanently constrained; it also unfolds. In the line of Rancière's proposals (1987, 1990), this idea is at the origin of the postulate of “potentially political” subjects (see Chap. IV in Borgeaud-Garciandía 2009).

5.4 Subject of Domination, Subject to Unpredictability

The modes of domination and defenses fail to annihilate the subject who somehow claims to be “in lag” regarding the assigned identities of being poor, dominated, *maquila* worker, etc. This does not imply that the lag created through the narrated story consistently marks a break with the forces that are imposed. (1) The subject is a product of domination. He is this subject and he is this product in the story he tells just because he suffers these constraints. (2) The subject that vindicates himself can tend to other forms of submission—that young woman who longs to be married, to

¹² In 1987, the sociologists Helena Hirata and Danièle Kergoat questioned the psychodynamics of work on the necessity to consider sexual division of labor (Hirata and Kergoat 1988). Pascale Molinier is the first psychologist to demonstrate the existence of female collective defenses (in health organizations) (Molinier 2006) and the structural importance of sexual division of labor.

be a housewife and attend her husband, or Frani, who redefines her story at the light of her conversion to a Jehovah's Witness. (3) Finally, these lags are also part of defensive strategies that allow workers to preserve themselves.

Of course, workers, as most people, are apt to make relevant, in their numerous actual experiences, memories, desires, what defines them as good workers, loyal men or women, faithful companions, respectful employers, exemplary believers, good mothers, etc. However, I consider as a starting point the narrative of the subject as he claims to be because that is what he is at the time of presenting himself. Even when his existence is limited and also "configured" by the thread of subjection, the subject invests the suffered violence in the repeated effort of responding to an "ideal" subject he seeks to inhabit—and inhabits in a kind of way, as starring their stories during the interviews. The developed defenses hinder the subject as an autonomous being, while also participating in the creation of that "other" self, working to emerge from these obstacles, regardless of the outcome of the attempts. If the worker just cannot "choose" himself because of external circumstances that deprive him from the minimum necessary conditions, we can paradoxically observe that the only alternative for not being invaded by those circumstances is precisely by defending a construction of self. On the side of the exerted dominations, these are not only restrictive, but also productive. Subjects are created with and against them. Judith Butler argues that the production of power "surpasses its own goals" (Butler 2002: p. 35). Indeed, it introduces both reproduction and the potentially unpredictable.

When Yolanda, introducing herself, states: "I am a woman, a strong woman ... I do not rely solely on this work, I can do something else": (1) this does not alter her dependency on the *maquila*, where she could be quickly hired and "make" a salary with her production; however, (2) with her story, she opens and somehow gives existence to a gap, or at least, a certain distance, regarding domination. (3) At the time she is telling me this story, she experiments her own power as a subject who can not be grasped only through domination, however strong it may be. Yolanda is not a strict subject of domination. She is a subject *in lag*, potentially capable of turning against that domination.

There cannot be domination, nor workforce, if those dominated beings are destroyed. They must be able to build their subjectivity in, for, and despite this relationship. If they preserve power by preserving themselves from it, it is in the refusal of invasion, the proof of their own existence denying the only place assigned to them by the subjection. The condition of existence for domination is the condition of its own subversion. The subject that builds himself attests the perpetual work of domination and its limits. During the time of the narrative itself—time of rupture and distance with his being and his daily life—the subject renegotiates his way of being in the world and seeks to affirm an autonomous way of thinking in his own voice. It does not matter whether these are real; what matters is that they can be thought within its potential. It is for this mismatch, to this unpredictability, both crack and product of domination, that I dedicate my reflections to.

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