

"Just Another Puppet," attacked Honduran supporters of Kernaghan for bringing their fight with the maquiladora industry to the United States.¹⁹

The president of the Honduran Council for Private Industry (COHEP) was blunt:

"Why do we have to go to the North American Senate? [These maquiladora employers] haven't even been tried in this country. I think it's a lack of respect, it's undignified."

Those voices defending national sovereignty and dignity that raise their shouts to the sky about the presence of North American troops, now whimper and whine in the North American Senate for members of Congress to intervene in our affairs, and, of course, such an intervention would be, without a doubt, extremely favorable for North American voters at the cost of the livelihood, the food, the clothing, the schooling, and so on, of thousands and thousands of Hondurans.

The same show, just another puppet. We should be ashamed!

The maquiladora industry, for its part, has sought professional help to construct its message. In 1996, Edward J. von Kloberg III—lobbyist for clients including Burma's military junta, "Baby Doc" Duvalier of Haiti, Juvenal Habyarima of Rwanda, Samuel Doe of Liberia, and Saddam Hussein—was hired by the AHM to defend it against charges of sexual abuse and child labor in Honduran garment factories producing Kathie Lee apparel.²⁰ The Honduran maquiladora industry has also collaborated with groups like the Committee of Free Trade Zones in the Americas, which recently proclaimed magnanimously: "We are eager to understand why international groups have such great interest in discrediting Free Trade Zones. We believe that those groups are motivated by the interests of large organizations that still believe they are in the eighteenth century, trying to block the division of labor; they have not understood the concept of economic symmetry, the specialization of the nations, and much less have wanted to understand the process of economic globalization."²¹

Kurt Alan Ver Beek addresses contrasting perspectives on the maquila in his article "Maquiladoras: Exploitation or Emancipation? An Overview of the Situation of Maquiladora Workers in Honduras."²² Ver Beek's argument, based on research done in Honduras, is that the so-called debate

about maquiladoras is polarized between the two positions referred to in the article's title and that the fact that most of the research is done in Mexico weakens the global arguments. He follows Tiano in pointing out the "absolutist school" versus the "relativist school" of thought in the debate on maquiladora workers' conditions.²³ Followers of the absolutist school, Ver Beek states, rely on absolute standards of well-being to gauge the situation of maquiladora workers around the world. Advocates of the maquiladora industry in its current incarnation are relativists, arguing that the workers are better off than they would be without a job. Absolutists, according to Ver Beek, explicitly or implicitly compare workers' wages in the South to workers' wages in the North by citing them in dollars. In addition, they describe local working conditions or health complaints in absolute human rights terms without local comparisons. To avoid this problem, he notes, some researchers have compared maquila workers to service-sector workers. However, Ver Beek argues, these groups are not similar enough for the comparison to be meaningful. He also rightly points out that another common method, that of comparing maquila workers to the truly destitute, is inherently flawed. Maquila workers do not usually come from the poorest of the poor.

Under the aegis of the AHM, Ver Beek conducted a survey using first-time applicants as a control group. Although his survey is problematic because of its sampling bias and his affiliation with management, he reaches the standard conclusions of most statistical maquiladora studies. He finds that employees are better off than applicants in terms of income. Although his data show that men earn more than women,²⁴ he points out that both applicants and workers earn more than the minimum wage of US\$85 per month. "In summary," he says, "maquiladora employees are earning about 50 percent [more] than minimum wage and 50 percent more than applicants did in their previous jobs; maquiladora employees in 1998 were making more (in dollars) than they did in 1993; experience but not education is rewarded; the highest paying factory-floor job is closed to women and maquiladora salaries are not enough to move a Honduran family out of poverty."²⁵

Ver Beek comes to the conclusion that employees are worse off than applicants in terms of health and health care and the ability to unionize.

He argues that on the whole—with the exception of health—maquiladoras are neither better nor worse than other forms of employment in Honduras but wonders if critics should hold maquiladora owners and local employers to the same standards.

Ver Beek's question brings us to the commonly abused anthropological concept of cultural relativity. Both relativist and absolutist arguments can be correct within their own limited frameworks, and both arguments blind the analyst to the entirety of the situation. The maquiladora industry must be seen in a context that is—as discussed above—the outcome of violent colonial and postcolonial processes of both foreign and national domination. Cultural relativism (which assumes that cultures are bounded and intrinsically good) is an inadequate and inappropriate lens through which to view maquilas, but so is a historically decontextualized perspective relying on dollar figures.

Honduran qualms about the maquila industry are often framed not in terms of the false dichotomy examined by Ver Beek in collaboration with the AHM but rather in terms of morality. The gendered shift in employment brought about by the industry in Honduras, as elsewhere, threatens the core of the patriarchy both by denying men the chance to provide for their families and by employing women in masculine ways. Women's employment in formerly male sectors puts them at risk of losing their control, their sobriety, and many of the characteristics that previously had defined their femininity. This kind of gender subversion is often portrayed in Honduras as a recipe for social disaster, despite the fact that a traditional gendered hierarchy exists within the factory.

During an interview with Francisco, the Narcotics Anonymous member quoted earlier who had lived for part of his childhood in Canada and spoke with me in English, I asked if the maquila had caused crime. He responded:

What happens—you have all these guys from the countryside, especially women, right, that . . . never knew what it's like to live in the big city and whatever. Then they get a job here in the maquiladoras and then, like it might be somebody who's like sixteen or seventeen and they don't even know what makeup is. And they come and get a job here in the big city, right? All of the sudden they make their own money, they can pay for

their own apartment, and so then somebody else comes and says, "Hey, why don't we have a couple of beers," and this and that. And then all of a sudden this same girl that I'm telling you that was just sixteen or seventeen, like a year, a year later or two years later: completely changed. Completely changed, the personality, like a 180 degree change. But it's because of that, it's because you've brought in these people from a totally different environment . . . into the city. That's probably what happens. And that has a lot to do with, like a lot of AIDS has been spread through them like in San Pedro Sula, that's a perfect example. San Pedro Sula—there are more women than men here. I mean, they don't have balance. They have like four or five men [in a maquila]. The rest is women, like thirty or forty women. So that like working in that environment, I think that all those things that I'm mentioning are key players in these social . . . illnesses that we have. You know. We, we have a—you know—the alcoholism, the drug using, the spread of AIDS, all that.

In Francisco's analysis, maquila women are easily corrupted, diseased, and sexually loose. This argument is employed by both critics and proponents of maquiladoras, the latter arguing that, among other things, young women's employment rescues them from prostitution. In fact, maquiladora employees are much more likely to be avoiding working as domestic servants. Not coincidentally, maids are another group that has historically suffered from the same prejudices. The increase in women's job options has resulted in the importation of young servants from increasingly rural areas, to the frustration and amusement of the wealthier elements of the working class. Teto's sister Wendy, for example, had to teach her maid, Martina, who came from a rural village in the department of Lempira, how to do the simplest chores, from putting shoes on the appropriate feet to using running water. Working women—especially poor working women—are victims of a gendered achievement ideology (the notion that hard work and good morals bring economic success, and conversely, poverty results from indolence and immorality). When they reject old understandings of femininity to become "modern" workers, they are scorned for doing so. While most working women do achieve a measure of economic independence, they are more exploited than men and are rarely able to earn enough to move themselves or their families out of poverty.