
Street Vendors, Television Extras, Walmart Stockers, and More: Worker Subjectivity and Labor Processes in Atypical Work

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Abstract

This essay reviews Enrique de la Garza Toledo's anthology on atypical work, titled *Trabajo no clásico, organización y acción colectiva* (Vols. 1 & 2) and situates it within the larger tradition of Latin American sociology of work. It argues that the anthology merges an emphasis on labor processes in a specific industry with an attention to the subjectivities and relationships that support worker agency and labor movements. Moreover, it posits that the rich case studies on atypical work in a wide spectrum of settings in Mexico City that are included in these two volumes provide grounded material for meso-level theorizing about the factors that shape atypical work and the ways that workers in those jobs respond to them.

Keywords

atypical work, Latin American sociology of work, Mexico, informal sector, worker subjectivity

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In Latin America today, traditional manufacturing represents no more than a fraction of employment in the region's economies (Brady, Kaya, & Gereffi, 2011). To some extent, this reality is a legacy of the debt crisis of the early 1980s, which pounded an emerging manufacturing sector and reduced prospects for growth that until then had looked promising (Amsden, 2001) and of the bleak "lost decade" of shrinking economies and rising unemployment that followed. The rich sociological exploration of the structural factors that shape employment in Latin America can arguably also be traced back to this historical moment of crisis and the economic changes it engendered (Abramo et al., 1997). At that moment, the examination of the world of work and the condition of workers in Latin America took on a renewed urgency and labor processes were considered with a keen eye to context, defined, at the time, by fragile and indeed imperiled democratic institutions, weak and co-opted labor unions, and the widespread prevalence of poverty and social exclusion. This research trajectory on the sociology of work in Latin America continued unabated for the next three decades (Abramo, 1998; Cavalcanti, 2002), and, as evidenced by Enrique de la Garza Toledo's most recent compilation of studies on nontraditional workforms, remains as vibrant as ever.

De la Garza Toledo's two-volume edited anthology, titled *Trabajo no clásico, organización y acción colectiva* [Atypical work, organization and collective action] (2011), merges two significant lines of inquiry that have characterized the sociology of work in Latin America. The first is what Abramo et al. have called "a sectoral research strategy," wherein research focuses on the factors that inform the conditions of work and production in specific industries. Through examinations of industries as varied but as specific as banking, textile production, petrochemicals, and telephone services, among others, researchers explored organizational changes in response to increasing globalization, the introduction of new technology, and shifts in the profile and subjectivity of the labor force. They have shown that the outcomes were extremely heterogeneous, generated by processes that were complex and informed by local and national contexts, by political junctures, and, most significantly, by the initiative of social actors, with workers chief among them (Abramo et al., 1997). The second area of exploration on which de la Garza Toledo's anthology builds is the concern with atypical work. In the introduction to his anthology, de la Garza Toledo's begins by invoking the definition that has guided exploration of atypical work: It is work that does not fit the standard—and by his account, standardized in most sociological literature—model of full-time, formal, salaried, and implicitly manufacturing employment (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, p. 12). Rather, it is work that is often but not always informal, highly contingent, irregular, located the margins of

the economy in firms that are frequently, but again, not always, small, and that use adaptive, usually basic technology (Portes & Shauffler, 1993). The sociological scholarship on work processes in Latin America has shone a penetrating light on this kind of work and has documented both the profile of workers in atypical jobs, focusing in particular on attributes such as education and gender (Telles, 1992), and the varied strategies they deploy to resist exploitation, to extract profit where they can (Villarreal, 2010), but mostly to secure stable livelihoods in economic sectors that are markedly unstable (Biles, 2009; Edward, 1996; Tardanico & Menjívar Larín, 1997).

De la Garza Toledo's anthology combines these two research concerns by featuring studies that apply a sectoral analysis to atypical work in Mexico City. The scholarship included in these two volumes begins its exploration of atypical work by examining the traits that define production in the sector in which that work occurs: The case studies of atypical work examine first the organization of the industry in which it occurs; the product that it generated and the technologies that are used; the cost structure of production (including wages) and its location in supply chains; the pace and variability of production; and of course, the working conditions that these factors create.

So, for example, Ruiz de los Santos's study in the anthology of "vagoneiros" (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 53-108, vol. 1)—the informal sellers that peddle everything from pirated CDs to foodstuffs on the Mexico City Metro system—includes a robust analysis of the relationship between cost of products that salesmen and saleswomen purchase for resale, the cadence through which they move through subway wagons, and the income they are able to generate. It also includes detailed examination of the organization structures, though informal, which protect the relationships between these three elements, in large part by enforcing a clear set of work practices and norms. Similarly, Olivo Pérez's study on informal peddlers in Mexico City Center (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 109-162, vol. 1) and Gayosso's account of informal merchants of artisanal products in Coyoacan (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 123-208, vol. 2) both show that the work of selling depends on an extended network of suppliers, negotiated and safeguarded access to the public space that sellers transform into a commercial setting, and the collective organization of sellers to regulate their trade; and yet, when compared, these studies show how small differences in these basic structures and in the ways that social actors respond to them produced markedly different conditions of work. In the City Center, the pace of work was intense, the wages poor, and sellers were continually subject to official harassment, whereas in Coyoacan, the vendors made a more comfortable living, and until recently, were somewhat sheltered from state pressure through the legitimacy they had established

by presenting themselves as experts on artisanal products. The studies on taxi drivers and microbus chauffeurs by Pogliaghi (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 209-250, vol. 2), León Salazar (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 163-208, vol. 1), and Martínez (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 251-304, vol. 2) share this same attention to industry structure, as do the analyses of work and worker agency in more formal settings such as Motarcé's study of agents at call centers (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 69-122, vol. 2), Rodrigo Gutiérrez and de la Garza Toledo's depiction of software engineers (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 209-226, vol. 1), Feregrino's account of extras on television programs (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 23-68, vol. 2), Hernández Castro's portrayal of floor stockers at Walmart (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 221-288, vol. 1) and Garabito Ballesteros description of workers at McDonald's (de la Garza Toledo, 2011, pp. 289-322, vol. 1).

Through their sector analysis, the studies offered in the anthology make a strong case that defining atypical work by its divergence from an ideal-type—defining it by what it is not—is wholly insufficient. It neither meaningfully advances the project of understanding the conditions of work nor provides insight into how workers experience their jobs and act to construct and change them. Atypical work is atypical in specific ways that are shaped by the structure of the industry in which they occur and the function those jobs fulfill within the organization of production. In this sense, atypical work has perhaps more in common with formal sector work than is generally recognized: The features of work—whether as a machinist on a production line of a manufacturing plant or as vendor in a spot of Mexico City's downtown square—grow out of the demands of systems of production and of the actors and organizations that engage with it, rather than its adherence or divergence from some idealized standard of work.

De la Garza Toledo elegantly bookends these two volumes of case studies with a theoretical frame that addresses the need for a more nuanced consideration of atypical work, both “traditional” as in the case of street vendors and “modern” as in the case of merchandise stockers Walmart. De la Garza Toledo places his emphasis squarely on the construction of worker subjectivity within the context of atypical work. This, he argues, is a process that depends not just on the tasks of work or the products generated but also on the articulation of the production process with wide-ranging social relationships of power, influence, and culture. Moreover, he maintains that as a result the boundary between work life and social life remains porous and contested, such that worker mobilization in atypical work settings depends primarily on their social identities. Indeed, de la Garza Toledo goes so far as to suggest that even the products that workers offer themselves grow out of their

subjectivities as member of a wider social world: The vendor of artisanal crafts, for example, was selling not just a trinket but also an aura of counter-culture anticonsumerism and cultural authenticity; the employee at Walmart responded not just to shoppers' need for goods but also to an emotional desire to have those products handed to them with the immediacy of modernity.

Between de la Garza Toledo's interpretation of the studies in the anthology and the evidence the analyses provide, there is noticeable slippage. The cases are highly descriptive and provide a wealth of detail—at times so much detail in fact, offered without analytic gloss, that the reader can get lost and lose sight of the broader argument each case presents. When the studies are theorized, they seem to be reaching for the theoretical frame that de la Garza Toledo lays out and almost forcibly tethering evidence to concerns with worker subjectivity and collective action rather than deriving insights from rich material each authors present. Nevertheless, the wide but meticulous, and often captivatingly vivid, descriptions in the study provide the grist for generating important and innovative meso-level theories about atypical work and the structures that shape it and distinguish it from standard “typical” employment. Here, I note just three.

First, the cases in the anthology speak to the remarkable complexity of the organizational forms that govern atypical work and the production systems in which they were embedded. In the studies featured, the organizational forms existed in both formal and informal work settings and were both formal and informal in nature. They governed myriad facets of atypical work, including access to employment, wage levels, training and opportunities for advancement, autonomy, and gender politics at the worksite. The labor of being an itinerant vendor in the Mexico City metro, for example, was regulated by multiple layers of informal organizations, headed by “leaders” themselves organized in a complex hierarchy. These groups each regulated specific subway lines and enforced industry norms, the cadence of work, and the type and source of merchandise sold. Dues-paying membership in one of these group and allegiance to its leader was a prerequisite for access to a given line, and initial entry into a group was purchased, negotiated, and inherited through family ties or traded for sexual favors. But even Walmart, which de la Garza Toledo terms the epitome of modern commerce and on its face, furthest of the cases from the proscribed vending on underground metro trains, has jobs portrayed by the company itself as highly standardized, with clearly delineated and regimented tasks, were governed by organizational structures, formal and informal in kind, that were almost byzantine in their complexity. Not only did floor restockers come into contact with numerous formal managerial layers as they moved through the hiring and training process and as they

carried out their job on a daily basis, but they also had to negotiate a shadow set of managerial structures. In particular, workers found themselves compelled to cultivate client–patron relationships with the security personnel who were charged with ensuring that workers did not engage in theft: Workers covered security personnel’s off-book consumption of merchandise and protected themselves from security staff’s punitive action by extending material and nonmaterial favors. These and other cases in the anthology support the claim that atypical work, precisely because it does not follow a well-established template of industrial employment, with its norms and expectations, is at once more sensitive and more dependent on organizational structures for the features that define it.

Moreover, the studies in this anthology suggest, although somewhat tangentially to be sure, that the organizational structures that govern atypical work are so complex and so charged with intricate power relationships that workers must actually develop the skill to navigate them. The training that new workers receive, across the wide range of industries features in this volume, is for the most part informal, interactive, and on the job. However, the training involves not just the ability needed to complete a job but also how to carry out the tasks that comprise it within the parameters established by the social structures in the industry. Indeed, the studies demonstrate that these industry-specific interpersonal skills may in fact be vital to workers’ ability to secure a livelihood that workers’ adeptness at complete the task associated with jobs. When viewed through de la Garza Toledo’s emphasis on the construction of worker subjectivity, the ability to navigate the organizations and social relationships that govern work may be a central expression of this identity-formation, but, as the cases show, it is certainly an ability that is learned deliberately and with significant effort.

The second insight that stems from the studies in de la Garza Toledo’s two volumes is the degree to which the organization of work, working conditions, and worker mobility were permeable and contingent on factors external to production strictly defined. Atypical work as not encased in the regimented managerial control associated with more standard workforms and is not shielded from extrinsic pressures by the administrative procedures that regulate the stable long-term labor markets of the internal labor markets at ideal-type manufacturing firms.

De la Garza Toledo introduces this point by arguing that clients or customers in many atypical work situations are in fact integral to the production process: Vendors, be they in Mexico City public squares or in McDonalds and Walmart, are selling more than a product; they are selling the interaction they create with the customer. In this, his analysis and studies in this

anthology join the growing stream of scholarship on emotional work (Lopez, 2010) and add important observers about how the communities of coping workers develop to deal with the pain of dealing with rude or irate customers (Korczyński, 2003; Sloan, 2012) and extend past the worksite into broader community and family spaces. They also demonstrate that the spaces in which workers perform emotionally in ways that escape managerial control may extend far beyond the workspace but may nevertheless have important and multifaceted implications for organizational goals: McDonald's employees in Mexico City, as Garbito Ballesteros recounts, videotaped one another engaging in transgressive acts, like videotaping themselves performing dances with mops in the franchise, and then posting them on YouTube. The clips have been quite popular and not only function as a rejection of heavy handed "organizational feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1993) but also end up advertising the restaurants as places where customers join in on the secret and share in this clandestine expression of resistance, albeit vicariously. Thus, workers, with the collaboration of their YouTube fans, produce a dining experience with unique political connotations.

However, the observations the anthology makes about the porous quality of atypical work goes beyond actors directly involved in the transactions of atypical work. Several cases in the collection note in particular the significance of public space on the conditions and organization of atypical work and on the ways that workers in these jobs construct their identities and their collective action. At their most literal, the studies refer to impact of the physical manifestations of public space on atypical work: the layout of the public squares where street vendors peddle their goods and the proximity of those spaces to merchandise suppliers; the traffic patterns and traffic congestion, as well as the configuration of public transportation systems, on city streets where microbus drivers and taxi chauffeurs make their living; and even the arrangement of on-location filming sets where actors play roles as extras for television soap operas. They also refer, however, to the people who move through those public spaces and their import for atypical work regardless of whether they are in fact participating in any of the transactions involved in the labor itself. The punks and truants that frequently intimidate and harass metro train vendors are one example; likewise are Bus Rapid Transit systems that squeeze minibuses out of their established routes and the shop-owners on the periphery of public squares that mobilize and threaten street vendors in turf battles over the market share. Most pertinently, the cases also highlight the role of the state in controlling the spaces in which atypical work occurs: This control is most poignantly felt in public areas that are directly under state jurisdiction and where government bureaucrats display often capricious

discretion in their decisions about whether to allow or penalize the extralegal uses of public space involved in many kinds of atypical work featured in this anthology.

The cases in de la Garza Toledo's anthology offer a nuanced presentation of the state and depict how the actions of government officials and street-level bureaucrats blur the distinction between formal and informal segments of the labor markets. Not only do they reject, through thick empirical evidence, the artificially sharp distinction between formal and informal work that much of the literature on work in Latin America still maintains but they also point to the implications that the interpenetration of formal and informal work has for labor organizing. This is the third of the many meso-level insights offered by de la Garza Toledo's edited volumes that I highlight in this essay.

The organizational structures that regulate atypical work tend to perform a dual function as *de facto* labor syndicates that advocate for the interests of workers in atypical jobs. This is especially true when those organizations, though well established, are sanctioned by informal norms and practices, rather than when they are designated as labor representatives or unions. Their informality is their strength: With no legal standing as labor representatives, they are not subject to legal control and are not bound by the legal parameters of the labor code in their negotiations with actors that affect the conditions of legal work. And it is this informality that gives them the flexibility to negotiate effectively with formal structures, most notably governments and their enforcement of regulation. They have the discretion to cut deals with government employees, for example, about the degree to which street-level bureaucrats (and the political parties that are their patrons) will circumscribe the activities of vendors, drivers, and others. The informality of these organizations simultaneously makes them more challenging to control: Their parameters and their constituencies are more difficult to discern, in part because they are often in flux and the issues that are subject to negotiation more difficult to limit. Unlike so-called "white unions" or company unions in place at formal worksites featured in this volume, like Walmart and call centers, these informal organizations are impossible to co-opt on a permanent basis and their allegiance to governments and political parties is contingent and instrumental. In this sense, they retain real ability to advocate for labor, pushing to protect and improve the conditions of atypical work. Interestingly, their lack of legal standing also forces them to be more accountable to their members and to show tangible gains: Their legitimacy grows directly out of worker support, which they receive by demonstrating their effectiveness in wresting concessions on workers' behalf. The organizations, for example, that regulated metro train vendors saw the dues that their members paid fall in the wake of

a government crackdown on vendors' selling activities. Workers responded immediately to these organizations' failure to protect them, and no amount of social pressure, bullying, and even physical intimidation that these organizations deployed could change this trend.

The cases in de la Garza Toledo's anthology, although somewhat overabundant in their empirical richness, offer meso-level insights about atypical work like those described above and many more. When taken as whole, however, they also issue a provocative challenge to the field of labor sociology. They suggest that the distinction between the study of labor processes—that is, the organizational structure of work and the conditions of labor that it creates—and labor movements—the study of worker mobilization either in unions or social movements—so aptly described by Burawoy (2008), may actually be obscuring the deep, intricate, and ongoing interrelationships between the two, especially when it comes to atypical work. Many of the same organizations that structure atypical work double as pivotal actors in movements to push for worker rights, and many of the same identities, spaces, and allegiances that support worker mobilizations also govern, in very direct ways, the conditions of atypical work. De la Garza Toledo and his collaborators show, once again, that Latin American sociology of work is pointing the way forward for the field as a whole.

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Bio

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