

MODERN WORKSHOP INDUSTRY IN MEXICO: ON ITS WAY TO COLLECTIVE EFFICIENCY?

Fiona Wilson

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore the expansion of small scale manufacturing industry now underway in rural Mexico. As the focus is on 'modern' small firms: i.e. those with capitalist labour relations that are capable of some level of technological innovation and product adaptation in response to market forces, this suggests that the flexible specialisation approach may provide appropriate conceptual tools for analysis of the industrial development underway.

The discussion is set within a wider context of modernisation, in that this perspective (though not the 'theory') allows one to pay attention to broader temporal processes at work and to treat social, cultural and political relations in conjunction with the economic ones. It becomes more obvious to ask broader questions, such as how aspirations for progress become generalised and lead to industrial growth; and how local relations of solidarity and collectivity as well as of power and inequality already present in a particular society mould the way industrial production is organised and expands.

Though worked out initially to account for the current renaissance of small-scale industry in advanced industrial economies, the flexible specialisation approach may also provide a useful framework for an analysis and comparison of small-scale industry in developing countries. Important elements within this approach include the following. Progress occurs in localities where specialist small firms cluster. The profitability and resilience of such agglomerations rest on the possibilities open for them to collaborate, so that inter-firm linkages and inter-firm divisions of labour give benefits for all. By clustering and specialising, small firms are thought to achieve levels of overall efficiency and competitiveness surpassing those of the single large scale enterprise. Furthermore, the flexible specialisation approach implies the existence of particular forms of labour relations. In one interpretation, it is the workers who are made 'flexible'; as sweat-shop workers, they are not protected by labour contracts or labour legislation. But flexibility has another meaning within modern small scale industry and is seen to stem principally from the presence of skilled, versatile workers who are able to perform various parts of the labour process and who do not necessarily feel bound to confront their employers.

The adaptation of flexible specialisation would appear to hold out major developmental prospects for small scale industry in the Third World and currently there is considerable interest in reformulating the thesis in normative terms so as to provide guide-lines for development planning. But too hasty an adoption of the approach to guide policy and planning would be mistaken.

As shown by existing case studies as well as by the review presented by Schmitz (1990) discussing the relevance of the paradigm in development studies, more research work, and especially more comparative research work, is needed in order to test, adapt and refine the concepts drawn from flexible specialisation and ensure that they do in fact accord with industrialisation experiences and tendencies in different Third World regions. This article, by examining a case study from the garment sector in Mexico, hopes to contribute to this enquiry.

I am assuming from the outset that the knitwear industry found in small towns in Mexico can appropriately be discussed under the heading of flexible specialisation. The small manufacturing firms cluster in points in space; and not only do many badly paid 'flexible' workers labour in sweat-shops, cases are also found of modern flexibilisation (whereby skilled workers paid at the same fixed wage rates are moved around different machines and tasks in the workshop so as to break the monotony).

A full 'testing' of the relevance of flexible specialisation is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I shall use the Mexican material to discuss meanings and interpretations of one central concept — collective efficiency (see Schmitz in this Bulletin). I shall concentrate primarily on exploring the social basis for collectivity which, under particular circumstances, has been strong enough to help initiate industrial activity and later generate some degree of collective efficiency. The first section of the paper will sketch out the background to the upsurge of modern small scale industry within Mexico. There follows a discussion of the development of a workshop-based knitwear industry over the past 30 years in a small town in the state of Michoacan. Forms of collectivity pertaining in the town during three time periods are discussed. Tentative conclusions are then drawn as to the directions of change in answer to the question of whether collectivity and collective efficiency are

becoming more pronounced over time or whether stronger pressures are leading toward the greater separation and individualising of the firms.

2 THE RESURGENCE OF SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRY IN MEXICO

2.1 Economic background

Mexico has a long industrial history and the period from the 1950s up to the early 1980s was one of general economic growth, expanding markets and comparative prosperity. The demand for locally manufactured consumption goods steadily rose not only due to increasing cash incomes but because tastes and needs were also changing. For example, a mass market was being created in the cities for low cost apparel; the use of home made or traditional clothing, such as woollen sarapes and shawls, or leather-thong sandals, was increasingly taken as a mark of backwardness.

Industrial and commercial expansion in the cities exposed workers to a variety of new products, techniques and skills. In the factories workers gained experience in both handling and repairing machines, some of which could be adapted for use in small enterprises. Some of those employed were prepared to stay on indefinitely as wage workers, but others resisted permanent proletarianisation and hankered after the higher economic returns and greater social status associated with independent production. There had always been a mass of small workshops in the towns producing garments and other basic consumption goods for local markets. But the important point about the late 1950s and 1960s was that more technologically sophisticated imported capital goods were being made available to small businesses. Hire purchase and other sources of credit gave access to, for example, small industrial looms, 'over-lock' sewing machines and shoe making machinery from Italy, Spain and later Japan. New modern machines began replacing the wooden looms and simple Singer sewing machines that had been the mainstays of artisan garment production since the late 19th century.

Conditions were becoming more propitious for an upsurge of 'modern' small scale industry geared to meeting the growing demand both in the cities and in the regions of agricultural development and export production in the Mexican north. The sectors included garments and shoes, foodstuffs, leatherware, glassware, decorations and adornments and more recently, plastic goods and machine parts.

As a concomitant of large scale industrial growth and economic prosperity, the Mexican state instituted a body of progressive labour and tax legislation. And there was an active, though not autonomous, trade union movement. Labour relations were relatively

peaceful and little strike action interrupted the main period of Mexican industrialisation. But enforcement of tax and labour legislation as well as the trade union activity did not appear beneficial from the point of view of struggling small enterprises. Workshop owners saw themselves as unduly exposed to petty harassments and extortions by government and union officials. And they also saw how large enterprise owners were in a completely different league when it came to political influence and 'bending the rules' for their own gain.

2.2 The industrialisation of Western Central Mexico

Starting in the early 1960s, a growing number of industries were returning to the countryside, usually to the owners' home towns. The movement did not take place everywhere but was concentrated within a triangular region lying between the cities of Mexico in the east, Guadalajara in the west and Aguascalientes in the north and comprising the states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacan and Aguascalientes. In the past this had been an important region for rural manufacturing but only a very few centres had kept their industrial traditions alive in the 20th century. These old centres were often of strategic importance for the new phase of rural industrialisation.

There are now some 50 to 60 small towns which have specialised in a particular 'modern' industrial sector in the western central region. The movement continues and may well have speeded up in recent years, partly as a result of the devastating earthquake that hit Mexico City in 1985 and partly as a result of the general need to find cheaper locations and labour costs in the recession. The uncertainties over numbers and tendencies arise from the fact that the majority of industries are 'hidden'; they are neither registered nor easy for the inexperienced to see. This is a region burgeoning with clandestine or subterranean industry and it is also a region where women constitute the bulk of the industrial labour force; the two characteristics being connected as I have argued elsewhere (Wilson forthcoming).

The industries of Western Central Mexico exhibit considerable variation and complexity in terms of the organisation of production and their links with suppliers and markets. This reflects both the industrial sector and the time period when location in the countryside took place. The most characteristic organisational form is the small workshop which employs a few wage workers but there are also factories, domestic enterprises and out workers. Some sectors employ a purely female labour force, while in others, parts of the labour process are designated men's work. Formal sub-contracting is rare in some sectors, such as knitwear, as well as in the older firms, but it is far more common in the more recently established enterprises

producing cotton clothing and blue jeans where commercial contractors supply inputs, including possibly the garment pieces. Firms established in the countryside during the recent recession tend to be less autonomous and more constrained by hierarchic sub-contracting arrangements (Escobar 1988; Arias 1988).

2.3 Influence of the US market

Due to accident of location, the US has long been Mexico's most important trading partner. From the mid-1960s, Mexico has exported a growing volume of manufactured goods and these now represent 61 per cent of Mexico's total exports to the US (Harris 1991). From the perspective of Western Central Mexico, production in many centres is linked with the US market. Not only are Mexican made goods sold at or over the border, they also supply the high waged regions of the Mexican north that are dedicated to agricultural or industrial export production. Although official figures suggest that labour intensive industries make up a declining share of total exports, the size of the garment export trade is possibly under-recorded due to the considerable clandestine trading and the 'seepage' of goods over the border, taken for sale in a myriad of sacks and suitcases. In the absence of data, it is impossible to guess even the order of magnitude of the 'real' flow of garments to the US.

The influence of the US market, therefore, would appear to put Mexican small scale industries in a parallel structural position to those of the EEC 'fringe': in Southern Europe and North Africa. In terms of industrial perspectives, small scale industry in 'mestizo' Mexico, the Caribbean and Costa Rica may well face similar possibilities and have more in common with Greece, Portugal and Morocco, than with 'Indian' Mexico, or even with other parts of South America.

Though trade exists, it is not known to what extent the small firms north and south of the border are themselves linked. Within the garment sector there may be growing contacts between the Los Angeles basin and the western-central region, for example, in terms of labour and capital flows but at present, direct sub-contracting would appear to be the exception rather than the rule. This may well change in future and there is considerable uncertainty as to what consequences a North American free trade agreement would have for Mexico's small scale industries and for their international connections.

3 HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF A WORKSHOP-BASED INDUSTRY

In 1960 a sweater producing industry was introduced to Santiago, Michoacan, a small town with a present population of 9,000 people. The pioneering owners brought small industrial knitting looms and over-lock

sewing machines home from Mexico City. At the time, the town was poor and backward. There were neither paved roads nor telephone communications. The lack of electricity meant that only manually operated looms and sewing machines could be employed. Yet the industry was able to take root and enterprises multiplied.

Today there are around 50 workshops, each employing 3 to 40 wage workers (as well as over 200 domestic knitwear enterprises; though these are not the object of enquiry here). In workshop knitwear production, men operate the looms to produce cloth which is handed over to women workers for cutting, sewing, pressing and adornment. For every male loom worker, some 7 to 10 women are employed in the workshops. In addition, parts of the labour process, especially embroidering, have been put out to domestic out workers.

Technological change was particularly marked during the early 1980s. The introduction of new efficient looms led to the redundancy of male workers while in contrast, more skilled women sewers were required to operate the new specialised sewing machines. Some product diversification within the knitwear sector took place in an attempt to capture new markets. Despite the palpable modernisation, virtually all the workshops are still located in the owners' homes and remain hidden from view. Nevertheless, one soon becomes aware of their presence by the throngs of carefully dressed young women making their way to and from work; the shiny new pick-up trucks and station-wagons manoeuvring in the narrow streets; and the tangle of power lines and throb of machinery seen and heard in all parts of town.

The rise of the sweater industry will be explored under three headings: the origins of the social collectivity capable of initiating industrial development; the period of more egalitarian relations generating a multiplication of workshops; and the period of diversification and differentiation of workshop enterprise.

3.1 Mestizo identity, gender and migration: the social basis of collectivity

Santiago has always identified itself as a strongly 'mestizo' town and as being culturally distinct from its 'Indian' hinterland. Mestizo identity is rooted in shared values concerning family, God and work; and it has been closely interwoven with a highly conservative variant of Catholicism. Moral codes and precepts based on ideas of honour and shame have engendered highly suppressive gender ideologies (Melhuus 1990). These have served to perpetuate gender segregation; the stereotyping of gendered behaviour (machismo and marianismo); the dualistic identity given women as 'suffering mothers' or 'shameless prostitutes'; and in more practical terms, the subjection of young women to

rigid systems of protection and control.

In Mexico, Michoacan was renowned for being amongst the most conservative states, and mestizo women in Santiago like elsewhere were compelled to live protected, secluded lives within the confines of the domestic domain. Over the years, however, the Catholic Church's hold weakened as Mexico became increasingly preoccupied with secularisation and modernity. In poor backwaters like Santiago, the basis of mestizo identity took time to change, but even there it eventually came to be associated more closely with the nationalist, developmentalist rhetoric of the Mexican state. At one level at least, a consensus developed between state and locality as to the importance of western style economic development and the role of modern manufacturing industry in achieving economic growth. But intervening in this secular process of modernisation was the specific history of migration.

Decades of endemic male migration have contributed in a very significant way to the development of a social will for change and a 'propensity to industrialise'; this goes far beyond the earning of cash for investment. The small towns of the region had faced enormous economic dislocation and impoverishment in the course of the early 20th century. The social response was for men to migrate while women and children stayed at home. Migration flows to the US reached massive proportions during the years of formal labour contracting (the Bracero Programme) from the 1940s to 1960s and they remained high thereafter, through the movement of 'illegal' migrants. Whether as 'braceros' or 'illegals' men faced similar hardships, humiliations and racism (as 'wet-backs') largely irrespective of their specific social background.

The migration served to entrench gendered networks amongst both men and women that were no longer limited to family and kin and through which goods and services circulated. These collectivities later became the basis through which new economic activities were initiated and carried out. Enduring links were forged amongst migrants from the same home town who helped each other out 'on the road' and 'in the north'. Back home, the migrants' distinct life experiences tended to keep them together; characteristically they drank heavily, gambled and adopted particularly aggressive behaviour towards women. But the men's networks continued also to be a means of mobilising support across social class lines; they could facilitate access to loans and credit, labour, information and contacts.

In the migration years, households in Santiago survived largely through women's efforts in subsistence production, domestic manufacturing and the sale of

services. Remittances could not suffice: women had no accepted rights to the money earned by their menfolk in the US and even 'responsible' husbands found it hard to send money home regularly. In this situation women too were compelled to rely on networks so as to share goods and services and mobilise help at times of emergency. Mothers set their unmarried daughters to cash earning work in their own households or they handed them over to help co-madres. 'Helping out' could involve domestic work, but also forms of domestic manufacturing. Amongst women, too, a basis of collectivity was building up that for some time at least, cut across both family and class lines.

Despite long absences, the majority of migrants remained closely attached to home. This reflected both the nostalgia common in migrant society and the very real obstacles preventing economic or social advancement whether in Mexican or US cities. Yet the ideological message of modernising Mexico was that advancement was possible and open for all mestizos within the system. Some men working away from home but having retained access to social and financial resources began to take seriously the problem of how to bring progress to the squalid towns of their birth. Their determination could override difficulties caused by lack of infrastructure and distance from markets. The pioneering decision to establish a small scale industry was not 'explicable' in strictly economic terms; not even the need to get hold of cheap female labour. Local people were generally intensely proud of the modernising industry growing up, notwithstanding that it was labelled 'clandestine' or 'illegal' by others.

In societies riven by migration, it is important to remember the very positive meanings attached to 'family' enterprise. The early workshops carried powerful appeal in that they heralded a reunification of the family and a normalisation of life. In the ideal workshop, the husband manned the loom while the wife sewed; the enterprise belonged to both. Owning husbands not only mastered loom work, they needed to specialise in commerce, and understand how to repair their machines. Owning wives were deft sewers; they also managed the sewing room and arranged the outwork.

In Santiago workshops employed wage labour from the start but they did so under the guise of 'family relations' and by drawing on the gendered networks already in place. Men took employment with kinsmen or associates as apprentices to learn the trade of loom knitting. Young women were handed over by their mothers to a workshop of a co-madre, where they worked in a domestic domain under the stern eye and protection of the owning wife. Young women were destined to leave both their workshop and family of birth on marriage.

3.2 The multiplication of workshop enterprise

During the 1960s and 1970s, small firms multiplied. Making similar sweaters on similar machines, they belonged to the same category of small-scale business, none paid local taxes or minimum wages and all were clandestine. They were chiefly distinguished one from another in terms of the numbers of machines and machine operators employed.

The labour system was based on the close contacts already existing between owners and workers. Workers were men and women of trust, 'de confinaza', who could be relied upon not to steal machine parts, thread, needles or sweaters. The labour contract was temporary rather than life-long and involved the payment of small regular cash wages, help in emergencies, occasional gifts and access to skills and information. Women when they left a workshop on marriage often received a lump sum in cash — a kind of dowry. Men also received assistance on leaving; and it was this that led to the multiplication of workshops.

Loom work was arduous and under-paid; there was no way that workshop owners could reimburse male workers with wages on a par with migrants' earnings. Instead, it was generally accepted that owners would give assistance at some future date when the worker wished to separate to start his own business. A 'good' worker could expect a credit advance and/or machines which a 'good' owner would settle on him on easy terms. For example, the pioneering owner in Santiago estimated that he had taught well over 100 men the arts of loom work and machine repair.

The opening of workshops by former workers might have led to the establishment of a more formalised putting out system whereby 'workers' continued to hand sweaters over to patrons long after loans had been repaid as part of a more permanent sub-contracting arrangement. Yet in Santiago, although sub-contracting occasionally took place, such patron-client relations did not generally appear at this phase. The more egalitarian nature of the male networks tended to prevail and still provided some basis for collectivity. This facilitated the development of inter-firm relations and brought benefits of greater efficiency for all.

Amongst the most important exchanges between owners were the following: assistance at times of emergency especially when machines broke down or when insufficient time remained for a single workshop to complete an order; the pooling of information such as warning of a government official's impending visit or blacklisting a 'troublesome' worker; and reciprocities with respect to trying out new machinery. But mutual assistance was relatively limited and it only affected the sphere of production. There is no evidence to suggest that any commercial cooperation took place; once an

owner had paid off his debts he usually became an independent agent, free to sell his product where he could.

More important benefits for the sweater industry as a whole came about when workshop owners entered politics. For decades, local political power in Santiago had been in the hands of an elite group of livestock owners. They had directed public money to forward their own interests especially to finance water projects. With the industrialists in command, public money could more easily be directed to provide an electricity supply; pave roads in town; and invest in modern infrastructure which could have the effect of lessening the degree of domestic drudgery (such as the installation of a piped water supply and communal maize mills) and so allow more women to enter the labour force. Such improvements made way for a new era for the knitwear industry.

3.3 Workshop differentiation

Technological change gathered momentum in the late 1970s; so too did labour protest and the struggle for improved employment and working conditions. Labour relations were being transformed and the applicability of the household model to workshop organisation was wearing thin (see Wilson 1991). No longer did loom workers generally belong to the same social networks as the owners; the 'old' migration days were long gone and collectivities across social class were breaking down once more. Though workers still left after an apprenticeship to form their own workshops, employers used this primarily as an opportunity to off-load inefficient obsolescent machinery so as to acquire new. Workshop differentials became more pronounced. They came to differ markedly in terms of rate of technological innovation, productivity, quality of product and markets supplied.

In the knitwear enterprises (as in so many other fields) a three-fold division came into existence. Large enterprises produced high quality sweaters on modern (maybe computer controlled) looms, with five or six types of specialist sewing machine and they supplied more secure markets in the US and Mexico. Small workshops making do with old and second-hand machines produced low quality knitwear for sale in local 'tianguis' (open markets). And an intermediary group struggled to enter higher priced markets and cut corners and took risks to do so.

New workshops appeared in all categories, according to the resources at the disposal of the owners. Workers separating to form their own businesses were rarely able to scrape together additional financing; they entered and remained at the bottom. In contrast, the clearly profitable industry attracted new entrants, often from the professions and/or those who belonged to the

wealthiest local families (including the children of the old livestock-owning elite). They had the chance of investing in the up-to-date machinery from the start. There was not much possibility for growth or mobility over time, especially when markets diminished and credit facilities dried up during the recession.

Different labour relation regimes emerged. Worker action forced large enterprises to offer minimum wages and social security. In some, payment of equal wages according to hours worked (rather than piece rates) in the sewing room has been connected with the modern flexibilisation of labour where workers rotate between different machines and jobs. In the smallest workshops, wages are still very low but the relaxed working atmosphere is seen as a compensation. It is in the vulnerable intermediary group where labour relations are most explosive; there, management tends to be more highly authoritarian as owners demand both quantity and quality from a labour force not paid minimum wages.

Processes of differentiation appear to have undermined, rather than strengthened, collective efficiency. One can argue that the more egalitarian ethos characteristic of the earlier phase is being suppressed and more permanent patterns of social inequality have come to the fore. There are no longer the same bases for collectivity or potentials for collective efficiency. Quality differentials now divide modern high tech producers from poor workshops and the former are little interested in acquiring shoddy goods produced by the latter. Owners of small workshops lament the 'egocentrism' of the large workshops in not 'helping' them out. Informal sub-contracting arrangements are found only amongst workshops belonging to the same class; but even here they are fragile. For most of the time business relations are marked by competition and secrecy.

There are two main areas in which contact amongst owners currently takes place: acquisition of thread and labour relations. In neither case can inter-firm relations be said to generate very great collective benefits for the workshop group as a whole.

Thread, the largest variable cost, is available from a variety of sources. There have been various attempts by owners to collaborate in purchasing it in bulk from distant factories in order to cut costs. But much suspicion has surrounded the deals; those buying on behalf of others have been accused of deceit and the practice has stopped. This has occurred both amongst groups of large workshop owners and also within a cooperative of small enterprise owners expressly set up to improve access to inputs.

Chances of cooperation diminished further in the late

1980s due to the rapidly rising price of thread. A few owners were tempted to turn to thread buying and selling in order to increase speculative profits: buying cheap at the factory, storing it, and selling when prices rose. Not only was there little collective benefit to be gained from this form of commerce, it re-enforced more hierarchical relations as thread was sold at different prices to privilege some and penalise others. Thread storage, in fact, turned out to be a highly risky business. Floods destroyed the stores and bankrupted one major owner-trader. As no help was forthcoming from his fellow owners, he was forced to stop sweater production.

Workshops are now divided with respect to worker training. The differentiation means that it falls to low-wage workshops to train young recruits in machine work. Only after several years of practice do loom operators or machinists reach maximum productivity. At the start of their training, not only are workers slow, they waste much thread and require overseeing and disciplining. These are costs that large firms are now able to avoid. Instead, they are able to select workers with several years' experience who are looking for higher rates of pay.

Division with respect to training again ensures a more permanent separation between workshop groups. The training workshops suffer a constant drain of experienced workers yet only with great difficulty can they offer wages set at the minimum level; they remain 'clandestine'. In contrast, the more productive workshops better able to fulfil the law have become less 'clandestine' over the years. This means that fewer grounds for inter-workshop collaboration exist; no longer do owners share a similar structural position with respect to the law. The permanent division between the more and the less 'clandestine' workshops has had many repercussions. Proposals to institute a common training centre in the town met with little support from the large workshop owners; it was seen as an unnecessary cost by those who could best afford to pay.

In terms of attitudes toward labour, workshops openly compete with each other for access to experienced workers. Workshops paying minimum wages are less likely to support 'pirate' workshops facing labour conflicts. Blacklisting is less of a threat to individual workers — so long as they have skills to offer.

It appears furthermore that the forces leading to a clustering of workshop activity are weakening and geographical proximity is no longer seen as giving a clear advantage. In recent years, some larger workshops have relocated in the regional centre of Zamora though they continue to employ workers from Santiago. And the children of workshop owners who

enter the industry and are helped by them have tended to locate their workshops elsewhere.

3.4 Conclusion

In sum, one can suggest that historically connections were made between the local society's collective struggle to survive in the face of intensely disrupting and painful conditions of life and the emergence of a will to industrialise. This meant that both the early owners and workers were prepared to labour long and hard for very small returns and do so without crude or personalised forms of compulsion that enslaved workers. The ambiguous inclusion/exclusion that migrants had encountered in city society found a reflection in the way small scale industries both conformed to but also deviated from the ideology and policy expressed by the Mexican state.

Officialdom defined the workshops as illegal, but in local eyes, they were greeted as bearers of modernisation and progress.

The patterning of workshop enterprise on the household carried important resonances for an

impoverished migration society which strongly desired a return to 'normality'. Furthermore, adaptation of the household model turned out to be an extraordinarily effective way of circumventing the constraints imposed by restrictive gender ideologies in a conservative mestizo/machista society. By associating the sewing room with the domestic domain placed under the protection of an older woman, young women were permitted to become wage workers, and indeed might become the principal providers for their families.

While the gendered networks that spanned social strata and kin group were of profound importance in leading to some measure of collectivity in the early years, this was not sustained over time. Instead, the trajectory of small scale industry has led to a growing differentiation of workshops, and a breakdown of collective interests and of their possibilities of working together for mutual benefit. While some workshops graduated to become modern small firms, the majority have remained sweatshops. Conditions facing small scale industry under recession have tended to heighten feelings of competitiveness to such an extent that firms are increasingly individualised and can no longer see the same benefits deriving from clustering as before.

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