Putting transnational labour process in its place: the dormitory labour regime in post-socialist China

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ABSTRACT
Globalization of capital accumulation and transnational production highlight a shifting paradigm in labour process theory, which requires a theorization on the spatial politics of production. The shift from Taylorism and Fordism (mass production and welfare-state interventions) to flexible accumulation (flexible production, casual labour, deregulation and privatization) may be a periodization that has become increasingly problematic. What is emerging is the transnational political economy of production that links not only to a new scale of the economic, but a new economy of scale, in which mass production and the space of work-residence are extensively reconfigured for capital accumulation on a global scale. This article aims to explore a new spatial politics of transnational labour process in China at the time of its rapid incorporation into the world economy. We study a distinctive form of labour regime, the dormitory labour regime in China, and explore the articulation of production and daily reproduction of labour using two contrasting case studies.

KEY WORDS
China / dormitory labour regime / spatial politics / transnational labour process / transnational production

Introduction

Globalization of capital accumulation and transnational production highlight a changing paradigm in labour process practice, which requires a theorization on the spatial politics of production. The shift from Taylorism
and Fordism (mass production, mass consumption and welfare-state interventions) to flexible accumulation (flexible production, casual labour, withdrawal of state interventions, deregulation and privatization) may be a periodization that has become increasingly problematic. The flexible production paradigm appears to be no longer able to encompass many developing countries that have been tightly incorporated into global industrial capitalism in a transnational context. What is emerging is the transnational political economy of production that links not only to a new scale of the economic, but a new economy of scale, in which mass production and the space of work-residence are extensively reconfigured for capital accumulation on a global scale. Deterritorization of production in the ‘Third World’, explicitly in the making of China as a world factory, has greatly challenged, if not replaced flexible production politics, notably in a western context. In this article we explore a new spatial politics of transnational labour process in China at the time of its rapid incorporation into the world economy. We study a distinctive form of labour regime, the dormitory labour regime in China, and explore the articulation of production and daily reproduction of labour using two contrasting case studies.

Burawoy’s (1985) concept of ‘politics of production’ was critical to labour process theory in bringing back the political and ideological effects of production regimes, in which the role of the state played a central part in shaping the nature of production and labour politics in the workplace. What was missing from Burawoy’s consideration was the spatial aspect of production, something that Harvey (1982) has sought to provide through a critique of Marx’s theory on capital accumulation. Transnational reorganization of world production makes it harder to neglect this missing dimension – the space production of production. Capital flows, labour mobility, technology diffusion, international subcontracting chains, information networks, just-in-time production, are transnational processes that not only require intensive reconfiguration of time, but also rapid reorganization of space (Harvey, 2001). Time–space compression characteristic of the global age is not an annihilation of space (Hutton and Giddens, 2000). Rather it crystallizes an abrupt, conflictual and fluid process of rapid reconfiguration of spatial arrangements for capitalist expansion and global manufacturing, namely, in the international division of labour (Frobel et al., 1980; Henderson, 1989), transnational corporations and capitalist class (Sklair, 2001), technology transfer and the mobility of labour (Sassen, 1988), feminization of labour use and the growth of new factory-towns in Latin America, Asia, and especially in China (Deyo, 1989; Lee, 1998; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). What is often neglected in these studies is a more micro but deeper view on how this reconfiguration of spatial production influences production politics in a multi-scaling production site, where the macro field of global economy meets with the micro field of local political and labour market institutions and workplace relations (Frenkel, 2003). The main focus of this article is on the transnational reorganization of world production, articulating how global, national and local factors, give birth to new forms of labour regime and workplace relations.