

BOOK REVIEW**Janitors, Street Vendors,
and Activists: The Lives of
Mexican Immigrants in
Silicon Valley**by *Christian Zolniski*

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Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists offers a political economic analysis of the impacts of global restructuring at the local level. Through an ethnographic account of Mexican immigrants in Silicon Valley, Christian Zolniski demonstrates how the vast movements of capital, labor, and changing technology in the past several decades have radically transformed people's lives both in the workplace and at home. The author illustrates how Mexican immigrants have become integrated into global systems of production through flexible labor regimes including subcontracting, part-time labor, and informal arrangements outside the formal market. Although these arrangements have largely favored Silicon Valley's high-tech corporations, Zolniski shows that the exploitative conditions in which Mexicans work also provide contexts through which immigrants have organized both at work and in their communities to challenge these conditions.

The introduction and first chapter describe the transformation of northern California from a once agricultural area into the booming high-tech microelectronics industrial sites of Silicon Valley. As Zolniski argues, these "developments in the high-tech industry radically transformed the political economy of the region" (29). In particular, this transformation was accompanied by a growing demand for new flexible labor arrangements that favored subcontracting and low-skilled workers. Mexican immigrants responded to the demand for labor, as in previous stages of history, forming an indispensable labor force in Silicon's high tech industry. Yet despite their important contribution to the economic development of the region, Mexican laborers have remained largely employed in low-skilled, low-paid jobs.

Chapter two examines the experiences of immigrants working as custodians at Sonix, one of Silicon Valley's most successful high tech corporations. As Zolniski argues, poor working conditions, low wages, and discrimination in the work place prompted custodians to organize and demand a union. Their efforts to unionize were thwarted by Sonix's shift towards more flexible sub-contracted custodial arrangements. The undocumented status of many immigrant workers also impeded their efforts to organize successfully. Ultimately, under the new labor arrangements working conditions for laborers worsened.

Chapter three presents a glimpse of the informal economy that emerged in Santech, the residential neighborhood that housed many of Silicon's immigrant workers

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described in the book. Santech's informal economy expanded as a result of income and labor qualities as well as the demand for flexibility associated with recent developments in high tech industries. The expansion of Santech's informal economy is shown to be a direct outcome of income and labor inequalities as well as the demand for flexibility associated with recent developments in the high tech industries described earlier. Individuals make a living in the informal economy through a variety of activities including street vending (e.g., selling home-made food and popsicles) and providing services (e.g., providing dental care). The stories of three individuals make clear that for some the informal economy provides an alternative to low-wage work, while for others it provides a way to supplement more formalized labor arrangements. In all three cases, informal economic activities are integral to the reproduction of low-income households and families.

Chapter four examines various ways that economic, political, and social forces also influence household and family organization to incorporate more flexibility. Extra-family and extra-household arrangements provide a common way for migrants to pool resources for mutual support and minimize the negative attributes of flexible labor and living conditions under poverty. However, Zolniski does not romanticize these social arrangements. Rather, he demonstrates that they are fraught with conflict and inequality, often to the detriment of women in the household.

Chapter five highlights the roles that Mexican women have played outside the household, as community leaders and organizers. The author features several examples of women's activism aimed to improve the educational and physical well-being of their children and families living in Santech. Balancing their activism with domestic responsibilities and work, and drawing on multiple social networks, Santech's women worked together to combat discrimination and marginalization while fostering a sense of community and belonging. Despite the optimism provided by the women's successful campaigns, we are reminded of the structural limitations that continue to govern the lives of Santech's residents.

Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists makes a significant contribution to the current scholarship on globalization, immigration, labor, and urban studies. A particular strength of the book lies in its expansion of flexibility, beyond discussions of production. Indeed, Zolniski successfully shows how flexibility shapes the strategies of both employers and laborers. Moreover, he demonstrates that flexibility, for the Mexican immigrants he describes, influences their lives not only inside the workplace but also in the household and their communities. Zolniski also demonstrates that Mexican migrants are defying stereotypes that portray them as victims of poverty. Santech's residents are deeply engaged in civic and labor politics, which suggests that inner-city barrios provide spaces of hope and empowerment. Finally, Zolniski challenges us to think more critically about the relation between agency and structure. Indeed, even as the ethnography exposes the reader to human potential for effecting change, Zolniski illustrates that without changing structures of oppression, there are limits to human agency. Beyond these contributions, the book's clear prose and rich ethnography make this book accessible to all individuals interested in immigration studies. I highly recommend it for classroom use.