Prentice, Rebecca

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ABSTRACT: An ethnographic study of a garment factory in Trinidad describes the informal and sometimes illicit practices among workers that in some ways exploit the factory for individual purposes but in other ways provide the "productive sociality" that make factory work specifically, and neoliberal capitalism generally, possible—in this case, in the context of local class and race relations and global labor relations.

I first encountered Rebecca Prentice's work on 'thiefing a chance' in a 2009 volume edited by Katherine Browne and Lynne Milgram titled Economics and Morality: Anthropological Approaches (reviewed elsewhere in ARD), and I am very glad she has expanded that essay to a book-length study of the factory experience in Trinidad. Thiefing a chance
—the local phrase for seizing an opportunity in the garment factory to obtain some material or copy a pattern or work on your own project on company time—is only part of her description and analysis of the situation in contemporary global manufacturing and neoliberal work.

"This is a book," she writes in her introduction, "about life in a garment factory in Trinidad, West Indies. Its ethnographic moment is more than ten years after an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed program of liberalization began opening national trade barriers in the face of intense global competition, transformed worker entitlements and expectations, and also presented new economic opportunities for engaging the global market" (p. 2). As much research has shown, these neoliberal policies have had profound displacing effects on workers not only in the developing world but also in the United States and especially in light industry like textiles, which can easily outsource and requires relatively low skill levels. Some parts of the world that provided cheap labor were particularly hard hit, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, with women bearing much of the brunt of change. (See for instance the film Poto Mitan, reviewed elsewhere in ARD, about Haitian women and globalization.) Anthropologists have also examined the Western and Eastern poles of labor reorganization and the precarity of neoliberal work, from Sharryn Karmir and August Carbonella's Blood and Fire: Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor to Pun Ngai's classic Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace, both reviewed elsewhere in ARD. However, much of this literature has portrayed workers as victims of neoliberal forces, but Prentice highlights "workers' attempts to exploit the interstices of new labor configurations through illicit and informal uses of the factory—practices they collectively dub 'thiefing a chance'" (p. 2).

At the heart of Trinidadian factory experience—and no doubt other if not all neoliberal work experience—is what Prentice calls "the paradox of flexibility" (p. 4) which is many ways traps and disempowers individuals but in other and sometimes unexpected ways frees and empowers them. Part of the problem has been focusing on the factory as a structure rather than as a field of action, and accordingly her book "contributes to scholarship that troubles conventional readings of 'the factory' as a stable institution by emphasizing the intense and covert linkages between..."
formal and informal registers of production," including spaces for "flexible, self-motivating labor" and self-construction (p. 5).

The first chapter describes the relatively unique setting of the Signature Fashions plant in Trinidad, run by a local fashion designer named Helene Foster. Prentice reports the literal physical layout of the work space with its segmented and hierarchical areas of activity. Already she notes "a fundamental contradiction within its factory: the apparent incompatibility of a rigid manufacturing process and 'flexible' product" (p. 35). While workers can move from one area and activity to another as production needs dictate, individuals also tend to be assigned to one area based on their skills, with an apparent ethnic component to the work. Workers, virtually all of them women, also find the factory relatively 'disorganized' with a rapidly-changing and unpredictable 'now for now' quality.

The third chapter expands on the racial dynamics of the factory, linking race and place. "I began to see," she notes, "how the terms front and back structured production in the Signature Fashions factory into an implicitly racialized geography. Workers 'to the back' were almost entirely Afro-Trinidadian, mostly from densely populated urban neighborhoods in East Port of Spain. Front workers might be either Indo-Trinidadian or Afro-Trinidadian, although the workers who sat at the 'front front' of the shop floor on the newest and most high-tech sewing machines were Indo-Trinidadian women from traditionally 'Indian' towns like Chaguanas, San Juan, or Aranguez" (p. 52). This is depressingly similar to the racial divide chronicled by Tijo Salverda in The Franco-Mauritian Elite: Power and Anxiety in the Face of Change (reviewed elsewhere in ARD), which recounts another outcome of previous historical processes of globalization and labor migration. Prentice goes on to discuss the neighborhoods of these various workers and the disciplinary practices of the shop. But one of the most important points she makes is how laborers transform the factory into a site of opportunity—and themselves into "entrepreneurial selves" (p. 70)—which leads naturally to her main presentation on 'thieving a chance.'

'Thieving a chance' is the main topic of the fourth chapter, and this behavior is critical to how the women see or construct the workplace as 'is we own factory.'
Prentice sees the ambiguity in that phrase—both individualizing the factory (making it 'their own') and claiming or establishing ownership over the factory. Thieving a chance is using factory resources and time—but not stealing in the eyes of the workers—for private purposes: "workers operated a covert assembly line, furtively producing duplicates of Signature Fashions garments for themselves" (p. 88). But it is also one manifestation of a Trinidadian (and probably not only Trinidadian) cultural value of taking risks, demonstrating initiative and cleverness, and building reciprocal relationships at work. It is, in a word, part of the sociality of the factory—informal, even illicit, but necessary for the smooth operation of the formal and licit production process. The workers further 'thief' not only fabric and patterns but also knowledge and skills, enhancing their neoliberal selves. This is why Prentice argues convincingly that such activity does not fall simply into scholarly categories like 'resistance' or 'accommodation.'

The issue of skill and the 'struggle for skill' informs the fifth chapter. As throughout the global neoliberal economy, "workers must adapt to new conditions on the ground by continually seeking out opportunities to retrain. For Trinidadian garment workers, self-skilling articulates almost seamlessly with the widespread practice of pursuing multiple livelihoods, bridging a formal economy defined as wage employment and an informal economy composed of off the books, own-account work" (p. 114). This continual training of the self entails learning to use more of the factory's machinery as well as learning about style, as the women 'thief a chance' to produce a garment for wear or for sale and transfer their skills to their own home-based sewing businesses.

Inevitably, the individual body is a site of work experience and discipline, including exhaustion, injury, and illness. Prentice explores this subject in the sixth chapter. The seventh chapter turns to another concept that is related to 'thieving a chance' but also inherent in Trinidadian and many developing societies, namely crime and the fear of crime. A specific manifestation of criminal insecurity on the island is kidnapping, which also has its distinct racial/communal dimension—comparatively wealth Indo-Trinidadians taking for ransom by comparatively poor Afro-Trinidadians. She investigates the workers' senses of crime and danger in their country—some actually dismissing or even applauding kidnapping
and crime against the upper class—as well as the too-common sense among owners and managers that workers are a vaguely criminal element in their own right. She conveys that "managers imagine workers as the vectors through which violent crime will infiltrate the shop floor" (p. 179), part of the ironic paranoia that it is workers who exploit managers, rather than the other way around.

In the conclusion to her quite intelligent and enjoyable book, Prentice contends that workers like those she studied in Trinidad "do not simply contribute to the flexibility of the firm through their vulnerability to exploitation," which is the typical analysis of neoliberal precarity, but "they also contribute to it through their own agency" (p. 197). That is, as is easy to comprehend, 'thieving a chance,' learning new skills, operating a home sewing business on the side do not resist or thwart capitalism and neoliberalism. Instead, their relationships in the shop are the very "productive sociality" that make capitalism and neoliberalism possible, productive not only because they get factory work done but "because they engender self-reliant, strategizing subjectivities" (p. 199). She rightly concludes that "a rhetoric of 'empowerment' can serve capitalist ends that ultimately disadvantage workers" which calls upon anthropologists to apply "an ethnographic view that also appreciates the politics of labor" (p. 201). Anthropologists have begun to answer that call, and *Thieving a Chance* is a worthwhile contribution to the effort.