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The management of “quality”: class decomposition and racial formation in a Chicago factory

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Abstract Workplace training offers a distinctly explicit and uniquely articulate site for the ethnography of the capital–labor relation as an *ideological* phenomenon, where the everyday work of hegemony is shown to be deeply grounded in the everyday hegemony of work. In this ethnographic account of a factory classroom devoted to introducing production workers to the precepts of Total Quality Management and training them in Statistical Process Control, the neoliberal reform of the labor process—which sought to accomplish a class decomposition of the company’s workforce in favor of an individualizing regime of workers’ personal responsibility and accountability for various quality control operations—repeatedly provoked the company’s Latino workers into angry and vociferous expressions of antagonism to management. Indeed, insofar as the management’s efforts to reform labor by decomposing the workforce as a *class* formation merely intensified the prevailing preconditions of their *racial* formation, they thereby only exacerbated anew the Latino workers’ antagonism *as workers* to the terms of their subordination. Thus, the generic (ostensibly race-neutral) reform of the *labor* process initiated under the aegis of “Total Quality Management” implicated the presumed management of “quality” in a concomitant reconfiguration of what was, effectively, a contemporary regime of *racial* management.

Keywords Race · Labor · Racial management · Total Quality Management · Ideology · Hegemony · Workplace training · Latino

Wherever enterprises are set up, a few command and many obey. The few, however, have seldom been satisfied to command without a higher

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justification... and the many have seldom been docile enough not to provoke such justifications.

Reinhard Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry* (1956 [1974]:1).

Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship ...

Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, (1929–35 [1971]:350).

The everyday work of hegemony is profoundly rooted in the everyday hegemony of work—its necessity, its ubiquity, its normalcy. This indeed is precisely where the historical (and also historically specific) dimensions of capitalist social relations are most palpably grounded (and reproduced) in *routinized practice*.¹ The ideological—indeed, *pedagogical*—dimensions of the capital–labor relation must ultimately remain contingent upon the practico-ideological role of labor itself as a *disciplinary process*. Such disciplining-through-labor begins with what Marx identified as the requirement that the will of the worker be purposefully and attentively subordinated to the objective of her labor for the entire duration of the work (1867/1976:284), and within an industrial workplace, also “the technical subordination of workers to the uniform motion of the instruments of labor” (549; cf. Chakrabarty 1989:65–115; Foucault 1977:135–228).² As Michael Burawoy has argued, “the organization of work has political and ideological effects” (1985:5,7; emphasis in original; cf. Peña 1997:55–100). “Consent,” therefore, as Burawoy contends, “is produced at the point of production” (1979:xii). Without a decisive measure of consent, day in and day out, the work itself would simply not get done.

There is, on the one hand, the tacit and utterly mundane compulsion of laboring practice and the dense pedagogical redundancy implied by the physical organization of work. On the other hand, there are more pedantic ideological projects, the more articulate “educational” scripts, which insistently propose to justify or at least naturalize the social relations embedded in the daily grind of the labor process. But it is precisely the dreadful and stultifying routinization of these relations in practice that gives hegemonic projects the semblance of “natural laws” (Marx 1976:899). There are crucial junctures, however, where the tedious monotony of repetitive labor and the didactic monologues of ideology intersect, and are exposed in all their dialectical tension. One such point where the apparently parallel universes of discourse and practice are visibly co-constituted, and which therefore commands critical scrutiny, is workplace “training.” For, here is the site where the

¹ This crucial insight is, after all, the central (if often unrecognized) theme ultimately animating Marx’s discussion of the fetishism of the commodity-form, which acquires its special status as a “social hieroglyphic” (1867/1976:167) because of the systemic way that the social relations between people, as producers, are *mediated* by their respective *practical* relations to things (e.g. tools, machines, raw materials, money, commodities), and finally manifest only in the objectively “social” relations between the things produced by their labor, through exchange (165).

² As Marx explains, because human beings realize our purposes in the materials of nature *consciously*, our work requires that we “subordinate [our] will” to such tasks: “a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work. This means close attention” (1867/1976:284). Thus, labor subordination—and also the ensuing (political) problems of social domination, more broadly—is inextricable from some elementary and rather prosaic *technical* problems that are especially acute in the context of estranged labor, but which notably arise from more ontological features of human creative capacities.

subordination routinely enacted through the everyday organization of work acquires an extraordinary explicitness.

This essay inquires into the ideological dynamics of workplace “training” and the reform of the labor process toward the ends of more effective and efficient labor subordination. More specifically, it considers efforts directed toward the more effective and efficient management (and control) of “quality.” This study draws from my ethnographic research in a metal-fabricating factory in Chicago that employed approximately 250 people, which I call Imperial Enterprises,³ where I was employed during the mid-1990s as an instructor of English as a Second Language (ESL) among Latino (predominantly Mexican/migrant) production workers,⁴ and sometimes as an instructor of basic mathematics (alternately, in Spanish and English) among both migrant and non-migrant workers.⁵ In all of the Chicago area factories where I was employed as a workplace instructor during the mid-1990s, management-driven imperatives for worker literacy were inevitably and inextricably entangled with typically contradictory, potentially irreconcilable compulsions for high productivity and mandates for standardized “quality” and precision (the sophisticated measurement and regulation of which had conventionally been subject always to more or less meticulous oversight and supervisory command). Some balance of these divergent demands for both quantity and quality became, in each particular production process, a working quotient of “efficiency.” In small- to medium-sized workplaces like Imperial Enterprises, which principally made parts for, or otherwise serviced, larger industries (such as producers of capital goods, automobiles, and various durable consumer appliances), local managements tended to exude a remarkable anxiety about their capacity to adequately satisfy the requirements of their corporate customers, whose fields of operations were commonly construed on a transnational if not effectively global scale. Increasingly, these smaller employers had become acutely apprehensive about their capacities to

³ This company name as well as all personal names in the ensuing text are fictive. Due to the fact that some of the people who were my interlocutors in the larger research project are vulnerable to the punitive legal recriminations that could be brought to bear upon their undocumented immigration status, I have chosen to protect the anonymity of the people depicted here. Likewise, in the interests of protecting myself legally against any possible charges of breach of contract or confidentiality on the part of this company, where I was indirectly employed, I have opted to exclude or alter any extraneous details that could serve to identify this particular workplace.

⁴ The contradictions of workplace literacy that arise from the place of “training” in labor discipline had diverse ramifications for my own institutionally mediated social situation and practice, both as a workplace-based instructor and as an ethnographer (cf. De Genova 2005:147–166, 2006). Elsewhere, I have elaborated a more extended discussion of the politics of second-language learning in particular in the racialized context of Mexican (or Latino) migrant labor and workplace “training,” including a critical problematization of my own sociopolitical status as a US citizen and “native,” racialized as white (De Genova 2005:13–55).

⁵ Throughout the ensuing text, when the category *migrant* is deployed, it should not be confused with the more precise term *migratory*; rather, the term *migrant* is intended to do a certain epistemological work—i.e., to serve as a category of analysis that disrupts the implicit teleology of the more conventional term *immigrant*, which is posited always from the standpoint of the (migrant-“receiving”) US nation-state (cf. De Genova 2005). In this instance, where the term modifies Puerto Ricans—who are US citizens by colonial birthright and thus, in a juridical sense, precisely not “immigrants”—*migrant* may be understood to refer to persons who originally migrated to the US mainland from the island of Puerto Rico (as opposed to those born on the mainland).

meet their clients' "global standards" of quality control and simultaneously maintain production quotas that could reliably secure their profit margins.

Furthermore, this essay elucidates how the ostensibly generic (race-neutral) reform of the *labor* process initiated under the aegis of "Total Quality Management"—a political strategy of class decomposition—instigated and inflamed forms of workplace antagonism that assumed the overt form of *racial* conflict. Thus, the presumed management of "quality" was effectively implicated in a concomitant reconfiguration of the contemporary regime of what Roediger (2008) has incisively designated *racial management*.

"Total Quality Management" as class decomposition

During the 1990s, when the ethnographic research for this study was realized, managerial anxiety about enhancing companies' answerability to "global" standards was manifested through a ubiquitous preoccupation with "Total Quality Management" (TQM) and the "team concept"—overlapping expressions of a pervasive (pseudo-)humanistic mantra of late twentieth-century capitalist managerial "organization theory" (cf. Barker 1993; Garrahan and Stewart 1992; Grenier 1988; Hodson et al. 1994b; Knights and McCabe 2000b, 2002, 2003; Moody 1988:187–191; Ray 1986; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992; Willmott 1993, 2003).⁶ As its proponents themselves have made emphatic, TQM entails not merely a technical re-organization of the labor process but rather is principally about re-envisioning the ever-expanding production of surplus value on an effectively *educational* model, as necessarily and critically requiring the productive enterprise to exude continuous adaptation as a "*learning* organization" (e.g. Senge 1990, 1992). In a euphemistic effort to dispense with the conventionally more hierarchical and authoritarian idioms of old-fashioned industrial relations, "Quality Control" is abolished in favor of "Quality Assurance," workers are refashioned as "associates" or "team members," and industrial relations managers magnanimously (but revealingly, nonetheless) transpose "personnel" into "human resources," if not "human capital" (see also Hodson et al. 1994b). TQM's putative goal becomes "empowering" workers to "take ownership" of their respective locations in the production process. As the supposed "owners" of their jobs, and sometimes as participants in superficially non-hierarchical "quality circles," workers are held more accountable for the "quality assurance" of their own production, and are supposed to relate to other workers (as well as supervisors) who are implicated in subsequent operations in the production process, as their "customers." All of the relations of production are semantically inverted as relations of exchange, in order that workers may come

⁶ Even within the academic literature concerned with organizational theory and methods in management and business administration, where the TQM concept originated, there is evidence of some notably critical skepticism about the exuberant promotion of TQM as a "fad" or "fashion" (Abrahamson 1991, 1996; Hackman and Wageman 1995) and its accession to the status of a de facto "social movement" (Hackman and Wageman 1995:309), leading to a marked divergences among rhetoric, technical discourse, and empirical realities (Astley and Zammuto 1992; Zbaracki 1998), and even to its partial disavowal by its originators (Senge 1992; Zbaracki 1998).

to inhabit the standpoint of their employers, as “owners” with a vested interest in maximizing the profitability of their own production.

Beyond mere semantics, however, the TQM movement aspires toward a distinctly neoliberal reconfiguration of factory discipline, increasing flexibility without conceding authority, premised upon the prospect that workers might embrace it as a liberalizing reform that could nonetheless rationalize and enhance their increasingly self-regulated subordination to the imperatives of “efficiency” and “quality.”⁷ Michel Foucault’s critique of the neoliberal theory of “human capital” interrogates precisely this fatuous manner in which wage laborers are refigured as “autonomous entrepreneurs with full responsibility for their own investment decisions ... the entrepreneurs of themselves” (Lemke 2001:199). Indeed, one of TQM’s chief characteristics is the combination of precisely collaborative organizational forms with its overall neoliberal ethos of virtual “ownership.” In practice, such strategies aim at an enhanced disciplining of all workers, not only by augmenting their actual responsibilities in the labor process to include various quality control and inspection tasks, but also by intensifying their accountability for every aspect of the production process that involves them (cf. Ezzamel et al. 2001; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). During my ethnographic research, in instances where small-scale work “teams” were rewarded monetarily for exceptionally high levels of efficient (high quality) production, with bonuses paid to individual team members invariably calculated on the basis of *group* performance, for example, the predictable consequence was that each individual within the team tended to be implicated in a more or less overt disciplining of his or her co-workers, as well as the concomitant internalization of the pressure to consistently perform in a manner that would not be seen to undermine the team’s prospects of extraordinary remuneration for “quality” production. In short, the team form of work organization heightened the demands upon each individual to be a “good worker.” (In workplaces where such bonuses were calculated as percentages based on unequal pay scales, furthermore, the workers’ surveillance of one another’s discrepant “gain-sharing” bonuses after each pay period still further intensified mutual suspicion and animosity). Even in concert with “team” forms of work organization and the attendant disciplinary mechanisms of small-scale collective responsibility, then, this whole constellation of discursive and practical organizational tactics must be recognized as fundamentally *individualizing* in its intent.

In this sense, TQM is apprehensible as an overall strategy decidedly aimed at the *de-composition* of the workforce within any given workplace. This may be a strategy for decomposing workers as members of a class, but it may also aspire merely to decompose them as members of an assortment of disparate but cohesive identity blocs (each constituted in more or less openly antagonistic competition with one another, yet all defined nonetheless through their common subordination to the mandates of management). Thus, my contention is not that TQM is introduced only as a political strategy to subvert or otherwise fracture a presumed solidarity among workers that precedes it and summons forth managerial schemes

⁷ For a general discussion of post-Fordist regimes of “flexible accumulation,” see Harvey (1989).

to decompose workforces already mobilized for struggle or organized on the basis of class antagonism to their employers. Rather, I am suggesting that TQM, like all management practices, must more or less systematically (and restlessly) aspire to both compose and form a given workforce as labor-*for*-capital, and likewise persistently continue to also decompose and reconfigure those same labor relations in order to elude the very prospect that workers might engage in one or another process of class formation as labor-*against*-capital. Struggle is constitutive and always at least latent in the capital-labor relation itself; it is not a reaction formation. Whether decomposing a workforce as a relatively organized whole or more simply contributing to the dissolution or fragmentation of alternative formations of solidarity (such as racially-identified ones) among blocs of workers, TQM's decomposition of labor necessarily implies the workforce's *re-composition*—as an aggregate of self-motivated and mutually disciplined laboring individuals whose productive energies may be directed toward a quasi-entrepreneurial maximization of the firm's overall efficiency and profitability.

One of the founding theoretical formulations of TQM promotes the notion that management must profitably facilitate what it depicts, in an explicitly metaphysical claim, as the individual human being's "instinctive drive for precision, beauty, and perfection" (Juran 1974:4.54). In this manner, TQM devises to capitalize on human labor's autonomous creative capacity and ingenuity—something that is inherently collective, cooperative, and socially configured. The goal is therefore to re-channel the enhanced productive powers of what Marx depicted as "the collective worker" (1867/1976:464–470, 481–483, 502–503, 643–644)—as well as the concomitant stimulation of the individual workers' competitive "animal spirits" (443–444, 447) and "sense of liberty, independence and self-control" (697)—into strictly *individualized* forms of responsibility, answerability, and subjection, generally. The "collective working organism," itself "a form of existence of capital" (481)—which Marx recognized to be a multifaceted "mechanical monster" (503) that systematically fragments particular human labors and converts individual workers into "crippled monstrosities" (481)—now within the purview of TQM, is hereby chastened to be also an ever-vigilant, self-correcting one: a *learning* organization. For Marx, the vast automaton of the modern factory necessarily reduces each individual into "the automatic motor of a detail operation," and confronts each worker with the astounding technical and scientific achievements of human intellectual potentialities only as an alien and despotic power which "mutilates the worker, turning him [*sic*] into a fragment of himself" (481). The TQM project now commands the worker to similarly collude in the mutilation of her own *intellectual* capacities as a self-monitoring "smart machine," while yet the motive force and figurative "owner" of what remains, as ever, a mere detail operation.

And yet, in practice, even when TQM effectively transforms the subjectivity of employees, "self-discipline ... also has its limits and points of resistance" (Knights and McCabe 1999:199, cf. 1998a, b, 2000a), making neoliberal forms of "subjective" control unpredictable and impossible to exhaustively align with managerial interests and outlooks. "The demands of capital accumulation and the identity and power relations that are a condition and a consequence of its reproduction" generate their

own systemic failures (200).⁸ As David Knights and Darren McCabe contend (adapting Foucault), whereas “power could never be exercised unless there were a measure of responsible autonomy on the part of those over whom it is exercised ... power cannot be the exclusive prerogative of management” (2000b:1485). Thus, they also argue, “we have no alternative but to set humanism against itself,” for, while humanism exerts an individualizing demand on subjects to be accountable and responsible to its power, “it cannot prevent us from using the freedom it imposes on us to transcend its limits” (2000a:426).

Workplace “training” as a site of struggle

The disciplinary dimension of workplace “training” was the object of a collective critique that was forcefully articulated at Imperial Enterprises, when workers were subjected to quality-control training sessions taught by Rudy, the factory’s “Quality Assurance” manager, as the concluding pedagogical component of basic mathematics courses that I taught. The company management had preconceived and arranged these courses such that my math curriculum would culminate in a practical (and ideological) introduction to “Statistical Process Control” (SPC), a procedure by which production workers carry out inspections, measurements, and calculations that are charted as a continuous, in-process means of regulating production according to “quality” specifications. Thus, the obligatory introduction of new job requirements related to quality control inspections added significantly to the number and complexity of tasks that each worker would have to perform and was quite evidently tantamount to a dramatic intensification of their ordinary work routines. Here, indeed, was the type of reform of the labor process that scarcely concealed what was in fact a palpable struggle over the “normal” working day in this factory.

The workers at Imperial, for their part, were generally suspicious if not actively resentful of these proposed “reforms,” which promised only to disrupt their familiar routines and further complicate their working lives. Their inclinations to resist these changes in the labor process had not manifested themselves, however, in any demonstrable forms of collective mobilization, as the workers were largely disenchanted with their distinctly non-combative, often non-responsive, and generally beleaguered union, and moreover, insofar as the workers themselves tended to be divided along racialized lines. The day shift, which was widely perceived to be more privileged and was in fact less productive, had a larger

⁸ Notably, based upon an extensive survey of workplace ethnographies, Hodson et al. (1993) concluded that enhanced worker autonomy on the job (as a consequence of post-Fordist flexibilization) and the team organization of work had no definitively detrimental effect on levels of worker solidarity, and further, Hodson et al. (1994a, b) judged that workers’ heightened participation in the organization and monitoring of the labor process actually increased worker solidarity and also enhanced workers’ concern over organizational injustice. However, based again on a survey of ethnographic work, Hodson (2002) concluded that heightened worker participation, e.g. in self-monitoring teams, appeared to reduce workplace conflict, at least inasmuch as it did not tend to manifest itself in strike actions. For a revealing account of less formalized but nonetheless stalwart modes of resistance to TQM-inspired reforms of the labor process in an automotive plant, including changes to “the social organization of production,” see Ezzamel et al. (2001).

constellation of (US-born) white and African–American workers, accompanied by some European-origin (migrant) workers (including some highly skilled tool-and-die makers), whereas the second and third shifts were overwhelmingly Latino (predominantly Mexican/migrant, and secondarily Puerto Rican) in composition. Among this larger Latino bloc, however, Puerto Ricans (migrant or not) were all US citizens by colonial birthright, whereas most of the Mexicans (even if long-settled and “amnestied” after their previous apprenticeships in migrant “illegality”) had commonly begun as undocumented workers and largely remained non-citizens.⁹ Nonetheless, there was a significant minority of Black workers on the afternoon and night shifts, as well as an important presence of Latinos on the first shift. In addition, there were also a small but closely cohesive and identifiable number of Iraqi Assyrian migrants, who were not infrequently harassed—however ironically—for their supposedly dubious national origins and alleged affiliation with the regime of a country against which the United States had recently waged a war and continued to bomb quite routinely, and then, not many years thereafter would invade and occupy yet again. This sort of nativist suspicion was even (and perhaps especially) perpetrated by the other “foreign” (largely Latino, non-US citizen) workers. The management was predictably dominated by US-born whites, but relied heavily upon an intermediary layer of bilingual Latino supervisors to oversee the daily operations of the Spanish-speaking workforce.¹⁰

The first time that I was witness to Statistical Process Control “training” sessions during the spring of 1994, the all-Latino class erupted into what may appropriately be described as a mutiny. Only 3 weeks earlier, notably, two of the course participants—Ramón and Enrique—had both been abruptly fired. Ramón and Enrique were both Puerto Rican migrants who had spent most of their adult lives in Chicago. Both had been employed in the relatively skilled position of die-setter, and were held responsible for a die that had allegedly not been set properly and was consequently broken by the operation of an enormous hydraulic punch press machine. This dismissal was particularly scandalous, because Enrique had been working at Imperial for 33 years of continuous service, and almost certainly had more seniority in the company than virtually any of the bosses themselves. When I had expressed my own dismay upon hearing the news, the workers concurred cynically, “It’s impossible... but it’s possible.” From the very beginning of the first SPC training session, when Rudy was taking attendance and unsuspectingly asked, “Who’s not here?” the ominous reply of the class was: “Enrique and Ramón.”

Of the thirteen or fourteen workers remaining in the class, all but one (another Puerto Rican man) were migrants from Mexico. Rudy himself was originally from Mexico, but had come to the United States in his early teens, to join family who had been in the position to support him while he managed to learn English, complete high school, and then go on to college (notably, unlike his brother Esteban, who also worked at Imperial and was fairly fluent in English, but was not employed in a

⁹ For an extensive analysis of the specificities of Mexican/migrant racialization, see De Genova (2005); for a related analysis of the dynamics of racialization between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, see De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003).

¹⁰ For a fuller depiction of the particularities of Imperial Enterprises as a workplace, see the variety of related discussions in De Genova (2005) and De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003).

management position). When Rudy tried to conduct the training in English, he was instantly chastised. “Speak Spanish, Rodolfo!” Rosa insisted, calling him by his proper name. Re-deploying the logic that the company (and Rudy himself) frequently used to scold the workers into taking the training seriously, Rosa justified her mandate for Spanish: “They spend a lot of money, so we had better come out of here understanding this!”

Early in the SPC training, one of Rudy’s rhetorical ploys was to elicit from the workers a list of job-related tasks for which they supposedly “didn’t have time,” but in fact, simply neglected because they did not like doing them. People readily mentioned such general tasks as “clean the machine,” but they also volunteered the SPC-specific task of “making charts,” and further, offered with no inhibition such quotidian aggravations as “see the supervisor,” and likewise included “go to the inspection office” (where Rudy himself was regularly stationed). Rudy seemed to imagine that he could cleverly shame the workers into admitting that all the apparently extraneous tasks required for the purposes of quality control, in fact, were not responsibilities they resisted because they “don’t have time” (as might be the common “excuse” or “complaint”), but rather because they simply did not like doing them. Rudy’s mission, then, seemed to be to get the workers to learn to “like” these tasks by coming to appreciate the gospel of “quality” with which he himself was so enchanted. Nobody exhibited much remorse or even modest embarrassment, however. “It’s false that I don’t have time,” Carlos merrily (and somewhat defiantly) proffered his admission: “I really just don’t like to do it!”

“The Quality Revolution”

Rudy proceeded to supply the rationale for why these additional work requirements were so utterly necessary, and launched into an extended and rather tedious exposition of the background history and the ideology of “the Quality Revolution” and the imperative for Total Quality Management, including a slide presentation with caricature drawings of the “gurus” of TQM. In the face of almost instantaneous adversity, ranging from casual disregard to candid disdain, Rudy’s message assumed a missionary zeal, as he denounced all manner of inefficiency, production defects, and waste. “Other companies have gone out of business,” he pleaded, “We have to change!”

After the workers’ patience had steadily been worn down, boredom and rising irritability combined to generate a sudden outburst against Rudy’s pedantic and monological imperatives for higher quality production. Rosa, Carlos, and Tomás were the most vocal initiators of an outcry that began by objecting, “But the material is too thick, Rodolfo! Look at what happened to Enrique and Ramón! The machines aren’t in good condition! You tell them [the bosses] that the machine is bad [that it’s running bad parts], they tell you to change machines, then five minutes later they call you back, but they didn’t do anything!” At this point, after an accumulation of objections, Alejandro rose from his seat, and flailing his arms angrily, unleashed, “Fucking sons of bitches! [*¡Pinches güeyes!*] I told all of them about the problems I was having with the machine—then later they say, ‘I don’t

know anything about that’.” Rudy pathetically tried to calm down his unruly audience, appealing, “Come on, guys, we got a lot of material to get through,” to which several workers replied in frustration, “Well, go ahead, go ahead, go on then!”

Shortly thereafter, once Rudy had begun to make his pitch for the “team concept”—a central fetish in the TQM repertoire, as we have already discussed—Alejandro declared with renewed exasperation: “You talk about ‘team work,’ but I’ve been here ten years, and there’s no ‘team!’” Rosa followed, “They don’t listen to us, they don’t fix the problems—that’s why there’s no quality!” To this, Tomás added his own concise appraisal: “Because they’re stupid asses! [*¡Porque son burros!*].” Soon, after a succession of angry outbursts of exasperation and critique, this first session (of four scheduled) was concluded.

“They only understand power”

After class, Rudy expressed his own resentment and exasperation to me, insisting, “The other group wasn’t like this!” Thus, he seemed to want to defensively assure me that the workers’ volatility was not an effect of his own incompetence, and may also have intended to insinuate, however subtly, that unlike the other instructor of a second math course, I had evidently not fulfilled my own presumed obligation to “prepare” the workers over the preceding 10 weeks of the course for their indoctrination into Statistical Process Control. Indeed, this group included many of the same workers who had previously also participated in one or more of the ESL courses I had taught. “I know that these people have been ignored for a long time,” Rudy admitted, “but they just want to complain about the bosses and the machines. They’re just worried about getting a warning ticket, but this is another thing.”

The workers, Rudy was convinced, were mired in their narrow particularity and could not comprehend or appreciate a more complex context that surrounded the immediacy of their own presumably petty grievances. Rudy then began to theorize the “deeper” problem, as he understood it:

“You’re gonna find out more and more that the ones with a lower education level, they only understand power – physical strength – and skill,” [and now clenching his fists, demonstratively] “... hands-on things. But to understand these things, it’s gonna take a long time because they don’t like to use their minds. And if something happens one time and they don’t like it, they won’t ever forget it; if somebody does something wrong, they’ll never talk to him.”

I responded first in the apparent role of a “detached” observer, suggesting some constructive pedagogical criticism: “Well, you know, I noticed that when you were explaining some of the more abstract topics—the conceptual part—you spoke more English, and I noticed that some people started to get sleepy-eyed. Maybe it would be better to speak in Spanish for those parts.” Whereas Rudy had sought to disparage these workers as effectively “uneducated,” implicitly soliciting my solidarity with him by emphasizing the contrast between the workers and the two of us as “teachers” or “trainers,” however, I realized in making this criticism that I

may have been inadvertently pointing to the limitations of Rudy’s bilingualism, and thus invoking the rather pronounced class and educational inequalities between him and myself. Given that Rudy would surely have been originally exposed to SPC and routinely accustomed to discussing the subject entirely in English, I was most likely calling attention to his very probable incapacity to effectively communicate the training material in Spanish. Rudy’s defensive reply revealed this, if only obliquely; he argued, “But I don’t agree with that, either—because they’re in this country; you’re supposed to speak English. The work manuals are all in English; you can’t just say, ‘Oh, I don’t like it because he speaks English.’ It’s different if I’m at home with my kids, watching TV—then, if I wanna speak Spanish, that’s my problem.” Rudy resorted to the convention of Anglo hegemony in the United States whereby English is presumed to inevitably (and appropriately) prevail in public spaces, and subordinate languages, like all other things marked as “culturally” distinctive, are relegated to the “privacy” of “domestic” spaces of home and family. By implication at least, Rudy also seemed to underscore the fact that I had previously been charged with the task of teaching English to these workers who otherwise appeared to have been only very poorly equipped for their SPC training. Deliberately evading this particular prospective debate with Rudy, I simply reiterated my original point: “Well, I’m just saying this because, for some of the more difficult parts, some of the people were losing their interest.” Rudy now admitted, more candidly, “It wouldn’t matter if it was in Spanish, it would be the same way. I knew it was gonna be like this.”

Now, with greater frankness (and resorting to Spanish as a gesture of intimacy and discretion), I reminded Rudy of the long shadow of labor discipline that loomed over this event: “Enrique and Ramón were in this class, you know—they were part of this group. Enrique had more than thirty years here. It creates a difficult environment for you...” “Yeah,” Rudy conceded (continuing in English), “management needs to change too—they have to listen to them. These guys are old-timers, they’re not fooled. The company keeps changing supervisors, but it’s always the same results—it’s a revolving door.”¹¹ Now, somewhat more inspired, Rudy continued, “If they want, I can arrange for a meeting between them and Morris [the company president]; we can create a Quality Circle!” Rudy quickly tempered his enthusiasm, however, reiterating his skepticism about the apparently negative attitudes of this particular group of workers: “But that means they need to think about how to do things better and solve problems, not just complain about everything.”

Newly reassured by the recollection that the facilitation of greater communication between workers and management was indeed one of the presumed ideals of Total Quality Management, and reminding himself that the interests of labor and management ought necessarily to be seen as complementary, Rudy revisited his original gospel, now as if to reaffirm for himself his own fundamental convictions about the grave importance of his mission: “But we need it—if not, we’re all gonna lose. We won’t survive, and they’ll just be in the same situation somewhere else:

¹¹ For a related discussion of the inadequacies of managerial efforts to implement TQM, see Knights and McCabe (1997).

working in some other factory, having the same problems as they have right here.” It was especially clear to me at such moments as this that Rudy harbored an acute sense of vulnerability about his own relatively privileged but always precarious position in the company.

“Changing Culture”

During our conversation, Rudy and I were interrupted several times by curious management personnel, who eagerly asked alternately hopeful or vaguely worried questions. Morris, the company’s owner and president, whose office was located quite near to the training room, and who had probably been able to detect more accurately the intensity of feeling that had been expressed, asked cynically, “They want me to go away?” Rudy, who by this point was visibly exhausted and irritable, answered frankly, “They want you to change things.” Here, however, Rudy’s pointed remark was not merely the beleaguered expression of his own failure to prevail over the workers’ opaque and intransigent antagonism to his self-satisfied message of managerial enlightenment. Rudy’s self-appointed role as propagandist for TQM quite genuinely had implications not only for the production workers but also for the management. Indeed, the reformatory mandate for management to “change things” was a central tenet of the official “commonsense” of the TQM ideology (Ray 1986; Willmott 1993, 2003; cf. Hodson 1999). For instance, on one occasion, I discovered some discarded presentation notes from a meeting of the management at Imperial. The first segment of the presentation had apparently been devoted to the familiar TQM theme of “Changing Culture,” and highlighted a managerial concern to actively and deliberately cultivate a less authoritarian environment or “corporate culture.” This title was followed by a variety of sub-headings emphasizing “trust,” “respect,” the importance of “consistently being fair,” and the strategic nexus between worker “involvement” in decisions related to quality and efficiency, an enhanced sense of “ownership” (or, personal investment in the productivity and profitability of the company), and subsequent “commitment” or loyalty.

In the second session of SPC training, 2 days later, Rudy commenced class by condescendingly announcing that he wanted to proceed without any further “gossip” [*chisme*]. His reprimand instantly provoked a spirited retort from Rosa’s husband Ramiro, who affirmed, “It’s not gossip, it’s the truth!” In the face of instantly renewed adversity, Rudy introduced his idea of starting “Quality Circles.” Skeptically engaging Rudy’s proposal of worker–management collaboration, Rosa asked bitterly, “Why don’t they come and work with us in the factory?” “Ohh!” Roberto was humored at the outlandish prospect, “I don’t think so!” Ramiro, however, addressed Rudy’s proposition more earnestly: “If we have these meetings, it’s not to talk about the work; it has to be to talk about what’s really happening in the company.” While Rudy’s managerial point of view had been concerned to derisively insist that such meetings between workers and their bosses should not be consumed by the workers’ complaints and “gossip,” Ramiro’s standpoint as a worker demanded precisely the contrary—not a banal and narrow discussion of the

imperatives of productivity and quality control but rather a genuine dialogue about the awkward truths that pertained to the politics of the labor process and the conflicts on the factory floor.

The mere mention of “what’s really happening in the company” inspired Carlos to mention that he wanted to beat up another employee in the plant. Carlos explained that this particular nemesis had recently chastised him in a work meeting with the injunction to “Speak English!,” and had added to the affront the still more glaring insult, “Speaking Spanish is stupid.” Indeed, as became forcefully manifest on another occasion when I interviewed Carlos with his wife—both of whom, notably, had rather light complexions and fair hair in comparison with most Mexicans in Chicago—their experience of discrimination on the specific basis of their Spanish language was effectively inseparable from their specifically *Mexican* identity, and readily apprehensible to them, explicitly, as *racism* (see De Genova 2005:45–48). More generally, for Mexican (and also other Latino) migrant workers at Imperial Enterprises (as well as other workplaces where I was employed and realized my ethnographic research), their most visceral sense of the meaningfulness of their experiences of oppression, while always involving a complex intersection of their manifold racializations and their “immigrant” status, consistently and prominently included the discrimination and abuse they experienced on the basis of their Spanish language (De Genova 2005:45–48; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003:146–151). Nonetheless, their racialization—alternately, as “Mexican” or more generically as “Hispanic” or “Latino”—tended to be effectively inextricable in practice from the their experiences of exploitation and subordination *as workers*.

Very much consonant with that of most of his Mexican as well as Puerto Rican co-workers, Carlos’s resentment for discrimination against them on the grounds of not speaking English fluently, articulated a sense of vulnerability. For some, the prior requirement that they participate in ESL courses in the factory had been not inconceivably haunted by the tacit threat of punitive repercussions, exposing the production of language as itself inextricable from the language of “production”—the language of “making production” (meeting the production quota), the language of exploitation and labor subordination (De Genova 2005:36–39). Thus, the Latino workers’ sense of precariousness frequently manifested itself in terms of contempt for other workers whose English language could potentially be used to discipline and even displace them from their jobs, on the basis of a stubborn stigmatization of their Spanish language as a more generic kind of “lack” (cf. De Genova 2005:42–45). In this particular factory, notwithstanding other occasions for friction or division between them, Mexican and Puerto Rican workers exuded a definite if nonetheless always contingent tendency toward a kind of provisional mutual identification as “Latinos,” in order to strategically uphold a manifestly *racial* distinction by which they located themselves in relation, above all, to whiteness (especially that of the management) and Blackness (particularly that of the small minority of African–American co-workers).

At Imperial (as elsewhere), such occasions for Latino racial formation were commonly ensnared in their own racialized contradictions, revealing a rather persistent inclination to disparage African–American workers as “lazy” for their alleged incapacity to endure, or refusal to tolerate, the terms of labor subordination

and exploitation with which the Latino workers felt more or less compelled to accommodate themselves. Indeed, at Imperial, the Latino workers' perception of Black co-workers as lazy was very notably coupled with a resentment of the latter group's seemingly privileged and protected status in relation to a management that purportedly feared them as, alternately, dangerous (as predisposed to criminality and violence), or unduly empowered by their reputed legacy of union and civil rights militancy, and the related presumable recourse they had to accusations of racial discrimination and the supposed protections of the law (see De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003:185–188; cf. De Genova 2005:147–209, 2006). Indeed, in this respect, the Latino workers were largely recapitulating the derisive opinions that employers themselves commonly marshaled in defense of their aversion to hiring Black workers (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). Yet, the Latino workers' imputations of Black laziness could also be understood to be a sort of agonistic and profoundly self-defeating refraction, from the standpoint of labor *for* capital, of the employer's more crude and overt strategy of *racial management*, which articulated itself as a deep and abiding suspicion of the African–American workers as, in effect, *not* lazy, but rather as precisely mobilized (insubordinate) or at least always-already mobilizable—as labor *against* capital.

Here, the broad outlines of a larger history of racial management also come into greater focus, as the real or perceived menace of the Black workers to management's immediate mandate for labor subordination was inescapably also a crystallization of the figure of African–American insurgency as an enduring danger to the wider sociopolitical order of white supremacy. That is to say, Black *racial* militancy was inseparable from the specter of African–American *labor* insubordination, and beginning precisely in the late 1960s and early 1970s (in the immediate aftermath of civil rights- and Black Power-era rebellions), largely undocumented (legally vulnerable) Mexican/migrant labor-power had become an eminently disposable (i.e. deportable)—and for that reason, increasingly indispensable—commodity of choice for the beleaguered managements of manufacturing firms in Chicago's rapidly de-industrializing landscape. Yet, for those Mexican (and other Latino) workers, their own ever-tenuous and precarious social position—as deportable migrants—was, by all appearances, permanently threatened by the persistent availability of a reserve army of impoverished but ostensibly legally protected and substantively entitled US-citizen workers, who were disproportionately (racial) “minorities.”

“Mostly minorities working”

During the second session, whenever angry outbursts erupted, Rudy opted to quickly change the subject by steering the discussion back to the SPC course material. During this session, furthermore, having judged that this group of course participants simply “don't like to use their minds,” Rudy had decided to assign them something “hands-on” with which to occupy themselves. Thus, he distributed multicolored candies that could be categorized, and sorted according to various

plausible “defects” that might occur. These practical exercises were supplemented, however, with various overhead projections that outlined the topics of Rudy’s lecture. Among these, there was a graph charting quality over production, represented by a straight-line curve that was intended to communicate management’s utopian imperative: higher production, higher quality, in perfect equilibrium, banishing altogether any conceivable contradiction between quality and quantity.

Rudy’s presentation also relied extensively on appeals to the workers’ presumed self-interest, suggesting that the defective parts they produced at Imperial Enterprises would literally come back to haunt them, ending up by manifesting themselves as “rattles in the car you drive.” To these claims, which insinuated that defective parts were the fault of the workers’ negligence, Carlos repeatedly interrupted Rudy with an indictment of Rudy’s own Quality Assurance department; Carlos charged, “Inspection passes parts that workers know are bad.” Eventually, Rudy opted to plainly ignore Carlos altogether. Finally, for the duration of the last third of the class session, Carlos retaliated by repeatedly interrupting Rudy’s monologue, reminding him of the basic antagonism between the precious time that workers could garner for their own lives and their labor-time for the company, by melodically intoning one of his favorite expressions in English: “Time to go!”

Afterward, Rudy revealed to me something that I had not previously known—that he had spent 3 years in the capacity of supervisor immediately overseeing this same group of workers. Based on the presumptive authority of this extended prior acquaintance with this particular group of workers, Rudy addressed Carlos’ unrelenting interruptions as the means to affirm his more general perspective:

“Carlos has a lot of information, and he wants to let it out, but a lot of his information is unfounded. That’s why we need to get him into a Quality Circle, where his ideas can be put to the test – then he’ll learn to say only what he’s sure about. With these guys, it comes off the tongue, but it doesn’t go through the brain first. Carlos is a really hard worker, but he can make a mistake easily because he thinks he knows everything, so you have to put him in a no-problem situation. Then you’d be amazed what kind of output you’d get – but you always gotta be one step ahead of him.”

Rudy’s managerial “egalitarianism”—the discourse of “the team concept” and collaborative “quality circles,” with their emphasis on valuing workers’ knowledge and incorporating it toward the ends of higher productivity and efficiency—required the workers’ cooperation, consent, and agreement. However, when workers such as Carlos were intractable, or even when they merely disagreed with management’s imperatives, it was remarkable how seamlessly this egalitarianism translated into a blunt disqualification of the workers’ intelligence and a devout belief in the authoritarian necessity for manipulation—“you always gotta be one step ahead.”

Rudy persisted in his inclination to bemoan *this* particular class, in contrast with the other group (whom I had not been teaching): “We’re really going slow, the other group is almost done.” I asked him, “How’d you think class went today?” “Much better,” Rudy replied with renewed confidence, “See, that’s why I switched to the candy activity, because these are real ‘hands-on’ types. To teach them anything, you have to get them doing something with their hands—because they don’t like to use

their minds and think about what you're saying. But that's the kind of people you have to work with, and the trainer that can figure out how to get through to them is the one that's gonna last." Here, Rudy had shifted registers from his appraisal of this particular group of seemingly obstreperous workers to a commentary about factory workers more generally. He then immediately proceeded to racialize this incipient discourse of class differences. "In most factories, it's mostly minorities working, at least in this industry..." At this point, notably, Rudy trailed off. He may have become distracted by a creeping sense of self-doubt that troubled his momentarily bombastic self-confidence with regard to his own capacity (as a "trainer") to "last"; after all, we both knew that he was having a very difficult time "figure[ing] out how to get through to them." Not implausibly, however, Rudy may have become embarrassed by the contradiction of disparaging "these people" as "minorities," effectively disavowing his own membership as one of them (i.e. as a Mexican), especially in conversation with me (someone racialized as white, and ostensibly not a "minority"). Moreover, Rudy may have become abruptly distraught by the recognition that his own implicit but agonistic claim to "whiteness"—his will to distance himself from Mexican factory workers by authorizing himself, as an "educated" person who had achieved a position of modest authority in the managerial hierarchy, to characterize them as "minorities"—might awkwardly have to confront its own tenuousness in the face of one such as myself, whose apparent claim to racial whiteness was presumptively already secured. Abruptly, we broke off our conversation and parted.

Rudy's inclination to distinguish and distance himself in *racialized* terms from the production workers who were, after all, predominantly Mexicans like himself, may be a remarkable instance of racial dis-identification, but it was nevertheless fundamentally *consonant* with the overall racialization of the class difference and division between the overwhelmingly white management of the company and the overwhelmingly non-white (predominantly Mexican/migrant) workforce operating the machines on the factory floor. Rudy's intermediary status as a low-level functionary of the management therefore seemed to attenuate—at least, for him—his own inclusion as a Mexican or a Latino, and to the extent that he could continue to be figured among them, this merely tended to racially mark his status as an "exception." But his standing as a member of management, however lowly in the final analysis, also authorized him, or encouraged him to authorize himself, to articulate the effectively white racial standpoint of the company's bosses with regard to the larger task of racial *management*. Thus, in Rudy's anxious articulation of this managerial ideology, we are compelled to theorize the awkward slippage from the disparaging depiction of workers as people who "don't like to use their minds" to their banal racialized characterization as "minorities."

"Customers" or "Slaves"? Dominance without hegemony

When the class resumed the following week for a third session, Rudy formally made his "Quality Circle" proposal to the workers in the class, using the hackneyed language of "team work." The workers reacted instantly, articulating their

skepticism and disillusionment with this already dubious discourse: “You go to help a co-worker/friend [*compañero*], but you cannot—because you have your own job to do. They [the bosses] talk about it [“the team concept”], but they don’t do it!” Rosa was particularly vocal on this occasion, and she explicitly repudiated the insinuation of the company’s hegemonic “we” in discussions of production: “We—and by this, I mean myself and other people working with me—we’re producing bad parts, and we know it and tell them, and they [the bosses and inspectors] tell us to keep it running—and the parts are all bad, piling up in front of us!” Indeed, in all of the plants where I was employed, workers regularly pointed to this commonplace managerial hypocrisy about the contradiction between their mandate for more production (quantity)—especially for “just-in-time” (last-minute) delivery on “hot jobs”—and on the other hand, their generic imperative for fewer defects and less waste, i.e. higher quality.

This session became so vibrantly unruly that it was difficult for me to keep track of who was saying what. The workers denounced the managerial demands for “flexibility” on the parts of the workers, including the expectation that workers should perform multiple tasks: “They [the bosses] don’t do anything, just leave us all the work to do! ... Who should teach the new workers to do the job well? The foreman!” When Rudy protested that the class had to resume the discussion of “quality,” someone demanded, “For you [Rudy], what is ‘quality’? *We’re telling you* what ‘quality’ is!” Another worker assumed a more performative stance: “I’ll show you my imitation of a boss—running! [fleeing from the problems on the job]... although it doesn’t do them any good!” Still another person challenged, “They’re seeing a lot of defects? They’re gonna see more—much more!” “I’m not paid to make up for other people’s mess,” added the next person, “... the boss doesn’t listen to anybody!” Someone else then contributed another line of critique, declaring: “And the old man [referring to Morris, the white owner of the company], he’s really racist!” What is crucial here is precisely that the denunciation of managerial *racism* was, for these Latino workers, effectively inseparable from their specific grievances *as workers*.

The debate now turned on the ubiquitous TQM verbiage about “the Customer.” One of the workers demanded rhetorically of Rudy, “Ahh, tell me already, who is ‘the Customer,’ really? Who here in this class is ‘the Customer’? We’re slaves!” While Rudy stammered something about “the Customer’s desire for a low price...” one of the course participants interrupted angrily and insisted, “The one who pays people less is the one who makes the most money for his own pocket!” When Rudy claimed that the company lost \$1,000 for every defective part returned by a customer, again he was interrupted with the retort, “Yeah, but look at how many thousands they make in profits!” As in each of the prior sessions, each time that the class became intractable, Rudy abruptly changed the subject, and so the session continued in convulsive bouts of intermittent contention until the 90-minute class period was over.

The next session was supposed to be the last, but due to the repeated recalcitrance on the parts of the course participants, Rudy was simply not making progress through the SPC training materials at the designated pace. In an attempt to review the material that had already been covered, Rudy asked the class, “What did you

learn so far?” One or another person boldly pronounced the damning retort: “*Nada... Nothing. Ninguna ... Not a thing.*” Others disingenuously proclaimed, “Oh, a ton of stuff! [*¡Un montón de cosas!*].” And someone else dissimulated with the fateful phrase, “I don’t remember [*No me acuerdo*].” Rudy summarily opted to return to “hands-on” learning, so that these purportedly unthinking people would shut up and give him some peace. As the candy-sorting exercise continued, many of the workers were playfully cracking the candies as an ironic excuse to exempt them from the “quality control” process—and eat them.

If one considers the language of SPC in even a cursory manner, its ideology becomes quite manifest. The literally inevitable occurrence of “variation” has to be restricted to the narrowest possible margin of “regularity.” Defective (or “bad”) parts are considered “out of control.” Any abrupt turn in the statistical graph of a production process (such that the process begins to be inclined to one side of the mean, instead of oscillating regularly around the average) is called a “process shift.” Notably, even if that shift remains within the specifications of the process (within its permissible outer limits)—in other words, even if the process is still producing “good” parts—the mere incidence of non-conformity must be identified as a “problem.” The same applies to any and all “trends”—they are understood to indicate a dangerous tendency to go “out of control.”

When the SPC training was extended into a fifth, originally unscheduled session, the ominous names of Enrique and Ramón were invoked yet again, in case the message that the workers had been intent to communicate to management was not yet sufficiently clear. The conversation also turned to the “graduation” ceremony and party that was planned, in celebration of the workers’ completion of the course. (This was a practice that my employer generally encouraged companies to adopt in recognition of the course participants’ efforts in the workplace literacy program.) The workers were looking forward to the party, but they were disappointed that the bosses would be present on this otherwise festive occasion. Rosa inquired specifically, “Does Howard [the personnel manager] have to come to the party with us?” “He doesn’t really come here to be with us,” Carlos added, with good-humored cynicism, “— just to eat the cake!” One of the workers even suggested in jest, laughing, “Couldn’t we just go and kill him in his office?” Clearly, amidst casual jokes about murdering the personnel boss, Rudy would have no choice but to conclude, in the ideologically overburdened idiom of SPC, that this particular training “process” had gotten woefully “out of control.”

The contested terrain of “quality”

The respective meanings of “quality,” “empowerment,” or “teamwork” for workers and management at this factory were plainly as irreconcilable as their antagonistic interests in the capital–labor relation that compelled them into this agonistic dialogue. To posit the capital–labor relation as one that is intrinsically antagonistic is neither to endorse a messianic faith in the revolutionary historical role of the (presumably unitary) working class as its existential vocation. Nor is it to suppose that working people’s achievements of self-consciousness should be

inherently emancipatory as a matter of ontology. Nor is it a preemptive assertion by theoretical fiat that passivity or conformity among wage laborers is somehow anomalous. Rather, the analytical implication of this position is only to uphold a recognition that the material and practical potentiality for conflict is always already objectively given by the capital–labor relation itself as a relation of *struggle*. Relations of domination and subordination must prevail in the labor process as a precondition for capital accumulation. Yet, if domination and subordination are indeed pervasive, indeed routine, these relations remain precisely *political* in the most elementary sense: they are constituted in and of struggle. If that struggle is eminently material and practical, it is also nonetheless thoroughly ideological.

The manifestations of such struggles are inevitably historically conditioned and contingent, and their ideological configurations must likewise be heterogeneous. From this vantage point, nonetheless, struggle between wage laborers and capitalists is constitutive, and as such, open-ended, eminently historical, and precisely *not* structurally determined. There is no structurally universal or mechanistically predictable alignment of the subordinate pole of the capital–labor relation with the dominant ideology (which justifies its domination), or the hegemonic “common sense” (which naturalizes it as “normal,” “inescapable,” or “inevitable”), any more than there is any automatic recourse to a counter-hegemonic standpoint or a predisposition to class-conscious resistance merely as an effect of the objective circumstances of being exploited. In this sense, “every class struggle is,” precisely, “a *political* struggle” (Marx and Engels, 1848[1967:90]; emphasis added)—a struggle, in the first instance, over the *politics* of production, a power struggle over the regime of labor subordination. Indeed, it is the struggle between labor and capital that finally generates the conditions of possibility and also the actuality of the very social *relation* itself, which only then may be fetishized and reified as some kind of apparently fixed and enduring social “structure” (cf. Bonefeld 1995; Holloway 1995). The more or less lasting achievements of one or another formulation of consent or contention, hegemony or despotism, and the shifting terms that define the ideological parameters of these “cultural battles,” in Gramsci’s phrase (1971:348), thus emerge as the moving target of an analysis that must always be situated in its historically particular conjuncture.

Sociopolitical projects for the elicitation of consent and the consolidation of hegemonic rule, if they are indeed largely “educational,” are nevertheless most efficacious precisely when their ideological content achieves the apparently innocuous banality of the *commonsensical*. In this regard, Gramsci refers to a “conception of the world that is implicitly manifest” in all aspects of social life (1971:328). As Marx formulated the problem, as capitalist relations of production became more entrenched historically, they produced “a working class which by education, tradition, and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (1867[1976:899]). Notably, even under the relatively extraordinary circumstances of migrant workers’ undocumented, “illegal” status—as would have been a formative part of the “education, tradition, and habit” inculcated into the Mexican workers at Imperial Enterprises—the more coercive (and plainly political) dimensions of their particular condition as migrant labor generally achieves a commonsensical banality as merely “economic” “facts

of life,” with the machinations of state power and the compulsions of the law rendered effectively invisible by the fetishized spectacle of “illegality” as individual transgression (De Genova 2005:242–249). For Marx, the naturalized quality of the “self-evident,” by which “the silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker,” allows for “direct extra-economic force” to become “exceptional” (1976:899). Indeed, this is likewise true of workplace immigration raids and deportations, even if the spectacle of enforcement is a persistent and pernicious reminder of the exceptional vulnerabilities that suffuse the migrant predicament. In Gramsci’s rendition, these exceptions may be characterized precisely as “moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed” (1971:12). The ideological mediation of capitalist social relations is nonetheless always and everywhere a historically specific effect of—and indeed, a *response* to—the constitutive role of antagonism and struggle at the heart of the capital–labor relation. If coercive violence (beyond “the silent compulsion of economic relations,” that is) remains a relatively extraordinary recourse, the manifestations of conflict that do *not* culminate in large-scale crises are nevertheless abundant. Indeed, they are tantamount, in Marx’s felicitous phrase, to “a protracted and more or less concealed civil war” (1976:412). Even as conservative a Cold War-era sociologist as Reinhard Bendix, who explicitly sought to examine—*from the employers’ point of view*—managerial ideologies “which seek to justify the subordination of large masses of men [*sic*] to the discipline of factory work and the authority of employers” (1956[1974:ix]), could frankly posit the dialectics of workplace *conflict* as the decisive crucible where such justifications are forged.

The challenge of sustaining one or another formulation of hegemony is best understood as an unrelenting, multifarious, and ordinarily dispersed succession of more or less deliberate and calibrated interventions aimed at the decomposition and recomposition of those intrinsically conflicted social relations. Thus, a semblance of “spontaneous consent” is itself an achievement and remains ever contingent and partial all the same. Nonetheless, “the philosophy of an historical epoch is,” as Gramsci contends, “... nothing other than the ‘history’ of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in *imposing* on preceding reality. History and philosophy are in this sense indivisible” (1971:345; emphasis added). In his effort to specify further the “creative” (unpredetermined) character of “philosophy” as a practical and material force in history, “above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality’” (1971:348), Gramsci goes onto affirm, “reality does not exist on its own, in and for itself, but only in an historical relationship with the men [*sic*] who modify it” (1971:346).

What is elucidated by the poignant conflict between Latino workers and management at Imperial Enterprises which my ethnographic research reveals, then, is precisely how “the political and ideological apparatuses” of the production process itself (Burawoy 1985:8) assumed a manifest importance in mediating the uneasy and unresolved moment of transition from one already-established managerial regime to another. Whereas TQM strategies and discourses tend to focus generically on workers as individual employees, they nevertheless

symptomatically acknowledge that the capital–labor relation is one fraught with antagonism, even if only in their efforts to circumvent or surpass such purportedly anachronistic modes of conflict. Much as this new order was proposed as a recipe for reform that explicitly sought to enlist the workers’ active and conscious collaboration, and thus elicited their consent in prospectively refigured relations of labor subordination, it became a contested terrain of remarkable volatility (cf. Edwards 1979:16). Although these disputes over the neoliberal promises of worker “empowerment” readily disclosed the workers’ suspicion that Total Quality Management was merely a still more totalitarian encroachment into the conditions of their labor (cf. Barker 1993; Ray 1986; Willmott 1993, 2003), the conflict plainly did not instigate or presage any kind of extraordinary militancy or heroic resistance on the workers’ parts. Rather, the contested terrain of “quality” became an exceptionally articulate site for the *everyday* manifestation of the capital–labor relation as an ever-unequal, otherwise mundane, yet resplendently antagonistic and irreconcilable relation of struggle.

Moreover, it is crucial to reiterate finally that the reform of the labor process and the intended recomposition of labor subordination—which I have described for this particular factory at the point of its most ideologically articulate and explicit application, namely, workplace training—was nonetheless directed at a workforce which was quite plainly and rather thoroughly *racialized*. This was perhaps most pronounced for the Mexican migrants: if in most instances they were no longer undocumented, they had nonetheless commonly spent many years as such, and their distinctive *racial* status as “Mexicans” had been profoundly conjoined to their defining “illegal” condition *as workers*. The agonistic composition, decomposition, and recomposition of the workers at Imperial *as a workforce*, generically speaking, was inevitably entangled, therefore, with the contradictory intricacies of their particular and divergent locations within the wider sociopolitical processes of *racial formation*. Their very organization as a workforce was deeply regimented by racial inequalities and conflicts, ensuring that their re-organization as labor could likewise only continue to be a matter of plainly racial significance and consequence. Hence, the distinctly racialized implication of the Latino workers’ presumed need for English language within the larger mandate for remedial mathematics “training,” which was itself a prerequisite for Statistical Process Control and Total Quality Management, meant that the management’s efforts to reform labor by decomposing the workforce as a *class* formation merely intensified the prevailing preconditions of their *racial* formation, and thereby only exacerbated anew their antagonism *as workers* to the terms of their subordination.

The densely interconnected nexus of managerial theory and practice involved in the implementation of Total Quality Management—and notably, also the academic literature devoted to its analysis (whether critical or apologetic)—are consistently formulated in ostensibly *race-neutral* terms, and therefore extravagantly *de-racialized*. The requirement of capitalist production for “labor in the abstract” (Marx 1867/1976:128) in this fashion becomes naturalized as an epistemological and methodological presupposition: the particular heterogeneity and historical specificity of actual working people are obscured in favor of the grand abstraction—“labor.” Thus, this figuration of “workers” in general, or of “labor” as such—

conceptually removed from any of the concrete socio-historical circumstances that pertain to *particular* co-constituted formations of class and race (and gender, as well; cf. De Genova 2006)—exposes one of its decisive epistemological and political fault lines. Precisely in the excessive energy devoted to its primary aim—class decomposition—the strategy of labor management devised as a totalizing management of “total quality” inevitably faltered around these fault lines and collided with its own intransigent racial denial. And Total Quality Management was revealed to be merely one more remedial attempt at ostensibly “technical” fine-tuning within a larger historical legacy of capitalism as a thoroughly racialized social formation, and management as a distinctly *racial* enterprise.

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