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Microenterprise Development, Industrial Labour, and the Seductions of Precarity

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Abstract

Microenterprise development is underpinned by an ideology that the solution to poverty is the integration of the poor into market relations. This article addresses the paradox that its “beneficiaries” may be dispossessed industrial workers who already have a long history of participation in the capitalist economy. Exploring the transformation of garment workers in Trinidad from factory employees to home-based “micro-entrepreneurs,” I argue that working conditions and labour rights have deteriorated under the protective cover of seemingly laudable policies to promote economic empowerment via self-employment. Showing how microenterprise initiatives contribute to women workers’ “adverse incorporation” (Phillips 2011) into global production networks, this article calls for renewed attention to the labour politics of microenterprise development.

Introduction

In a 2009 article on activism and the global development imaginary, Dina Siddiqi identifies two forms of empowerment available to the “third world” woman: that of the garment factory worker or the microloan recipient. Garment workers embody liberal notions of female emancipation as wage employees assuming a role in the public sphere. The empowerment of the microloan recipient is encapsulated instead in the *neoliberal* disposition of the self-regulating citizen-subject: entrepreneurial, adaptive, and self-reliant (cf. Ong 2006, Lazar 2004, Rankin 2001, Schwittay 2011). In the Caribbean island of Trinidad, these two iconic figures have become fused together, as garment factories struggling to compete in a global market have begun outsourcing production to local home-based workers. Stitching at home for the factories that once employed them, Trinidadian garment workers have in many instances not only swapped stable employment for self-employment, but also find themselves newly addressed by NGO- and state-funded development initiatives as “micro-entrepreneurs” with their own home businesses to nurture and develop.

Microenterprise development in all its many forms—ranging from microcredit provisions and village banking, to business skills training and technical assistance—regards poverty as the systematic though unintentional exclusion of the poor from the capitalist economy (Roy 2010). Small businesses, enhanced by microfinancing and entrepreneurial trainings, are seen as a means of financial self-sufficiency, particularly for women traditionally excluded from independent market participation (Ackerly 1995, Kabeer 2001:64). Hence, the solution to poverty is conceptualized as the integration of the poor into market relations. This article addresses the paradox that in Trinidad as elsewhere, the “beneficiaries” of such initiatives may be retrenched industrial workers who already have long histories of participation in the capitalist economy. Exploring the role of microenterprise development in the transformation of factory employees into home-based workers, I ask whether microenterprise has legitimized labour precariousness and perpetuated adverse conditions of employment.

Scholarship on microenterprise development tends to focus on the extent to which microenterprise initiatives successfully lead to financial self-sufficiency and the “social empowerment” of the poor (Esnard-Flavius and Aziz 2011, Ffrench 2008, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996, Holvoet 2005, Kabeer 2001, Mayoux 1999, Rai and Ravi 2011, Rogaly 1996). In recent years critical analyses have moved beyond an assessment of whether microenterprise actually reduces poverty, to consider the ways in which it rehearses, accommodates, and proliferates neoliberal ideologies and power structures (Bateman 2010, Jurik 2005, Karides 2010, Rankin 2001, Weber 2004). As Anke Schwittay (2011) writes, closely-monitored participants in microfinance programmes become “fiscal subjects” who internalize and perform new norms of acquisition and spending. Microenterprise’s “success,” then, can be as much about inculcating citizen-subjects into particular forms of economic rationality

(although always in partial and contradictory ways, see Lazar 2004) as increasing the income of the poor.

My purpose with this article is to contribute to these debates on microenterprise and the neoliberalization of development by examining the neglected relationship between microenterprise and post-Fordist flexible production. Ever since recession and trade liberalization led to the demise of Caribbean garment production in the 1990s, Trinidadian garment workers have seen job opportunities shrink and increasingly enter a casualized, informal sector. This article draws upon my more than 10 years of anthropological engagement with Trinidad's garment industry to explore how state strategies to manage unemployment have interlocked with capital's need for flexible production, which together produce an increasing precariousness of labour. The responsibility for generating income—and the management of risk—becomes devolved onto workers no longer employed in factories but instead now based at home.

Recognizing that the politics of labour are inseparable from the politics of gender, I draw on feminist literature that analyzes the domestic sphere as a site of gender subordination. Women's claim to public status as workers has always been mediated by their highly gendered ties to the home as a domain of both productive and reproductive labour. These ties have been used as a pretext for the low wages and poor working conditions of many home-based workers (Carr et al. 2000, Elson 1999, Federicci 2012, Mezzadri 2015, Prügl 1996). Similarly, as Megan Moodie (2013) explains, microentrepreneurship initiatives that seek to support women's home-based enterprises while ignoring embedded assumptions about women's responsibility for social reproduction can unwittingly reinforce their gender subordination. I argue that the transformation of an industrial labour force from employees to home-based micro-entrepreneurs succeeds in part by concealing

women's uncompensated domestic labour, capitalizing upon their historical failure to attain the purportedly universal and ungendered public status of "workers."

I begin the article by mapping the history of economic crisis that has led to Trinidad's embrace of microenterprise development as a solution to unemployment and poverty. I then turn to the local garment industry, showing how trade liberalization and global competition have undermined labour standards and dispersed industrial production to small-scale workshops and, more recently, to the homes of garment workers. Telling the stories of two women engaged in microenterprise, I show how a seductive logic of entrepreneurialism elevates the status of self-employment and microenterprise above wage employment, which sometimes creates a mismatch between expectations and realities for women workers. Concluding with a discussion of how a deterioration of working conditions and labour rights has advanced under the protective "cover" of seemingly laudable policies to promote economic empowerment via self-employment, I call for greater attention to the labour politics of microenterprise.

An Enterprising State

In a 1997 policy document, "Creating a Nation of Entrepreneurs," the Government of Trinidad and Tobago laid out an agenda for turning a population of civil servants and agricultural and factory workers into a different kind of economic subject. Trinidad's 1970s oil boom had rapidly expanded the post-colonial state with investment in social programmes, education, employment, and national industries. Although Trinidad loaned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) until 1984, the country was thrust into a balance-of-payments deficit when the price of oil on the world market began dropping in 1982 and then fell steeply in 1986 (Karides 2002:160, Vertovec 1990:104). At the end of the decade and in the midst of

recession, the country signed three structural adjustment agreements with the IMF and World Bank, whose conditions included the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the dismantling of many trade barriers, and a reduction of the civil service (Bissessar and Hosein 2001, Moonilal 2001:6, Sargeant and Forde 1992:186).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the country had experimented with Saint Lucian development economist W. Arthur Lewis' programme of "industrialization by invitation" to attract foreign investors to establish operations in Trinidad (Yelvington 1995:60-63). According to Lewis, Caribbean nations possessed vast "surplus labour"—populations too numerous to be absorbed into agricultural activities—that would ideally find employment in a strong and growing manufacturing sector (Lewis 1954:141). But within the political climate of the 1970s and a rise of anti-colonial and Afro-centric political movements that rejected dependency on foreign capital of the kind that "industrialization by invitation" entailed, the government's strategy would shift toward direct investment in industry, with the oil boom providing capital for a "wave of nationalization programs" (Bissessar and Hosein 2001:7). During the peak of the oil boom, the state owned 62 enterprises including airlines, hotels, food processing plants, telecommunications, and energy, which one by one would be re-privatized under structural adjustment a decade later (Moya et al. 2010:17, Sargeant and Forde 1992). Structural adjustment in Trinidad meant relinquishing strong state intervention in the economy.

Through a period of economic recovery beginning in 1993, and a second oil boom in the 2000s, Trinidad has remained primarily an energy-producing economy, despite the state's declared commitment to economic diversification. With the Caribbean's highest GDP, Trinidad and Tobago was reclassified by the World Bank in 2008 as a "high income country" (Esnard-Flavius and Aziz 2011:96). The oil and natural gas industries now account for 80 percent of exports and 45 percent of GDP,

but provide only 5 percent of employment (Moya et al. 2010:8, cf. Katwaroo-Ragbir 2013:190). Because oil and natural gas exploitation generates revenue but few jobs—even in the so-called “downstream” industries of natural resource processing—under- and unemployment have remained chronically high over time, as have income inequalities and severe poverty (Bissessar and Hosein 2001:15).

With economic dependence on a low-employment natural resource extraction, it should hardly be surprising that the government would craft a policy called “Creating a Nation of Entrepreneurs.” By training its citizens in business skills, and providing technical assistance, administrative support, and microfinancing, the state would stoke the creative capacities of its populace, harness them for economic growth, and thereby absorb the “surplus labour” that had so concerned Lewis (1954). This move coincides with an emerging neoliberal insistence that the state’s role is to support and facilitate the economy by making its population and resources “available” to global capital while also stimulating entrepreneurialism within the population (Bateman 2010, Elyachar 2002, Roy 2010).

Microenterprise development in Trinidad is largely state-driven and in purposeful attempt to manage under- and unemployment, leading sociologist Marina Karides (2010) to describe it as a form of social assistance fusing together informal self-employment and government transfers. The dual nature of microenterprise’s purpose is reflected in the 2006 renaming of the Ministry of Labour as the Ministry of Labour and Small and Microenterprise Development (Katwaroo-Ragbir 2013:190, Moya et al. 2010:27). To understand why the logics of microenterprise are so seductive in Trinidad, its arrival must be situated not only on the heels of a debt crisis and structural adjustment, but also entangled with a narrative of government mismanagement of the country’s immense oil wealth. Discussions about the merits of microenterprise in Trinidad have always been couched within a widely-voiced

condemnation of the excesses of the 1970s oil boom. In this telling, free enterprise and the entrepreneurial spirit were smothered by governmental largess, which in turn created a “dependency syndrome” from which the populace could finally be freed (Katwaroo-Ragbir 2013:190-91, Karides 2010:207).

In a garment sector decimated by the reduction of trade barriers in the 1990s, it was not long before the scourge of rising unemployment would be answered by the state’s new agenda to promote microenterprise and self-employment. Fundamental to this policy shift has been a revalorization of the survival strategies that already existed within poor communities, such as creatively “making do” with scarce resources and opportunistically undertaking several income-generating activities at once (Heron 2011). As Carla Freeman (2007, 2014) has argued for Barbados, long-standing practices of occupational multiplicity and flexibility in livelihood strategies have been recast as an expression of an intrinsic entrepreneurial impulse that makes Caribbean people particularly well equipped for the competitive and hyper-individualistic requirements of a neoliberal economy. To understand how new forms of dispossession and the precarization of labour could be produced in this crucible, the next section will first explain the garment industry’s shift toward flexibilized, casualized, and informal employment, including the re-emergence of the putting-out system.

Disarticulating the Trinidadian Garment Sector

Fieldnotes, Trinidad, 2004:

I am standing on the ghostly shop floor of Kay’s Garment Factory. The lights are off, and the only forms visible are rows and rows of inert sewing machines shrouded in dusty plastic. I am being taken around the factory by the owner-manager, a septuagenarian named Mr. Khan, who tells me about his father founding the company in the 1940s, how it blossomed under the market protections of an import substitution policy over the subsequent decades, which was followed by the company’s swift demise when

trade barriers to ready-made garments were lifted in the 1990s, allowing cheap foreign goods to flood the local market.

In a far corner of the factory, lights are blazing, and as we approach I see a dozen women seated at sewing machines, stitching white cotton men's shirts. I ask Mr. Khan who the women are, and he explains that although his factory once supplied shirts and trousers to retailers throughout the Caribbean and the United States, today he had so few orders to fill that he could only afford to keep a few employees on the books and a dozen sewing machines running.

There is a familiar story about how the neoliberal restructuring of the garment industry over the past 25 years has transformed the geographic distribution of production and trade. Global trade liberalization—in the form of reduced import restrictions, tariffs, and duties, as well as the 2004 phase out of the international quota system known as the Multi-Fibre Arrangement—increasingly puts developing countries in direct and ruthless competition with one another. With higher local wages and fewer economies of scale, Caribbean manufacturers have struggled to compete with large Asian producers newly freed from export restrictions (Kowalski and Molnar 2009, Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson 2012).

Jennifer Bair and Marion Werner (2011:989) have argued that the globalization of garment and textile production is characterised by *disarticulation*: the periodic severing of some locations from global circuits of trade through disinvestment and capital flight. Pointing out that scholarship on these industries exhibits a bias towards sites where business is booming, they advocate instead that we train our ethnographic focus on single places to unearth their histories of inclusion *and* exclusion from the international circulation of capital. Such an approach provides insight into how and why places become integrated into or expelled from global production networks, allowing us to understand how these articulations and disarticulations impact upon the lives and livelihoods of people working within them.

I have conducted anthropological research in Trinidad since 2002, tracking the dissolution of the garment industry from large factories, to smaller workshops, and to workers' homes. The data for this article is drawn from 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in garment factories from 2003 to 2004, and a fieldwork trip in July 2014 that focused specifically on microenterprise and the growing practice of homeworking in the garment sector.¹ In my many visits to factories over the years, the rows of darkened, idle machines at Kay's factory seemed to comport with a common story about how neoliberal restructuring had sent all the jobs to Asia. As one local trade unionist described it to me in 2004:

“Globalization, this is one of the phenomenon of globalization...You cannot compete again. How you could compete with people who are paying wages of one dollar US a day.”

But both the inevitability and indeed the veracity of this narrative is belied by the everyday gossip and commentaries of factory owners themselves, which reveals a generational cleavage within the capitalist class regarding what the “phenomenon of globalization” actually heralds. For a younger cohort of factory owners now in their forties and early fifties, Mr. Khan and the other industry titans who presided over the garment trade during its boom years are actually figures of fun.

For this younger cohort who have owned and managed garment-producing firms since the 1980s, the industry's “old heads”—aging businessmen in their seventies or eighties—are relics of a former era. Their massive but empty factories stand as testament to inadaptable business practices. A characterization of the old heads as stuck-in-their-ways personifies a post-Fordist critique of the rigidities mass production (cf. Holmström 1998). As one of the younger factory owners said to me of Mr. Khan, “He's like an old bull you can't pull.” What irritated the younger cohort

¹ Fieldwork has included participant observation in factories and homes, as well as extended and repeated interviews with microenterprise professionals, state representatives, trade unionists, factory owners, and current and former garment workers.

was not just the old heads' inadaptability, but also their troubling contentment with running the kind of low-value, low-wage enterprises that relegate Trinidad to the economic and cultural periphery. Younger owners and managers contrasted this complacency with their own ambition to transcend territorial marginalisation.

The generational cleavage between the younger and older capitalists has been shaped in part by the younger men's historical experience as part of Trinidad's "boom-time generation." Born in the 1960s, they came of age at a time when the energy sector accelerated the country's development and raised expectations that the nation would become an active participant in global flows of technology, culture, and consumption (Miller 1994). Even though the oil boom was followed by a recession, Trinidadians with access to capital were able to create new businesses that reflected the boom-time sensibility. As the children of Mr. Khan and businessmen of his generation mostly left the garment trade to enter more lucrative fields such as real estate development, a new generation of garment manufacturers whose own parents were petty entrepreneurs have ascended within the industry. Their alignment of an entrepreneurial vision with first-world confidence, creativity, and the ability make things happen was often contrasted with the reactive nature of the "old heads," who as one younger manager told me, "They...cover down [their machines] and hope that maybe business might be better, or hope that maybe something would work out."

Rather than harking back to the protectionist regime as a golden era, the younger capitalists saw trade liberalization as an exciting opportunity to engage regional and global markets on new terms. They insisted that to be profitable, a firm had to become "flexible," run by managers who were innovative, enterprising, and opportunistic. While some firms pursued this flexibility by adopting high-tech innovations to mechanize production, or organizing multiply-skilled work groups to adapt to market demands, I focus in this article on the growing practice of

outsourcing production to local home-based workers. Sending factory workers home with industrial-grade sewing machines and a promise to supply them with work is a means of increasing the flexibility of labour itself.

For workers—excepting the very few with coveted jobs in “high-tech” automated firms—the decline of the garment industry has been experienced as a denigration of conditions: from plentiful job opportunities in the 1970s and early 1980s to rising unemployment as the nation entered recession, and finally to the collapse of the industry under global trade liberalization in the 1990s. Over this same period, workers describe not only the withdrawal of the state from inspecting factories, but also a decline in trade union activity. Although during the oil boom vigorous effort was put into organizing garment workers, which resulted in the establishment of collective bargaining agreements, trade unions now focus their energies on more profitable industries and public sector workers.² Employment relations in the industry are now highly individualized between workers and the firms.

Although the national census showed a 42 percent decline in garment manufacturing jobs between 1990 and 2000 (CSO 2003:27), these official statistics fail to capture the extent to which garment workers’ livelihoods moved into an informal sector of irregular employment and homeworking where their labour is not measured.³ Unlike the disarticulation of entire communities or regions described by Bair and Werner (2011), Trinidad’s garment industry has not been wholly expelled from international circuits of trade, but instead shows increasing casualization,

² The one exception is the National Union of Domestic Employees, a small and poorly resourced yet vocal union that advocates for domestic workers, and seeks to represent home-based garment workers in disputes with contractors and employers (Jayasinghe 2001:78, Karides 2002).

³ With the removal of “needle-working” as an occupational category from the census after 2000, the population of garment workers is even harder to judge.

informalization, and instability in job opportunities. Garment manufacturing survives in Trinidad by taking up residence in the informal sector.

The Return of Homeworking

If Mr. Khan's factory was massive, dark, and desolate, that of Bernard is tiny, bright, and bustling. Bernard runs a garment factory that I call "Universal Uniforms" above a fabric shop on the Eastern Main Road, outside Trinidad's capital city.⁴ Founded in the 1990s, Universal Uniforms obtains contracts for uniforms from governments and businesses throughout the Caribbean. The company has kept afloat because Bernard began experimenting in the early 2000s with sending workers home with industrial-grade machines and stitching to complete on a piecerate basis. By 2014, in addition to Bernard's 20 workers on the shop floor, he employed more than 25 stitchers to work on his garments at home. These stitchers work for the same piecerate as factory employees, sometimes hiring other stitchers from their communities to sew for them.

The quality of home-sewn garments must be equal to what is produced on the shop floor, therefore the cutting of the fabric and the finishing of the garments are conducted in the factory. Stitchers must provide, and be open to spot inspection of, a secure location to accommodate sewing machines on loan from the factory, or already be in possession of their own industrial-grade machines.

By employing fewer workers on the shop floor but maintaining in reserve the labour power of many more at home, factory owners like Bernard lower costs by externalizing their workforce and dispensing with obligations such as guaranteed

⁴ All names of people and factories are pseudonyms with the exceptions of Mr. Khan, who as a public figure agreed to be named in my research.

hours or base pay, National Insurance contributions, and the minimum wage.⁵ Home-based stitchers not only bear the expense of workspace and electricity, but also absorb the costs of market fluctuations by being permanently at the ready. These workers experience diminished entitlements, not only to National Insurance and paid maternity leave, but also the national worker's compensation system in the case of injury.

Bernard, when talking about his homeworkers, describes himself as taking a hard look at the changes wrought by globalization and being opportunistic in seeking out ways to navigate those challenges. He puts down his success to his own risk-taking and courage to withstand uncertainty. As he said to me,

“A lot of people who are in the business are aged people...they had the business from their parents, they built it in the boom days and it was booming...I don't think they would sleep properly if they had 50 or 60 machines outside! I don't think they would sleep well thinking how much thousands of dollars out there; suppose this, suppose that?...Because Kay's has over 500 machines and they only have about 10 operators, and they will not take one machine off that floor, and give it to one worker who has five years' service, even though she has accommodation in her home. They wouldn't do it.”

Trinidad's garment sector has long been characterized by so-called “dualism,” with modern, large-scale plants producing similar goods as small, informal businesses. Up until at least the 1920s, Trinidadian stitchers were part of a putting-out system whereby cloth merchants cut and bundled fabric, which they parcelled out to stitchers to complete at home. This practice changed (although never entirely disappeared) with the desire of merchants to bring production in-house in order to exert tighter control over stitching quality and labour discipline. Merchants provided space and sewing machines, but workers were expected to carry with them ancillary tools such as scissors, nippers, pins, and protective garments like kerchiefs and smocks, which is still the case today in every factory.

⁵ Alessandra Mezzadri (2015) provides a rich account of similar processes of externalization in the Indian garment industry.

When in the mid-century small workshops gave way to larger firms that replicated a Fordist model of vertical integration (due in part to government initiatives like the 1950 Aid to Pioneer Industries Ordinance, which supported industrial expansion), Trinidad's garment industry remained diverse because of the persistence of independent seamstresses and tailors working from their own homes and shops, who might occasionally take up bundles of stitching to make ends meet, and the seasonal requirements of Carnival costumes and school uniforms made locally. As elsewhere in the world, Trinidad's garment industry has never fulfilled the grand modernist narrative, which would predict the disappearance of home-based production as manufacturing became increasingly centred in factories. With a move towards flexible accumulation and smaller batch production, the industry's failure to centralize became recast as a strength (cf. Collins 2002).

The post-Fordist revival of the putting-out system is described by Trinidadian factory owners using the language of "cottage industry" (or simply "cottage"), a phrase that evokes an idyllic image of home-based skilled endeavour. The use of the term "cottage" seeks to ally homework with self-directed craft production, rather than sweated outwork reminiscent of the 19th and early 20th century garment industry. Whereas my questions to factory owners about outsourcing always led them to believe I was asking about subcontracting from China, and questions about homeworkers often generated little response, questions about "cottage" invariably generated excited discussion about the capacities of women in the Trinidadian countryside to accomplish factory-grade production in the comfort of their own homes and under their own control.

This language of craft is used as a rhetorical device to align home-based garment work with community uplift and self-reliance rather than with the bloody industrial struggles of the twentieth century. Widespread labour revolts during the

1930s brought visibility to women workers, particularly with the prolonged strike of the Renown Garment Factory in 1939 (Reddock 1993:254-5). Women became marginalized in the trade union movement during its consolidation in the 1940s—with its emphasis on formal sector employment and the formation of anti-colonial political parties—but their activism was rekindled in the 1950s and 1960s, when the policy of “industrialization by invitation” expanded the garment sector (Reddock 1994:276). Women in the labour movement fought not only for decent wages and working conditions, but also for the public visibility of their labour. The “freedom” of self-determination evoked in the romantic language of “cottage industry” is not the same freedom defined through stable and predictable, well-compensated work that took centre stage in industrial struggle.

Although Bernard’s stitchers are usually former employees, who contract for his factory alone, stitchers as a category of home-based workers obtain work either from factory owners or from independent contractors operating as intermediaries between firms and stitchers. Remuneration varies widely. While Bernard insists that the price paid for garments sewn is the same as the factory piecerate, stitchers report payment “negotiated” between firms and individual stitchers or via contractors.

Lena’s Story

For Lena, a 28-year-old Afro-Trinidadian woman in the rural northeast, working at home on contract is only one part of the complex of livelihood arrangements with which she sustains her life. She has three children, and prefers to be at home, not only so she can “throw an eye” on them when they come home from school, and not simply as a stop-gap because the Tru-Fit garment factory where she was previously employed closed down.

The main reason, Lena says, to stitch at home is because transportation costs are so high that “travelling” to work would take too large a portion of her earnings. For Lena to commute via public transportation to the cluster of factories along the Eastern Main Road would cost her almost two hours’ pay, or a quarter of her entire earnings. Lena takes in work brought to her by a contractor known to one of her sisters.

Lena is paid TT\$300 for a bundle of work, which if it took her a week to complete would be well below the minimum wage of TT\$12.50 (£1.30) per hour.⁶ But Lena says that it does not take her a week to complete the work, and in fact she wanted more bundles than she was receiving. The benefit to her of stitching for a contractor is access to the two machines on loan to her at home (one of which is a straight-stitch machine, the other of which is a serger, which sews inner seams), which allow her to put a more professional finish on the school uniforms she makes for members of her community, for cash-in-hand payment.

Like many garment workers in Trinidad, Lena is a skilled seamstress and can create entire outfits from scratch without a pattern (cf. Prentice 2012). Seamstresses are ideal homeworkers because they can solve dressmaking dilemmas on the fly: if the fabric has not been cut precisely they can make it work, anticipating problems with the stitching and correcting accordingly. Factory owners like Bernard insist that this skill makes home-based stitchers not simply low-wage workers, but in fact “micro-entrepreneurs,” because they are free to use the machines to develop their own small businesses when not busy completing garments for their employer. A seamstress who does so can also employ stitchers (who may not know how to draft or cut a pattern but can sew proficiently on the machine) for routine needlework,

⁶ This minimum wage rate refers to the summer of 2014.

turning her home into a place of employment for not only herself but other members of the community as well.

Sewing machines are expensive, with second-hand industrial models selling for TT\$3,000 (£310) to many times that amount. They are treasured gifts from family members who have migrated overseas; some women use rotating savings groups to raise money for them, while others use hire-purchase (although those machines are only domestic-grade and liable to break down under the strain of constant production).⁷ Lena has ambitions to sew for high-paying private clients—to do “whole weddings,” making garments for everyone in a wedding party—and to produce bespoke fashion clothing. But either her skill or access to clients beyond her own impoverished community is limited, and so Lena makes school uniforms. Access to sewing machines is more theoretically advantageous to her social mobility than actually so.

The plural nature of home-based garment production raises questions about the extent to which Lena is engaged in disguised wage employment, or is an aspiring micro-entrepreneur in need of support, training, and resources. As Elisabeth Prügl and Irene Tinker (1997) have argued, home-based work is a “descriptive” rather than “analytical” category because in the reality of everyday lives, home-based workers continually—and often seamlessly—shift between different registers of employment and income generation. Lena’s possession and “free use” of the sewing machines on loan to her obscures the capital-labour relationship, as does the fact that she sews at home for kin and for cash-in-hand payment from neighbours.

⁷ Hebe Verrest (2013:62) also notes that hire purchase interest rates in Trinidad can exceed 20% a year. Rotating savings groups, referred to as *sou sou* in Trinidad, is a longstanding means for women and men to amass a large sum by depositing cash each week, taking turns drawing the entire amount from the group (Besson 1995). Membership in *sou sou*, however, requires individuals to have a regular source of income, which may be why the practice is widespread among wage employees such as factory workers (Prentice 2015:77).

Homeworking provides Lena with the ability to engage in income-generating activities while “throwing an eye” on her children and therefore satisfying the reproductive needs of her household. It is for this reason that Prügl and Tinker (1997:1475) remind us that legal categories such as “employee” or “self-employed” require the “autonomous and self-contained individuals” of Western liberalism, and women’s persistent gender subordination and uncompensated and unrecognised reproductive labour mean that their own labour power is not fully in their possession to begin with. As Silvia Federici (2012) has argued, women absorb the costs of social reproduction through their unpaid domestic labour, which is naturalized—and thereby rendered invisible—in the private space of the home. David Staples (2006:4) explains how this burden of social reproduction can be made worse by the introduction of home-based employment, because a woman’s continuing presence renders her available for childcare and domestic upkeep for a larger portion of the day than would be possible were she away from home. Whether in a “matrifocal” family like Lena’s, in which she is the head of her own household as a single mother, or in the traditionally more “respectable” patriarchal marriage, Trinidadian women—mothers and their female kin—are expected to be the primary caretakers of children and keepers of the home.⁸

If Lena could work faster and take in more bundles of garments, she would make more money. Having the two machines means that she could do so with the help of her sister, or really anyone she could hire or get to help her. Lena describes her sister, however, as unreliable, and so she usually completes all the work on her own.

⁸ Although Carla Freeman’s (2014) recent research on middle class entrepreneurs in Barbados suggests a move towards companionate marriage with a more role equal for men and women in the domestic sphere, my research among working-class garment workers in Trinidad highlights the persistence of gender ideologies that render housekeeping and childcare a foremost responsibility of women.

The Seductions of Precarity

The past 30 years have seen the establishment of a worldwide neoliberal orthodoxy that sees the private sector as “the main engine for economic growth” (Verrest 2013:60), with the role of the state increasingly confined to facilitating and supporting such growth.⁹ Within this vision, the poor are either lifted out of poverty by the employment opportunities provided by a growing economy, or they *climb* out of poverty using their own creative capacities, entrepreneurial energy, and ability to expand and capitalize upon their social networks. Microenterprise development’s role in this new orthodoxy is not simply in providing training, credit, and technical support for entrepreneurs developing small-scale businesses, but also in creating capillary networks for propagating a neoliberal insistence upon individualistic self-responsibilization (Bateman 2010, Jurik 2005).

The embrace of microenterprise in Trinidad in the 1990s is part of this international shift, which redirects the state’s responsibility from the centralizing impulse of modernization to a decentralizing promotion of enterprise culture. Although several non-governmental organizations, including private charities, banks, and religious institutions promote microenterprise, in Trinidad microenterprise development is largely state-driven, supported by government resources as well as the assistance of the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), and UNDP (Karides 2010:194). These initiatives intertwine with government programmes to promote youth training and apprenticeship, women’s empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods. The diversity of initiatives reflects a range of different aims, from the alleviation of poverty and unemployment to the development of

⁹ Or as Loïc Wacquant (2010) has argued, the role of the state becomes managing the violent fall-out and gross inequalities produced by such as system.

women's economic autonomy, with some initiatives aimed at growing microenterprises into bigger firms with links to the international market.

Largest among the state programmes is the National Enterprise Development Company (NEDCO), established in 2002 to provide trainings, funds, advice, and marketing support for entrepreneurs looking to start or develop a small business or microenterprise (defined as having up to five employees, with no more than TT\$250,000 in assets or sales). With nine branches scattered throughout Trinidad and Tobago, and a headquarters in Port of Spain, NEDCO's target beneficiaries are petty producers and service workers (including street vendors, unregistered taxi drivers, and independent seamstresses and tailors) who are engaged in informal economic activities, with the aim of assisting them become successful entrepreneurs.

The NEDCO office in Barataria is geared towards this purpose with a library, advisors for one-on-one consultations in budgeting and writing a business plan, and day-long training workshops on topics such as "Record Keeping and Cash Management," "Know Your Taxes," and "Managing Staff." Loan recipients must fulfil minimum attendance requirements at training sessions, for which they pay a reduced rate of TT\$350 per day. As a flagship programme, NEDCO sets much of the tone of microenterprise policy and practice in Trinidad. In addition to supporting their own loan recipients, NEDCO also conducts trainings for the general public as well as publicized competitions to help spread "enterprise culture" throughout Trinidad. The inclusion of entrepreneurialism as a topic in the primary school curriculum is one recent achievement.

With a diverse local garment industry and the proliferation of microenterprise initiatives, these two areas intersect with one another at various nodes. When I first met Victoria in 2003, she described herself as a "dressmaker and business woman," but today is more apt to call herself an "entrepreneur." Victoria rents a studio

apartment in Port of Spain, where she meets with and measures the private clients for whom she sews. Victoria has four sewing machines, three straight-stitchers and one serger. An ideal target for the IDB- and World-Bank-funded aid to small and microenterprises that became available in the late 1990s, Victoria had seamstressing skills that she learned from her mother and a dressmaking course at a technical college. Victoria worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office while stitching clothing for friends and neighbours, slowly widening her circle of clients over time. She managed to recruit several clients from among the pharmaceutical representatives she met at work, and eventually was able to quit her job and begin sewing full-time.

In 2002, when Victoria wanted to move from her own home to a rented studio apartment in an upscale Port of Spain neighbourhood in order to serve higher-paying clients who would not have wanted to visit her working-class community, she completed a World-Bank-funded training course for "micro-entrepreneurs," where she says she learned how to set up her own business: how to choose an area of the city to set up shop, how to calculate her starting costs, and how much rent she could shoulder. Reflecting on the course she said,

"The business course I did was geared for entrepreneurs: accounting, insurance, where to register your business, banking. Different people come in to talk to you, and the things you need to consider. Some of the people in the course were already in business! And the things they asked about were very helpful. They were already experiencing it, and could see ahead of you, a heads up."

The path to success, then, is laid out in progressive sequence, with fellow "entrepreneurs" already steps ahead. With her sewing skills, Victoria's desire for instruction on how to transform self-employment into a business made her an ideal candidate for the technical training that the programme provided. For some microenterprise initiatives, this act of scaling up into a business is the primary goal.

The aim is not for Victoria to sustain herself through private endeavour, but instead to expand her business and create employment for others.

Victoria insists that her three employees must be former factory workers. She complained that when she experimented with training workers herself, they might take their precious new skills into jobs elsewhere. She said to me,

“So then I started putting an ad in the paper, and employing people who know the work already, just like how those people were getting my girls that I train! So, go somewhere, learn to sew, and I’ll take you after, if you’ve been working in a factory or something. So I would just show them my method, how I want the finishings done. It’s easier, ‘cause they know how to do it, and I don’t have to be over them...”

One way of interpreting this absorption of factory workers into microenterprises is simply that it is an outlet for excess labour. One of the expressed objectives of NEDCO is to regularize these businesses and bring them into the formal sector. This formalization however, is a selective and limited encompassment that involves taxing self-employed people, and registering businesses, but *not* registering them as industrial sites, which would bring OSHA inspections, National Insurance requirements, and the possibility for workers to establish a collective bargaining unit.¹⁰

If Victoria exemplifies the benefits of entrepreneurship training, stitchers in the Trinidadian countryside who take home bundles of work from local factories are addressed by microenterprise programmes of a different kind, part of rural development initiatives to promote “cottage industry” or home-based craft production. Local NGOs working to promote Trinidadian cuisine by helping local cooks of jams and pickles bring them to market, also offer assessments of self-

¹⁰ Workers in small production units like Victoria’s studio are at the mercy of their boss’s good graces. The minimum wage, which is enforced in most factories, is less evenly implemented in micro-firms of this kind; not to mention National Insurance, OSHA regulations, and maternity leave. Victoria describes a personalization of the relationship between boss and employee.

employed workers of many kinds, to facilitate the process of applying for microfinance through an institution like NEDCO. The application for a micro-loan includes questions about assets, in which a industrial-grade sewing machine is again an item of interest: the kind of equipment for which to apply for a loan, and yet as Lena's story shows, simply having access to machinery does not make paid work appear. For Lena, although her dream is to scale up her business in much the same way as Victoria, her immediate desire is to be given more work from the factories—more bundles of stitching to complete, to keep her sewing machines from standing idle.

Hebe Verrest (2013:60) explains that microenterprise programmes too often address micro-entrepreneurs as “classic” entrepreneurs, “whose objectives are innovation, growth, and profit,” but her research shows that many micro-entrepreneurs in Trinidad are modest in their aims and the *most* vulnerable seek funds for consumption at the lowest risk to their household. So there is a discrepancy between how the self-employed are imagined, the qualities of their presumed latent “entrepreneurialism,” and their own economic needs and goals. These findings resonate with Marina Karides' (2005) study of Trinidadian street vendors, who prioritized safe places to work, childcare, and affordable healthcare over the kinds of microfinancing they might be offered to develop and expand their small-scale businesses. Like Faye Harrison's (1988) study of women in Jamaica's informal economy, Karides' research shows how a sexual division of reproductive labour that ascribes domestic and childrearing activities to women deeply shapes Trinidadian women's livelihood activities because reproductive and productive duties are persistent and interlinked.

Victoria is a single woman without children. With the encouragement of her parents, she was able, she says, to pursue her dream of creating her own business,

but her possession of credentials from a local technical college and a circle of professional clients met through her job as a receptionist created the social conditions in which she could establish and grow her business. Lena's lack of resources and the ongoing need to look after her children are perhaps secondary to the fact that having spent many years in garment factories, she has no social network through which to cultivate a high-paying client base. Lena therefore has more in common with the former factory workers Victoria now employs than with Victoria herself.

The Labour Politics of Microenterprise Development

With microenterprise taking centre stage in development policy agendas, Ananya Roy (2010) has noted the curious silence of its advocates on issues of labour. The sudden absence of "workers" from development discourse coincides with a vigorous promotion of the figure of the "heroic entrepreneur" (Roy 2010:73). This shift has accompanied a transformation in the economies of much of the developing world, where formal-sector employment opportunities are shrinking, informal economies are expanding, and state objectives for full employment have given way to a new aspiration: that citizens will become economically productive in the absence of regularized, stable, or permanent work (Ferguson 2010:167-68).

As Catherine Dolan and Dinah Rajak (*in press*) have argued in relation to Eastern and Southern Africa, microenterprise initiatives confront the enduring problems of urban unemployment and poverty by converting job seekers into "entrepreneurs." Long perceived to be victims of development's failure to integrate them into formal economic relationships, urban youth are now perceived to be a solution to sluggish and jobless economic growth if their creative capacities can be appropriately stimulated and channelled. In their analysis of Catalyst—a social

enterprise that trains young people in Nairobi to sell household goods from door-to-door—Dolan and Rajak describe how the fading possibility of blue-collar employment has been converted into a new hope for unemployed youth, who essentially become petty retailers.

But here the Trinidadian case is instructive, pointing to an element of microenterprise development that is rarely acknowledged: its appropriation by manufacturing. If micro-entrepreneurship of various kinds has been offered as remedy to the problem of unemployment—by transforming blue-collar aspirants to burgeoning entrepreneurs—global post-Fordism has offered a different kind of conjuring act: the disappearance of formal-wage employment and its reappearance as home-based work. Whether it is Lena working on bundles of garments in Trinidad’s countryside, or Victoria’s former factory workers stitching in her studio apartment, garment workers who swap minimum-wage employment for microenterprise find themselves engaged in identical forms of work with significantly diminished rights, entitlements, pay, working conditions, stability, and visibility.

These workers have not been expelled or “disarticulated” (Bair and Werner 2011) from global supply chains, but rather have been re-integrated into them on more precarious and oppressive terms than before. Such circumstances can be described as “adverse incorporation,” whereby global production regimes are made flexible by enhancing workers’ vulnerability and disposability (Phillips 2011:382). Competitiveness and profit become secured by divesting workers of social entitlements—in other words, by processes of dispossession.

It is no accident that a transition from factory to homework in Trinidad involves women workers, who make up the overwhelming majority of the nation’s garment workforce. The pluralism of home-based economic activities that garment workers undertake—including the longstanding practice of sewing for kin and

neighbours—have made it easy for these new capital-labour relations to masquerade as relations of another kind: self-authored “economic empowerment,” with entrepreneurship forming part of an autonomous set of livelihood activities independently chosen by the worker herself. Elisabeth Prügl and Irene Tinker (1997) argue that the overlapping nature of industrial homework and home-based micro-entrepreneurship can make traditional development or trade union interventions counter-productive. From the point of view of trade unionists, workers who stitch at home for factories are disguised wage employees divested of their rights. For a microenterprise agency—like NEDCO—the concern is with a woman’s livelihood as an integrated complex deserving state support as long as she devotes herself to the pursuit of economic independence. Trinidadian homeworkers usually aspire to hire stitchers from within their communities to sew for them. In such instances, the homeworker becomes an employer, with responsibilities for maintaining working conditions and wage rates. This sort of entrepreneurial “success” is celebrated by development agencies, but attracts the ire of trade unionists, who decry this informalization of labour relations as producing new home-based sweatshops.

To create “a nation of entrepreneurs,” the concept of entrepreneurship—or minimally, of self-employment—must be seductive. But not every worker wants to become a micro-entrepreneur. Amidst a fragmented and informalized garment industry, there are several factories in Trinidad that still employ women full-time, and among these workers I heard a strong counter narrative. Sitting in 2014 with a group of garment workers I have known for many years, a factory worker named Veena commented while the others nodded approvingly:

“I prefer working at a place where, when I come home? I relax, I’m not working. And you see if you sew for other people, it might have sometimes when you have to work over the weekend, in the evenings to get that work out. And it’s not all year, you know! Sometimes it

doesn't have work. And don't forget where I'm working they have work for me every week of the year."

Workers like Veena describe microenterprise as a "constant hustle." What some of them object to about the re-emergence of homeworking is the relentlessness of work, and an inability to guard the home as a protected sphere into which market relations would not follow them. A separation between work and home is here presented as vital for their sense of control and equilibrium. Rather than become a nation of entrepreneurs, workers like Veena prefer with all its imperfections to be an employee instead. That these factory workers sometimes sew clothes at home for kin or friends for cash-in-hand payment indicates that they feel a sense of ownership and control over those activities, that they worry would be lost if such self-employment became their entire means of income.

Conclusion

My purpose with this article has been to refocus debates on microenterprise to consider its labour politics and relationship to flexible production. Microenterprise development aims to integrate the poor into market relations because it considers the mechanism of impoverishment to be their incidental exclusion from the capitalist economy rather than their purposeful dispossession. But, as I demonstrate with ethnographic material from Trinidad, the "beneficiaries" of microenterprise initiatives might themselves be retrenched industrial workers whose labour is made available to capital under precarious new terms. As Nicola Phillips (2011) has argued, our analysis must extend beyond who is included or excluded from market relations, to consider as well the nature of their inclusion. As labour conditions for Trinidadian garment workers deteriorate, their "adverse incorporation" (Phillips 2011) into global production networks as home-based workers have advanced under the protective

“cover” of seemingly laudable policies to promote economic empowerment via self-employment. The role of microenterprise in facilitating these processes is both deeply troubling and contrary to its stated aims.

The history of labour struggle in the Caribbean has necessarily countered a racist image of the worker as recalcitrant and hard to control, with a collective narrative of labour as possessing dignity, rights, and obligations. The role of women workers within these histories is complicated by their gender subordination—the independence and autonomy to embody the purportedly universal and ungendered category “worker” (Reddock 1994). With the convergence between industrial homeworking and microenterprise development, we see a re-ordering of history that places women and their labour within a development model concerned with “livelihoods” rather than and industrial labour category. So processes of precarization and dispossession are represented by development practitioners and state-led microenterprise initiatives as a form of “empowerment” whereby women are free to author their own destinies while negating the histories of struggle that have made this framing possible.

As microenterprise development, in all its diverse forms, continues to proliferate as a model for combating poverty and reducing unemployment, we must continually examine its relationship to labour and labour politics. Development discourses around homeworking, cottage industry, and micro-entrepreneurship in Trinidad legitimize and indeed elevate precariousness over stable employment. Insecurity becomes recast as freedom, self-exploitation reframed as “being your own boss.” The “silence” around the figure of the worker in contemporary development is, as Ananaya Roy (2010:73) has pointed out, a silence about work itself (as toil, as skill, and as a basis for labour rights and social entitlements). Examining the lived realities of homeworkers and micro-entrepreneurs shows how the convergence of

state strategies for the management of employment and capitalist strategies for managing the labour process have made precariousness profitable.

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