

MAPPING A GLOBAL LABOR MARKET

Gender and Skill in the Globalizing Garment Industry

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This article examines the ways that managers in a rapidly globalizing industry use gendered discourses of skill to justify and frame their search for inexperienced workers in low-wage regions, using a case of a U.S.-based apparel firm that relocated and subcontracted its sewing operations in the 1990s. It uses feminist theory to examine managers' claims that women's sewing skills in the United States were disappearing and that they needed to seek out these skills in parts of the world where women were not yet active participants in labor markets. Feminist researchers have long understood the ways that naturalization of skill cheapens women's labor. The case presented here highlights the way in which the portrayal of certain skills as naturally occurring resources justifies the movement of capital in search of new pools of workers without labor market experience or union representation.

The 1970s saw an important shift in the international division of labor, as corporations in many sectors began to turn to developing nations not just for raw materials and agricultural products but as sites for the location of manufacturing processes (Dicken 1998; Porter 1990). This trend accelerated through the 1980s and 1990s, facilitated by regional trade agreements and by the establishment of special economic zones for the manufacture of exports. The development of transnational production arrangements was a profoundly gendered process, as the vast majority of new workers in the relocating industries were women. This article examines the ways in which managers have used gendered discourses of skill to justify and frame their search for inexperienced workers in low-wage regions.

As David Harvey has argued, transnational production systems do not develop "upon a flat plain surface endowed with [a] . . . homogenous labor supply" ([1982] 1999, 415). Corporations understand that the gender and ethnicity of workers, their prior experience in factories and with unions, and the labor market alternatives they

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possess all affect the wages they can command. Industries facing strong cost competition have frequently sought out inexperienced workers in regions where there are few alternatives for paid employment. They have also tapped groups of workers, such as women, who have not previously worked for wages.

The U.S. apparel industry experienced such restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s, as many of its firms relocated production facilities or established subcontracting arrangements with factories in low-waged zones of developing nations. Women, who form nearly 80 percent of the U.S. apparel labor force, lost most of the 826,000 jobs that disappeared there between 1973 and 2000. They were also nearly 80 percent of the labor force recruited into apparel work in developing countries.¹

This article reports on case study research at a U.S.-based apparel firm that relocated and subcontracted its sewing operations in the 1990s. While managers were acting in response to competitive pressures and primarily sought to reduce labor costs, they justified their decisions in an unusual way. They argued that they needed to relocate production operations because of the erosion of women's sewing skills in the United States—and that they could find these skills in parts of the world where women were not yet active participants in labor markets.

This article argues that in the context of a globalizing labor market, discourses of skill provide manufacturers with a coded way to justify the search for inexperienced workers who will accept the lowest wages in poor regions. There is a painful irony in this use of the concept of skill. While skill has historically been the grounds on which male workers have staked and defended claims to a higher wage, managers in this case use claims about the natural skills of female workers to justify moving unionized jobs to regions where the wage is less than one tenth of U.S. levels.² This undermines the attempts of female workers both in the United States and abroad to bargain for greater remuneration or other benefits.

The argument here is not that the investment decisions of firms can be explained by reference to discourses of skill. Rather, this case reveals the way in which managers reinvigorate and redeploy naturalized concepts of skill, which have a long history in some branches of female-dominated work, as they relocate production to new parts of the world. The naturalization of skill has long provided a way to devalue women's work and reward it less. As labor-intensive industries globalize, it also provides a justification for seeking out new populations of women workers without labor market experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

The account that follows is based on case study research conducted in 1999 and 2000 as part of a larger project on changes in work in the apparel industry. It draws on interviews conducted at one apparel company studied in the course of that research. This firm, Tultex Corporation, had its headquarters in southern Virginia. Started in the 1930s, it produced low-end commodity apparel—mainly sweatshirts and other fleecewear. In the early 1990s, it employed nearly 6,600 people in eight

plants in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina, as well as in one factory in Jamaica and another in Mexico. To lower labor costs, by the middle of that decade, it had begun to combine production in its own factories with subcontracting, mostly in Mexico. Despite these efforts to reduce costs by developing a global production system, the firm was not able to adapt to the intensely competitive conditions in the industry during the 1990s, and it declared bankruptcy and ceased production in late 1999.

During field research, I conducted open-ended interviews with 4 of the company's 10 corporate officers and 6 midlevel managers in Martinsville, Virginia. I selected managers based on their responsibility for and knowledge of the company's production practices and global sourcing strategies. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was conducted in each manager's private office. I organized these interviews around a list of key questions about the company's history, current practices, and production strategies but gave respondents the opportunity to introduce issues they felt to be important. I also reviewed financial and human resource documents and visited production facilities. This included factories operated by Tultex in Martinsville, Virginia, as well as visits to one of its subcontracted factories in Aguascalientes, Mexico. In addition to speaking with managers, I conducted interviews with workers, union organizers and union officials and attended both general membership and board meetings of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees local 1994.³ In worker interviews, I followed a protocol of questions that covered the kinds of tasks they performed, the knowledge and expertise that were required, and the changes they had experienced in work routines during the past few years. I conducted interviews with workers at the union's offsite facilities. Finally, members of the research team spoke to community development officials and trade board representatives in Virginia and Aguascalientes⁴ and conducted a comprehensive review of the apparel trade press and of articles on the apparel industry in the economic press during the period 1990 to 2001.

While insights from case study research cannot automatically be generalized to all firms and workers, the examples discussed here provide a window into struggles around the meaning of skill in apparel work that extend beyond the firm where interviews were conducted. These struggles are occurring throughout the apparel industry but also in other globalizing industries that rely on labor-intensive assembly operations. In these contexts, the naturalization of the skills of women workers provides management with a tool—not only to justify paying low wages but also to explain decisions to relocate jobs. The case described here can be understood as a new skirmish in a centuries-long battle over how to interpret and value the knowledge and abilities that women bring to work. In the next section, I review some of the ways that recent feminist research has conceptualized skill and its relationship to gender. I then provide an overview of the apparel industry and its production process and of the ways that gendered notions of skill have been involved in its restructuring. Turning to the case of Tultex Corporation, I describe the gendered labor practices and concepts of skill that arose in the course of its operations in Virginia,

followed by an examination of managers' attempts to rework those concepts and practices in the context of a new global production strategy.

SKILL, GENDER, AND CLAIM MAKING: A LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Skill is a tricky category. Its meaning appears self-evident at first. According to Webster, it is the ability, coming from one's knowledge, practices, or aptitude, to do something well. Yet this deceptively simple term, with its implicit measurability, lies at the heart of Western culture's attempts to determine what is valuable work. Discourses of skill provide compelling ways to talk about the creativity, knowledge, and experience that workers bring to their jobs and provide moral economic frameworks within which to determine rewards for this knowledge and experience. They are thus tools for establishing hierarchies among types of work and for adjudicating many aspects of the employment bargain.

Feminist researchers have long recognized that skill is socially constructed in gendered ways. Phillips (1983, 102) has argued that "jobs are created as masculine and feminine, with their skill content continually redrawn to assert the dominance of men." Reviewing historical evidence, Baron concluded that "the concept of skill is itself gender bound. Abilities that women acquire . . . are defined as unskilled and go unrewarded" (1991, 14). Kessler-Harris (1982) has described the multiple ways that women's work outside the home has been construed, through many historical periods, as simply an outgrowth of their domestic responsibilities.

A number of feminist studies have demonstrated that society defines jobs filled predominantly by women as less skilled. Using data from the 1980 census, England et al. (1994) have shown that it is also true that our economy attributes less value to the skills generally performed by women than those associated with men. They demonstrated a zero or negative return to "nurturant skills"—that is, to skills involving face-to-face service provision and care. They conclude that "when a type of skill is done by women, whether outside paid labor or in predominantly female occupations, the skill itself gets stigmatized and devalued, so its contribution to organizational goals is not recognized" (p. 66).

Cockburn (1983) has demonstrated the depth of cultural beliefs about the relationship between gender and skill in her detailed study of the British printing industry in the transition from hot metal to cold composition in the 1970s. The technological changes involved in the transition coincided with the entrance of more women into the trade, creating a dilemma for male workers. These changes forced men either to "acknowledge themselves as completely deskilled, or acknowledge that many women are as skilled as men" (Cockburn 1983, 117). The difficulty that male workers and their craft unions had in resolving a notion of their own continued skill with the presence of female workers revealed the power of culturally held beliefs that construe any work that women do as fundamentally unskilled.

In her analysis of comparable worth initiatives, Steinberg (1990) has shown how those implementing the programs may subvert efforts to define skill in new ways. In the attempts to adjudicate pay equity that she examined, Steinberg found that the evaluation systems that review boards used to judge the complexity and skill of jobs institutionalized gendered values. The reassessments sought by women workers were thus, in many cases, predetermined to confirm the greater value of men's jobs. Steinberg argued that negotiations over skill can best be understood as a process of "claim-making," in which some claims succeed and others fail and in which those that succeed become institutionalized in labor market processes.

Nancy Fraser's (1989) essay "Struggle Over Needs" draws attention to the kinds of discursive resources that social actors use in making and contesting political claims. She provided a model of social discourse that foregrounds both the contested character of claims and multiple and competing ways of articulating them. Like many other feminist researchers, Fraser recognized that the interpretations thus developed are not simply representations but are acts and interventions in their own right. Working in the realm of struggles over need in the welfare state, she showed how social actors enclave and depoliticize certain claims through defining them as domestic or private issues or by defining them as economic concerns that should be left to market forces.⁵

Many of Fraser's (1989) tools and concepts can be usefully applied to disputes over skill. The history of these disputes is replete with examples of employers justifying their actions as market driven. In the case of women's work, arguments about domesticity also serve to undermine claims that work requires experience, knowledge, and specialized capabilities. Such arguments naturalize skill, contending that women are born with certain abilities or learn them through early socialization. As Kessler-Harris (1982) has argued, historically, U.S. work culture has seen the capacities that women bring to the workplace as directly connected to those they use at home. It has not recognized that these skills are formed in the public arena or transmitted through public institutions. Because they are not protected by public entities such as labor unions, it has considered them to be outside both the market and the realm of legitimate political negotiation. The paradigm of naturalized skill provides employers with powerful tools for enclaving and depoliticizing women's capabilities. It offers a rich vocabulary and set of narrative conventions rooted in broader cultural discourses of femininity. It also entails what Fraser calls a mode of subjectification. That is, discourses of naturalization construe workers as without agency, as natural resources and as possessing skills that they have not acquired through social institutions and, thus, that they cannot improve.

Workers have historically used assertions of skill to make claims on their employers. Such assertions provide a way for workers to talk about the creativity, knowledge, and experience that they bring to their jobs. They give workers leverage in disputes over a fair wage. In the early nineteenth century, when craft guilds were able to limit entry to a particular trade, claims of skill provided a powerful bargaining platform. The work culture of that period understood skill as the worker's

"property" (McClelland 1987, 191; Rule 1987). Workers gained recognition for the property of skill, however, only when they organized themselves in guilds and established institutions of apprenticeship that limited entry into the craft. These institutions relied less on the indispensability of the skills themselves than "on job monopolies guaranteed by the strength of organizations which kept out others who might quite easily have done their work" (Hobsbawm 1984, 198). As Thompson has noted, "the artisan was as much concerned with maintaining his status against the unskilled man [*sic*] as he was in bringing pressure upon the employers" (1963, 244).

Employers have historically resisted worker claims of skill through a dual strategy. They have found new ways to expand the labor market (for example, the late-nineteenth-century replacement of the spinning mule with ring spinning frames, which could be more easily operated by women and children). They have also engaged in arguments that devalued skill claims. Expanding the labor market allowed employers to argue that the skills in question were plentiful and thus not worth much on the market. Including women in the pool of workers allowed them to harness prevailing gender ideologies to argue that the capacities in question were not skills at all.

There is no arena of work where the definition of skill has been more influenced by gender ideologies than in apparel production. Social scientists and industry analysts alike have explained women's prevalence in apparel jobs by what Green has called the "fairy fingers" model of women's needlework (1996, 414). According to this explanation, all little girls learn to sew, presumably at their mothers' knees. They are good at it because of their dexterity, often glossed as "nimble fingers." Small hands and socialization to "picky" work yield workers "naturally" suited to the craft. Our society has used these constructions to explain women's prevalence in sewing work in the United States and Europe (Green 1997, 313). We have also deployed them with great vigor to explain the roles of women in a globalizing industry (Elson 1983). Because these popular explanations attribute so much of needlework to innate ability and early socialization, sewing operators have not historically been very successful in limiting entry to the field or pressing their claim to perform skilled work. In the garment industry, the naturalization paradigm provides the means to deny the learned and practiced competencies, knowledge, and creativity involved in sewing and to locate those capacities in the private realm of bodies and family socialization rather than in the public sphere of the market and waged work.

Many researchers have documented the ways that claims and counterclaims to skill in the garment industry have been structured around attempts to distinguish industrial sewing from work in the home and to construe the capacities involved as transmitted through craft organizations and training. In the United States, male cutters, for example, found it advantageous to distance themselves from seamstresses, whose skills were susceptible to naturalization and could so easily taint whole shops and occupations. Struggles between workers and employers, and among groups of workers within the industry, were structured by workers' attempts to

define skills as public and their remuneration as something that could properly be negotiated in the political sphere, and by employers' continued efforts to naturalize and depoliticize such claims (Abernathy et al. 1999, 31; Glenn 1990; Kessler-Harris 1977, 1985). In the late twentieth century, the terrain of these struggles shifted to new production sites in the developing world. As the case presented here demonstrates, gendered discourses of skill were redeployed in new ways as the size and geographic location of the apparel market shifted.

SKILL AND THE CHANGING APPAREL INDUSTRY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Twentieth-century apparel workers struggled to obtain recognition for their knowledge and abilities in the face of the immense changes in the industry. The most important of these changes were the standardization that accompanied the move from tailoring to the production of ready-to-wear clothing and the increasing subdivision of tasks that the adoption of mass production methods implied. By the early days of the twentieth century, the vast majority of workers no longer produced whole garments. A first-class white shirt passed through 25 to 30 hands before completion, and the manufacture of a coat was subdivided into 39 different operations, which could be performed by 39 different individuals (Kidwell and Christman 1974, 94-95). Some unions sought unsuccessfully to resist these new forms of section work.⁶ Meanwhile, the owners of apparel factories lauded the "unerring accuracy that is gained by the special training given by years of practice at one thing only" (*Haberdasher*, 1905, cited in Kidwell and Christman 1974, 95).

Within such a context, the meaning of skill shifted. In tailoring, skill had involved the careful measurement of a client, the adaptation of a pattern, the cutting of fabric, sewing, pressing, hemming, and trimming, with various fittings and adjustments required to ensure the final outcome. The tailor executed specific hand operations at each step and performed the calculations needed to achieve a fit. He or she drew on knowledge and experience to select fabrics of appropriate weight and characteristics, the proper thread for each weight and type of fabric, and the correct needle size. Once they had adopted sewing machines, tailors needed to know how to set up and maintain their equipment. They needed to choose the right plate size, adjust feed guards, and use appropriate stitch tension.

With the move to mass production of ready-to-wear garments, individual body measurements gave way to a set of standard sizes. Tailors translated each design into a pattern that was graded or configured to produce many sizes. Cutters would produce a marker—or plan for the layout of the pattern on the fabric. They would spread and inspect the fabric and cut it according to pattern. They would then bundle and distribute cut parts to operators for sewing. Each operator would receive a packet of pieces, on which he or she would perform a sewing task: stitching up a sleeve, basting a sleeve or collar to the body of a garment, cutting or stitching button holes, attaching a lining, and so forth.

By the 1930s, most factories had organized their sewing lines into what was called a progressive bundle system. When workers completed an operation on a garment, they placed it in a buffer or bundle. Managers laid out machines in a way that facilitated shuttling these bins of garments between workers. At the end of the line, workers would press the garments, attach labels, and pack them for shipping. Managers assigned each of these tasks a target time in standard allocated minutes. Time study engineers calculated standard allocated minutes for each operation in the process (Abernathy et al. 1999, 27-28). While cutting remained male dominated through most of the twentieth century, women came to predominate in assembly line machine work by the 1930s.

While the move to mass production redistributed abilities among workers and reduced the total number of tasks required of any one operator, individual tasks still required precision and care. They also required a knowledge of machines and of fabrics. But over time, there was a tendency for managers to reconstrue skill as speed; as several authors have argued, the ability to work at high speed became a new skill, inadvertently created by deskilling (Coyle 1982, 15; Glenn 1990, 100). Factory owners' practice of paying piece rate and the adoption of standard allocated minutes for each task fueled this trend. Because it was so difficult to further mechanize a process involving limp fabric, garment factories continued to rely on the progressive bundle system and piecework throughout the twentieth century.

By the late 1970s, many U.S.-based apparel firms were closing their shops and contracting out their sewing work in low-wage, offshore locations. Workers found themselves participating in a labor market of global dimensions, whose rules and dynamics were not entirely clear. By the 1990s, and especially after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, the rate of job loss increased dramatically. A very large proportion of job loss was the result of U.S. companies' closing their domestic manufacturing operations and opening up new ones, or subcontracting production, overseas. Despite popular rhetoric that blamed cheap imports from Third World countries, the globalization of the industry was driven primarily by the actions of developed country firms (Dicken 1998, 303). These firms constructed globally distributed production chains in which workers in developing nations labored under contract to First World firms producing goods for First World markets.

Until the 1990s, many analysts had thought that high-quality fashion garments required both smaller, more flexibly organized production processes and the skills of First World workers (Scott 1988; Zeitlin and Totterdill 1989). Despite such prognostications, in the 1990s, large apparel firms producing both low- and high-end goods were able to employ Third World seamstresses to meet their production needs. Many of the firms implemented complex quality control systems that monitored and measured each task that workers performed (Collins 2001). New information and telecommunications technologies allowed them to place and track orders electronically, greatly reducing response time in offshore production. Large firms continued to relocate their manufacturing offshore throughout the 1990s, and

those small- and medium-sized firms that could not do so, or that moved to relocate too slowly, went out of business altogether.

Like the earlier move to mass production of ready-to-wear clothing, these trends represented a moment of restructuring, where the industry reconfigured both its division of labor and the geographic organization of its production process. The remainder of this article examines one firm's attempts to dismantle its U.S. sewing operations and move them to Mexico and the ways that managers deployed gendered discourses of skill and its scarcity to justify this move.

TULTEX CORPORATION: STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE IN A GLOBALIZING INDUSTRY

In 1997, the Tultex Corporation appeared to be an eminently successful U.S. apparel firm. In that year, *Apparel Industry Magazine* (Behind this year's all-stars 1997) designated it as an "All Star" and commended the company for its efforts to move its sewing operations offshore, for adopting computerized systems to manage its supply chain, and for its new, state-of-the-art distribution center. Its sales for that year were greater than \$626 million, placing it among the top 30 apparel firms in the United States. Thus, it was a somber testimony to the severity of the competitive pressures of the 1990s that the firm had declared bankruptcy and laid off its 6,600 U.S. workers by the end of 1999.

The company was 63 years old at the time of its demise. William Pannill had started the firm in the 1930s. He had worked in the cotton mills of North Carolina before moving north in 1903 to learn the technology to produce knitted fabric. Returning south to the small town of Martinsville, Virginia, some years later, he employed the wives of local furniture plant workers in his first manufacturing efforts. In 1937, he set up a small factory for his son-in-law, Michael Sale. Sale Knitting Company began producing knitted goods in the period just before World War II and was bolstered by sales of union suits to the military during the war. It thrived and in 1971 merged with the diversified New York apparel firm Henry J. Tully Co. The new firm, called Tultex, was a vertically integrated operation that performed all tasks from the manufacture of yarn to the shipping of final goods. Its factories spun yarn, knit it into fabric, dyed or bleached it, and fleeced, cut, sewed, labeled, and packaged the garment. The firm performed most operations in Martinsville but distributed some sewing and yarn manufacturing among seven smaller plants in rural Virginia and North Carolina. In the 1980s, when the market for sportswear and athletic apparel soared, Tultex soared with it, going public at mid-decade. The firm brought a measure of prosperity and stable jobs to an otherwise poor region where it was the single most important employer.

Up until the 1960s, Tultex employed only white workers. As in other Southern textile communities, the relationship between Tultex and these white workers was paternalistic.⁷ Paternalism was a system that integrated white workers and owners in a conservative and racialized consensus. This consensus was based on the idea

that workers and owners were bound together in a family. The concept of workplace as family combined two contradictory assertions: the shared interests of members and the absolute authority of owners. Tultex cultivated the idea that what was good for the firm was good for the community and good for the workers, but it always retained the right to determine what good was. The majority of mill workers who were female were not part of this "brotherhood of white men" in a straightforward way. In fact, it is more accurate to portray their fathers, brothers, and sons as members of this pact. In the gendered rhetoric of racial segregation, mills promised male kin that they would provide a "safe" and "respectable" work environment for white women workers (Freeze 1991).

Like other Southern factories, Tultex integrated its facilities following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although the employment of African American workers proceeded slowly in the early years, by the 1980s, Black workers had come to form the majority in the plant. Once hired, however, managers did not incorporate Black workers into the relations of paternalism that governed everything from work assignments, to overtime, to shift rotations in the plant. Because of this, as Adler has argued for other Southern textile plants, African American families "were not indoctrinated in mill culture the way whites were" (1994, 20). This exclusion from paternalist networks provided a space for the development of a strong, rights-oriented, oppositional work culture, nurtured by local Black churches and fostered by a history of participation in civil rights struggles.⁸ Black workers tended to see a union, rather than personalized ties with management, as their best chance for improved wages and working conditions.

In 1994, after more than two decades of unsuccessful organizing campaigns, a majority of both Black and white Tultex workers voted for representation by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). This was the largest victory for the ACTWU since the J. P. Stevens drive in the late 1970s and the third largest victory in the union's history. The success of the drive could be attributed in large part to the efforts of African American women workers and the ways that their presence altered the culture and operating practices of the mill. The union received broad support in 1994, however, because of a series of actions taken by the firm that led Black and white workers to feel that the paternalist contract had been broken. Fleece sales turned sharply downward in the early 1990s, resulting in an overcapacity of fleece on the market. In response to this situation, Tultex managers cut pay and sharply reduced benefits. They cut piece rates in the sewing division most severely. As a result, women in the sewing shop were the first to organize in support of the union. Women who had previously opposed the union felt betrayed by these rollbacks. They questioned whether, since its reorganization as a public corporation, Tultex continued to have the interests of workers and community members at heart. In the words of one worker, "When I first came to work it was still a small company and people knew everybody. It was a family company, and then it got bigger and workers were not important" (Swoboda 1994, F1). Another said, "In the past, the owner would say, 'give me another chance. I built this company with you.'

And we would. But now they have played the family card one time too many" (interview, 9 August 1999).

The firm's family owners were deeply distressed by the union's victory, and within a month of the decisive vote, its long-standing owner/CEO stepped down and was replaced by a professional manager (Sturgeon 1996). Under new leadership, the firm sought to adopt a stance that would allow it to work with the union. It announced that it would raise prices to accommodate the higher wage bill resulting from the contract that was negotiated in early 1995. It formed an employee-management committee to address productivity issues, providing a forum for management and workers to address shared goals.

Tultex managers took a number of actions in their attempt to survive the competitive pressures of the 1990s. They shifted more sewing to a facility they had acquired in Montego Bay, Jamaica. They opened one sewing plant in Mexico and began subcontracting to a number of other factories there. They also began purchasing whole garments from contractors in South and East Asia and in South America. In 1998, the firm began shutting down domestic sewing operations, beginning with factories in the tiny towns of Chilhowie, Virginia, and Dobson, North Carolina, but followed quickly by the layoff of all sewing workers at the Martinsville plant. In 1999, it closed its next-to-last sewing shop in Bastian, Virginia. Sewing jobs were at the center of the company's restructuring efforts because of the labor intensity of the process, the relative ease with which they could be moved, and favorable tariff policies for the assembly of garments made from U.S. fabrics. Tultex estimated that it could save between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per year for each job that it moved to Mexico (Hoestler 1999). While in 1994, only 15 percent of the company's sewing was done outside the United States, by 1999, that figure had risen to 85 percent.

In interviews conducted six months prior to the firm's declaration of bankruptcy, both managers and workers discussed the economic restructuring that was underway. Managers spoke of economic pressures, including deflation in the apparel market and the need to compete with firms that had already established a network of offshore manufacturing operations. Workers spoke of the ways that managers used the threat of job relocation against them to undermine the gains that had been won through the union struggle and subsequent rounds of contract negotiation. It was on the terrain of skill, however, that some of the most telling—and paradoxical—comments were made.

SEARCHING FOR SKILL IN A NEW GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

In the summer of 1999, when managers spoke with me about their restructuring efforts, I had expected that they would explain the competitive pressures they were facing and would talk about production in Mexico as a necessary step to cut costs. The apparel industry remains one of the most labor intensive in modern economies, and labor costs continue to be the most significant production factor. Yet as Dicken

(1998) noted, "A garment is still a relatively complicated product for its price," and it requires much human handling. The basic sewing machine used today is not so different from those used 50 years ago, and the manufacture of clothing remains a complex of related manual operations. Sewing and assembly continue to account for 80 percent of all labor costs in clothing manufacture (Dicken 1998, 297). New technologies have not emerged to change this pattern, and thus securing cheap labor continues to be crucial to the success of apparel firms.

It is not surprising, therefore, that apparel companies move their sewing operations offshore. Such a move makes economic sense. It is what economists would predict and what business analysts would recommend. It is a manifestation of a new international division of labor in which "commodity production is . . . increasingly subdivided into fragments which can be assigned to whichever part of the world can provide the most profitable combination of capital and labor" (Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1980, 14). As a resident of Chilhowie, Virginia, where Tultex closed a sewing plant, poignantly observed, "Years before . . . companies came out of the North for cheap labor. Now they're going on South to Honduras and Mexico" (Kegley 1998). Managers emphasized all these points, and in keeping with the firm's history of paternalist relations, they also expressed deep regret and personal distress at closing sewing shops and laying off workers. In the words of one corporate official,

It's not fun shutting down a plant. It's not fun at all. . . . But like I say, you have to make decisions in the best interest of the majority of workers, and many companies were in the Caribbean and Mexico long before we were. . . . You go where you need to go. (Interview, 21 June 1999)

An unanticipated aspect of these conversations, however, was the way in which managers claimed that their decision to subcontract production abroad was made necessary by the erosion of skills in their U.S. workforce. All three of the managers responsible for the company's sourcing decisions framed their shift of operations to Mexico in terms of the geographical distribution of highly valued, and increasingly scarce, sewing skills.

I first encountered this argument when, during an interview, the vice president for resources noted that "sewing is the toughest part of the process. . . . It's a pretty difficult skill to master quickly" (interview, 21 June 1999). I found this assertion surprising, given the way that sewing skills have historically been devalued in the industry. It contradicted the broader cultural evaluations of sewing work noted by scholars such as Kessler-Harris (1982) and Glenn (1990). More important, it was at odds with the way that Tultex itself trained and rewarded sewing operators. Jobs that are highly skilled generally command high wages, and these workers have bargaining power. Training periods are long, and job requirements are specific. Sewing jobs at Tultex had none of these features. The "Qualifications Book," which contained job descriptions for positions at Tultex, listed the following requirements for a sewing operator: "good hand and finger dexterity; basic math ability; ability to

follow written and oral instructions; lifting up to 30 pounds; standing; sitting.” The training period for the job was the shortest listed for any position—60 days. The job description did not mention familiarity with any particular type of sewing equipment, the ability to perform specific operations, or prior experience. Starting wages for sewing workers were approximately \$2 per hour less than those for operators of knitting machines, dye jets, or cutting machines.

The vice president for resources was not the only manager at Tultex to assert that sewing was skilled work. In an interview for a trade publication, the company’s CEO echoed this theme: “They’re hard jobs; they require some skill. Our sewing workforce is aging, and young people are not coming into these jobs. Not everyone can sew at a productive rate, so these jobs are probably best done somewhere else” (With a name like Tultex, you’ve got to be good 1997). This manager not only argued that sewing was skilled but suggested that the skill in question was becoming scarce among U.S. workers. He argued that the cohort of workers who possessed the necessary skills was aging and that younger workers were not filling their jobs. This was one reason, he noted, for moving jobs offshore.

These same sentiments were expressed to me by the firm’s vice president for operations, who said, “The workforce is getting older every year that goes by and the people that sewed are gradually aging out of the market, and the new ones—the 20-year-old sewing people—just are nonexistent.” Later, he continued, “In those areas that we have that require more skills—sewing for example— . . . we move outside the United States for those jobs, because in the United States the cost of paying labor for those high-skilled jobs is too great” (interview, 21 June 1999).

These statements contained three interlinked propositions about skill: Sewing is skilled work, the necessary skills are growing increasingly scarce in the United States, and therefore, it is necessary to seek these skills elsewhere. Taken together, these propositions form an argument about why it is necessary to move sewing jobs overseas. It not only presents the move as economically necessary and appropriate but attributes that necessity to a flaw, or lack, in the workers themselves. This argument makes sense in a paradigm of naturalization, which says that sewing skills are found in a local population in the same way that a natural resource is discovered. They are not acquired through training programs or learned on the job. Cultivated through socialization within the family, they are not capacities forged through public work. Rather, they are brought into the public realm from the family economy.

Just as the proposition that sewing is skilled work was contradicted by the way that the firm trained and rewarded sewing workers, the proposition that sewing skills were scarce in the region was at odds with other forms of evidence. First, the firm had not experienced any difficulty filling these positions. In fact, because its sewing shops were in small, employment-starved, rural communities, the firm was able to maintain waiting lists for these jobs. In interviews, the vice president for operations claimed that young women who graduated from high school did not have the same sewing skills as their mothers. He said that he was not sure if this was because they were not getting the training at home or because schools were not teaching home economics (interview, 21 June 1999). In interviews conducted at

other large apparel firms, managers made similar points. An executive at Liz Claiborne, Inc., also commented on the erosion of sewing skills in the U.S. workforce and attributed it to a late-twentieth-century job market where women had a broad range of employment options and where their waged work meant that they no longer had time to sew or teach their daughters to do so. "In my opinion, we've lost the ability to sew in America," he said (interview, 18 February 2000).

Despite the fact that the firm was not experiencing a shortage of sewing operators, on the surface, management's argument about the scarcity of sewing skills made some sense. The U.S. workforce is in fact aging, and sewing skills in general have been declining among the population.⁹ But workers were quick to take issue with this logic. A union organizer, who had worked as a sewing operator for most of her adult life, responded to management's assertion that girls were not coming out of school knowing how to sew by saying, "That's bullshit. People don't come out of high school knowing how to operate a dye jet either" (interview, 9 August 1999). Her quick response revealed the gendered workings of the naturalization paradigm. Nearly all positions in the plant required training—from 60 days to 6 months. Every job required workers to become familiar with a machine, learn a complex series of operations, and exercise discretion and care in performing them. Only with sewing was there a presumption that workers entered the job with prior training, provided at home or in home economics classes in school. By pointing to the ways in which management's statements made sewing machine operators and dye jet operators incommensurable, she uncovered the way that naturalization of skill allowed managers to pay less for sewing work.

Managers' proposition that skill's scarcity and cost made it necessary for the firm to move to Mexico is in many ways the most complex of the three. Taking the lead from trade publications that suggested "seeking out new areas of the Mexican interior which had agricultural economies and cottage industries" (Flying south? 1999, 17), managers presented Mexico as a location where sewing skills were both abundant and cheap. If U.S. women have lost their homemaking skills to modernization and labor force participation, Mexico is portrayed as a place where that has not yet happened. Managers had few plans in place for training workers in what they identified as a difficult skill; instead, they spoke as though remnants of sewing cultures lost in North America and Europe still existed in other parts of the world, to be discovered and tapped by resourceful entrepreneurs. In these regions, the domestic (womanly) skills lost by U.S. workers were conceptualized as intact, linked to the simpler ways of life that pertained there.

Such a proposition needs to be evaluated in its multiple dimensions. First, it clearly overstates the ease with which new workers acquire necessary sewing skills. While some women in the rural areas where apparel factories relocate may have learned hand sewing or embroidery as children, they are not necessarily familiar with industrial sewing machines. In the 1990s, labor productivity in the apparel factories of rural Mexico stood at approximately 55 to 65 percent of U.S. levels (Made in Merida 1999, 8). Tultex management estimated productivity in Mexico at 50 percent. The same vice president who claimed that sewing was skilled work and that

those skills were growing increasingly scarce in the United States explained that "in Mexico and Jamaica we started out with very basic products. . . . The skill of the workforce was not . . . up to the level of the States." In the third quarter of 1997, company reports indicated that profits had been hurt by substandard work performed in Mexican factories. Improvements in the quality and productivity of Mexican sewing operators took some time, suggesting that the skills involved were indeed substantial but that they were learned, not found.

While at the level of fact, management's account of skill decline had numerous problems, at the level of ideology, it was powerful and compelling. Workers and analysts have long noted the way in which a paradigm of naturalization of skill can be used to depress wages, by arguing that the abilities in question are neither acquired at much cost to the worker nor scarce. Managers here drew on a related strand of argumentation generated by the paradigm. They claimed that naturalized skills, because they are innate or the product of early socialization, cannot be acquired through training programs or on the job. This claim worked to strip agency from workers, who were assumed (as already fully socialized adults) to be unable to acquire or improve their sewing abilities. It placed agency in the hands of managers, who could search out, discover, and map new repositories of skill.

Managers' accounts played with a paradox that is necessarily generated by a paradigm of naturalized skill. If women reproduce certain skills through their domestic labor and transmit them through socialization in the home, how are those skills to be preserved once women are in the workforce? If women's labor market participation undermines both their home sewing activities and their ability to teach their daughters to sew, then by drawing women into the workforce, the apparel industry depletes its skill base. According to this view, as factories draw women into their workforce, they undermine the reproduction of skill.

This line of argument provides a justification for what have been called greenfields employment practices, where employers draw new populations of workers without previous labor market experience into the workforce. It creates a linkage between what managers are willing to call skill and the vulnerability of these new workers; that is, the paradigm links the skill of workers to their lack of labor market experience. This paradoxical framing of skill provides managers with a justification for seeking what Arizpe and Aranda (1981) have called "the comparative advantages of women's disadvantages." By defining sewing skill as "learned at home," managers downplay the importance of prior labor market experience and justify recruitment in regions with few labor market alternatives.

While managers claim that it is the reproduction of skill that is being damaged by women's labor market participation, there is no real evidence that women's ability to sew is changing. What does change as women enter the labor market is the ability of managers to argue that their skills are unrelated to workplace experience—the ability of the naturalization paradigm to enclave and depoliticize skill claims. As women gain experience with wage work, they come to realize the labor market value of their skills and their comparability to other skills that may be more highly remunerated. Working side by side with other workers, developing more

experience in—and options within—the labor market, perhaps participating in union activities, their sense that the work they do is skilled eventually comes to exceed management's claims that it is not.

CONCLUSIONS: SKILL AND VULNERABILITY IN A GLOBAL DIVISION OF LABOR

To paraphrase Fraser's (1989) comments about the politics of need, the interpretation of skill as given and unproblematic hides the interpretive dimension of skill politics. It assumes that it does not matter who interprets the skills in question and from what perspective. It takes for granted that public discourses of skill are fair (and not skewed in favor of dominant groups) and fails to problematize questions of force, leverage, and institutional power. It is clear that an account of the global distribution of skill in sewing work requires answers to all of these questions.

In the case study reviewed here, managers at Tultex used discourses of skill to map the vulnerability of different groups of workers. In their imagined political landscape, as the women of southern Virginia became less vulnerable through union membership and the growth of labor market opportunities, they also lost their skill. At the same time, the passage of NAFTA in 1994 and new information and telecommunications technologies opened the rural communities of Mexico to U.S. factories. With few labor market alternatives, and usually without union representation, the women of these communities work for one tenth the wage of sewing operators in Virginia. In managers' parlance, the search for cheap and vulnerable labor is coded as the search for sewing skills. In the Alice in Wonderland world provided by the naturalization paradigm, having the most skill equaled having the fewest political options and the lowest pay.

Discourses of skill provided managers with a coded way to justify the search for inexperienced workers. But the paradigm of naturalized skill does not simply mask the real motives of employers or serve to justify unpopular actions. It has its own effects. It provides the frameworks, vocabularies, and gender narratives that both workers and employers rely on in constructing moral economies of work. It provides a compelling interpretation of the origins of skill in the social relations of domesticity that carries with it assumptions about women's proper relation to the labor market and to political activity. Far from being simply a trick or sleight of hand, the paradigm grounds management actions in weighty historical interpretations of women's worth and of what counts as politics. For workers, this means that to repoliticize skill, their organizing strategies must struggle against the whole cultural legacy of domesticity, with its assumptions about social relations of dependence and low female wages.

As labor markets become more globally integrated through complex international redivisions of labor, U.S. employers rework old social, political, and discursive strategies and redeploy them in new locations. Enloe (1989, 160) has emphasized that labor is never simply "cheap"—it is "made cheap" through these strategies.

Because transnational corporations rely so heavily on women's labor, they have embraced the naturalization paradigm as an important resource. Employers have long understood its role in cheapening labor. The case presented here highlights the way in which its portrayal of certain skills as material resources justifies the constant movement of capital in search of new pools of workers without labor market experience or union representation.

The response of labor movements to these developments will involve transnational organizing: building new institutions, practices, and modes of communication that transect and transcend the boundaries of nation-states and regions. It will involve obtaining recognition for basic workers' rights and the establishment of a discourse within which social actors agree that wages and working conditions are proper topics of negotiation, that is, where these topics ascend to the political sphere. A paradigm of naturalization not only devalues skill by denying that it is learned but, through the paradoxical moves uncovered here, makes it possible for managers to argue that as new populations of women workers acquire labor market experience, they lose skill. It thus construes the search for new pools of vulnerable labor as the search for skill. Managers avoid negotiating with existing groups of workers as they gain confidence and experience and the political horizon recedes ever further into the distance.

Changing discursive strategies will not change the competitive pressures on apparel firms, or—in the short run—the balance of power between employers and workers. But in the longer term, rejecting the naturalization paradigm may have an effect. By refusing a mapping that equates skill and vulnerability, and insisting on the socially acquired abilities and political rights of all workers, transnational labor movements can undermine the creation of low-waged enclaves that fuel the current race to the bottom in labor standards and that threaten the security of all workers.

NOTES

1. Data on women's participation in the apparel labor force are from Carrillo (1994, 223), Dicken (1998, 313), and Ofreneo (1994, 164). Data on the decline of apparel employment in the United States are from U.S. Department of Labor (1994, 253) and *Women's Wear Daily* (Industry loses 15K jobs in October 2001).

2. In 2001, the ratio between apparel workers' wages in the United States and Mexico was approximately 10:1 (Speer 2001). For China, that ratio was closer to 100:1 (Speer 2002).

3. The largest factory in Tultex's complex, located in Martinsville, Virginia, was successfully organized by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU) in 1994, after many years of unsuccessful campaigns. The ACTWU merged with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union to become Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees in 1995.

4. Greta Krippner, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology and research assistant for this project, conducted the research observations and interviews in Aguascalientes.

5. The first strategy is illustrated by the work that feminist social movements have done to establish domestic violence as a political concern—one that should be addressed by the courts and state programs. Opponents of this view argue that abuse is a private matter that should be resolved within families. In a parallel way, questions that social movements may raise about workplace democracy "may be enclaved

as 'economic' or 'managerial' problems," which should be left to the market. Fraser argued that family and economy are the "principal depoliticizing enclaves" that claims must exceed to become political (1989, 168-69).

6. In 1896, in Chicago, a group of Swedish immigrant garment workers established the Special Order Workers Union to represent women who sewed custom orders for department stores. This group, which was remarkable in being the first trade union to be controlled by women from the level of the local to the national office, refused to accept section work because of the deskilling it implied (Wertheimer 1977, 320-21).

7. See Anderson (2000) and Schulman and Anderson (1999) for a description of recent changes in paternalism in a Southern textile firm.

8. See Sacks (1988) for a description of similar developments in another type of work setting.

9. In 1998, the Bureau of Labor Statistics moved sewing machines from the "apparel and upkeep" category of consumer spending to "recreation" to take account of the fact that so few people make or mend their clothes (Kilborn 1999, A1).

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