

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



## Heterogeneity, Work, and Mobilisation Recent Works in Latin American Labour Studies

Matthew Casey

Volume 69, Spring 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1011333ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Casey, M. (2012). Review of [Heterogeneity, Work, and Mobilisation: Recent Works in Latin American Labour Studies]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 69, 169–186.

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Heterogeneity, Work, and Mobilisation: Recent Works in Latin American Labour Studies

**Matthew Casey**

Mark S. Anner, *Solidarity Transformed: Labor Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011)

Paulo Drinot, *The Allure of Labor: Workers, Race, and the Making of the Peruvian State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

Elizabeth Fitting, *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

Liliana R. Goldín, *Global Maya: Work and Ideology in Rural Guatemala* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009)

DURING THE PAST DECADE, scholarship on labour has been driven by efforts to widen definitions of work and workers' coping strategies. In order to understand the ways that human beings have experienced global capitalism in the present and the past, it is imperative that we create analytical lenses that do not limit labour to the domain of male, wage earners, or trade union mobilisations.<sup>1</sup> Some have even identified Latin America and regions outside of the North Atlantic as significant contributors to this project.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the four texts reviewed in this essay approach labour from the disciplines of history,

1. Marcus Rediker, "The Revenge of Crispus Attucks; or, the Atlantic Challenge to American Labor History," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1:4 (2004), 40–1; Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden 2008), 6, 18.

2. Leon Fink, "The Great Escape: How a Field Survived Hard Times," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 8:1 (2011), 110; John D. French, "The Latin American Labor Studies Boom," *International Review of Social History* 45 (2000), 279.

anthropology, and political science and present us with a heterogeneous workforce of women and men, engaging in paid and unpaid agricultural, industrial and household labour. They have mobilised in unions and other organisations both within and across racial, class, and national lines. How do labourers and those who study them make sense of this heterogeneity? What new problematics emerge from this heterogeneity for workers trying to mobilise or for scholars trying to analyze them?

In contemporary Latin America, the nature of work and the composition of the workforce are undergoing profound transformations. Structural adjustment policies have caused people to engage in forms of agricultural, household, and industrial wage labour in many parts of the region that were not available a few decades ago. In Mexico and Central America, this has entailed an increase in the number of women and adolescents engaging in wage labour and has produced a new commodification of household work. While the individuals and activities associated with wage labour are changing, so are analytical definitions of work. Widening categories of what constitutes work sheds new light on forms of unpaid and subsistence labour in the present and the past.

Changes in the composition of the workforce and the way it is defined by scholars pushes research into the diverse strategies that labourers have employed to improve their working and living conditions. Union organising, the traditional strategy of working class mobilisation, remains a viable option for many in Latin America. However, political and economic shifts have changed the way these organisations interact with employers and state institutions, encouraging many to ally with other types of groups across national and class lines. While some are analyzing new forms of union politics, others are identifying the historical and contemporary ways that Latin American labourers have sought to shape their lives by pursuing individual and collective strategies that involve joining both public and private institutions.

The untidy picture that emerges is not necessarily unique to Latin America. The texts' broad definitions of labour and workers' coping strategies, their attempts at situating workers in larger political economies, and the transnational nature of their analyses place them squarely within ongoing scholarly trends in Atlantic and global labour studies.<sup>3</sup> Showing the proletariat in all of its "motley"ness<sup>4</sup> has benefits that surpass the inclusion of previously ignored individuals into existing narratives about how humans experience global capitalism, though this is extremely important in and of itself; it also challenges us to reflect on how internal divisions within the labour force structure processes of work, identity formation, and mobilisation.

In the spirit of this broader project, this essay will analyze the four texts for what they tell us about Latin American workers, before moving on to their

3. Rediker, "The Revenge of Crispus Attucks," 41; Fink, "The Great Escape," 112; Linden, *Workers of the World*, 1–14.

4. Rediker, "The Revenge of Crispus Attucks," 40.

contributions to larger questions facing global labour studies and the world's labouring peoples. It will begin by treating the arguments of each of the four books in a way that adumbrates the transformations in Latin American labour from the early part of the 20th century to the present. Focusing on the theme of workers' heterogeneity, it will then analyze the books' contributions to two broader questions. The first is the relationship between efforts to manage labourers and their interactions with larger ideologies of race and class. The second evaluates the numerous ways that individuals, organisations, and institutions have sought to represent the interests of labourers in their local, national, and transnational contexts. These analyses of mobilisation serve as both inspiration for the creative ways that workers and their allies organise as well as a cautionary tale about the potential distance that may exist between labourers and those who claim to represent them.

### Transformations in Latin America in the 20th and 21st Centuries

IN THE LATE 19TH AND early 20th centuries, Latin American economies were sustained by the export of primary, mostly agricultural, products. A few decades into the 20th century, ruling classes throughout the region began calling for industrialisation and an increased role of the state in society, especially in regard to labour. One of the most well known texts about this changing relationship uses the idiom of "incorporation" to describe the proliferation of state bureaucracies designed to regulate unions, work conditions, wages, and so on. Although worker incorporation varied from country to country, Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier argue that labourers' strategic role in the economy, and their proximity to centres of power forced both democratic and authoritarian regimes to institutionalise their relationships to workers to prevent radicalism or political instability.<sup>5</sup>

Such narratives about the strategic motivations of the state and its singular desire to co-opt worker radicalism have come under scrutiny in Paulo Drinot's *The Allure of Labor: Workers, Race, and the Making of the Peruvian State*. Rather than being motivated by simple economic or political calculus, Peruvian reformers from the first decades of the 20th century believed that an interventionist state was a hallmark of modernity and that industrialisation would create civilised citizens out of Peru's indigenous masses. (Drinot 3) Such state-building projects were not unique to the government of Peru, which drew inspiration from other modernising states as well as from international sources. The first was the positivistic belief in the power of scientific reform to solve social problems. The second came from the Catholic Church's position that it was the duty of governments to maintain humane work conditions and prevent the spread of Communism. (22) If state-building marked

5. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN 2002), 8, 40–3.

the zenith of modern governance, industrialisation would cement efforts to achieve “national redemption” and to bring “civilization” to all Peruvians. (3) In other words, the state was not just trying to co-opt the labour movement away from radical parties, but also to transform workers and create new types of citizens.

Drinot’s effort to provide a finer texture to the state’s motivations to regulate working conditions requires a new analytical vocabulary and encourages explorations into understudied aspects of Peruvian labour policy. Words like incorporation or cooptation obscure more than they reveal about official visions of the state and labour. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and scholarship on state institutions in other regions, he describes the transformations occurring in Peru as a new project of “governmentality,” which is more useful than “incorporation” because it includes the idea that the state could aid and even improve populations. The new project required “rationalities of power” to define labour and make it knowable to the state as well as “technologies of power,” the institutional mechanisms used to govern labour. (9) Shifting the analytical terrain from incorporation to governmentality encourages exploration of areas of state-worker relations that did not have the power to destabilise the political or economic order but may have been significant in shaping workers’ lives. In addition to treatment of the state’s efforts to define the boundaries of collective bargaining, Drinot devotes a chapter to each of the government agencies formed to provide urban workers with housing, food, and health care at a low cost. All of these projects were designed to “improve” workers as much as prevent labour militancy. Workers’ housing would promote the development of stable families and “economic responsibility.” (125) Access to nutritious food “would improve workers’ aptitude for work and general capability to act as morally upstanding citizens.” (170) Finally, health care, which required contributions from employers’ wages, would encourage workers to save money and plan for the future. (218)

Central to Drinot’s argument is that Peru’s project of governmentality was not just gendered, as scholars have long declared, but also highly racialised. Peru was “a racial state” as well as a patriarchal one. (15) Making workers subject to state power involved the delineation of what constituted work, a process fraught with gendered and racialised assumptions. Labour legislation was geared toward a normative vision of the male, industrial worker who would serve as the head of his household. The immense labour expenditures of women, often as domestic workers, were not recognised by the state. For instance, a 1937 law specifically exempted domestic workers from obligatory registration in the national social security program. (206, 210) Definitions of work and interpretations of working conditions were also highly racialised. On the one hand, this manifested itself in the state’s campaign to create *restaurantes populares*. The goal of providing workers with inexpensive food was justified using a highly nationalist and racialised vision of food, since many had previously relied on restaurants owned by Asian immigrants, who were

accused of increasing meat prices and providing sub-standard food to the detriment of the national body. (164–5) Even more importantly, the state constituted labour in such a way that indigenous people were excluded from the definition of work, and by extension from contributing to the “attainment of progress.” (15) In other words, projects of worker improvement were actually efforts at achieving racial improvement. (226) For many Peruvians “Indianness was inimical to progress” but it could theoretically be overcome by changing workers’ habits. The incompatibility between workers and Indians is illustrated by the fact that the Peruvian state dealt with each of them using different “rationalities of power.” Indians and workers became known to the state through different institutions. (224) For instance, architects of the Social Security law envisioned it “extending to Indians *qua workers* and not to Indians *qua Indians*” proving that in the eyes of the state, “Indians were, by definition, *not workers* and workers were by definition *not Indians*.” (224) This aspect of Drinot’s argument will be examined further alongside the other texts below.

The indigenous rural communities that constituted an absent presence in early 20th century efforts to build the Peruvian labour state were not immune from state interventions in the same period in Mexico. In *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside*, Elizabeth Fitting challenges the discourses that essentialise Mexican peasants by exploring developments in their political, social, and economic institutions from the early 20th century to the present in the Tehuacán valley in Puebla, Mexico. It is true that the valley has been marked by major continuities since the colonial period, such as residents’ reliance on producing corn and the maintenance of colonial-era social institutions like the *mayordomo*. However, to either denigrate or romanticise these communities as being homogeneous or outside of history, as people across the political spectrum continually do, misses the major transformations that have occurred. Residents’ relationship to the environment must be conceptualised as a dynamic one. Residents of the Tehuacán Valley have historically produced different varieties of corn for subsistence and commercial use, even selectively breeding corn for specific traits suited to local ecologies. Corn producers have also faced environmental shifts during the 20th century. Large- and small-scale producers have competed for water from natural springs throughout the area. In 1954, one of these dried up from overuse, increasing the difficulties of obtaining water and showing that life in rural Mexico is far from static. (Fitting 134)

Fitting shows that Indigenous communities experienced many social and political changes as well. During the 20th century, corn producers in the Tehuacán valley altered the way labour and resources were organised. Valley residents have creatively combined resources to maintain *maize* (native corn) production. Many gain access to land, labour, and water only by engaging in collective sharecropping agreements with neighbours. (151) In the 1940s, many communities began forming private organisations to build underground water pumps to distribute water for the irrigation of cornfields, though others

continued to rely on water collected in ravines or rainfall. (123) As in Peru, the Mexican government played a strong role in the economic affairs of its urban and rural regions in the early part of the 20th century. One of the lasting results of the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, was the institutionalisation of community-level organisations designed to protect peasants' access to land and sustain agriculture. Between the 1920s and 1991, producers interacted with government-run agricultural organisations designed to provide education, incentives, and access to seeds. (41, 86)

Unlike Drinot's historical treatment of Peruvian state-building efforts, Fitting was able to conduct fieldwork to understand the way rural producers experienced state policies at the local level. While shifts in national politics had immense effects on local producers, not all laws were applied with the same consistency in every locale. Laws ostensibly passed for the benefit of agricultural communities could displace groups with customary access to land and water rights. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, agrarian reform programs actually cut access to water for residents of San José de Miahuatlán, who found it difficult to provide documentary proof of centuries-old agreements in the face of better-mobilised communities in the valley. In the early 1940s, they forcefully reclaimed their access to water, which was not formally recognised by the state until the 1960s. (139–141) State regulation was hardly a smooth or uniform process. Even within local communities, access to water was used as a tool of political patronage and periodically became the object of political violence. (145)

Fitting's book benefits from her extended treatment of the 20th century history of the Tehuacán valley, though its main contribution is her analysis of the changes that have occurred in rural Mexico since structural adjustment policies were first implemented in the 1980s. The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork and extensive interviews with corn producers, state officials, and agricultural experts conducted between 2000 and 2006. (9) She uses the issue of genetically modified and imported corn as a point of entry into the national debates about food and identity as well as the local dynamics of agricultural transformation in the age of neo-liberalism. (4) In Mexico, neo-liberal policies recommended by the IMF and World Bank, along with the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), eliminated institutions that had previously protected corn producers. (41) The policies were designed "to transform peasants...into either agricultural entrepreneurs who produce for export or an inexpensive labor force." (4)

Since the advent of neo-liberal policies, corn production for subsistence and local sale has decreased in quantity and profitability because of producers' inability to compete with imports of yellow corn from the United States. (4, 11, 18) The issue is not just that a foreign import is displacing a local product; it is also contaminating it. The fact that corn is both "grain and seed" means that genetically modified variants of the crop, which enter as food from the United States, have been inadvertently planted in Mexican cornfields, a trend

first discovered in 2001. (1) The effects of genetically modified strains of corn on Mexican *maize* production or the health of those who consume it is still largely unknown; research on the issue is heavily politicised. (50)

Proponents of genetically modified (GM) corn justify its presence using the larger logic of neo-liberalism. They interpret GM corn as the result of using science and technology to increase biodiversity in a way that is more efficient than techniques used by the farmers who exchange seeds with neighbours and seed banks to breed corn for certain traits. (12, 40) Opponents of transgenic corn, including Mexican activists and trans-national NGOs concerned with food sovereignty, have marshaled cultural arguments to defend Mexican corn producers. On the one hand, corn has been a pervasive part of daily life in Mexico since pre-Columbian times. Its production and consumption “are inscribed with notions of culture, race, and gender.” (14) This ubiquity, coupled with the heterogeneity of corn through selective genetic crossing, makes *maize* an appropriate symbol of the Mexican nation, which is conceptualised as a cultural and racial mixture. (36) Paradoxically, many activists’ claims rely on essentialised notions of the Mexican peasantry, raising concerns about the distance that exists between workers and the trans-national movements making claims on their behalf (this will be discussed below).

As Fitting argues, “concerns about transgenic corn are more than expressions of ‘cultural anxiety’ and ‘nostalgia’ for a simpler past. These concerns must be situated within the social, political, and economic changes brought about by the neoliberal corn regime.” (56) For example, in opposing transgenic corn, people are also politicising notions of scientific neutrality and efficiency, which others have claimed are beyond the realm of politics. They are also responding to broader shifts that have occurred in rural Mexico. Corn’s diminishing position as a source of livelihood has forced many valley residents, especially young women and men, to engage in other types of labour. Since the implementation of neoliberal policies, labour migration to *maquiladoras* (foreign-owned light manufacturing plants) and the United States has increased exponentially.

Since the production and consumption of corn have historically structured family labour and gender roles, economic alterations have transformed households. Opportunities for wage labour in local *maquiladoras* or abroad has led to an increasing commodification of household labour, as many women and children are beginning to interpret the latter in terms of opportunity costs and wages lost. (188–9) Migration and working in a *maquiladora* have also created rifts between new wage workers and their older family members. Not only do young people forego school for the economic benefits of working for a wage, young men, and especially women, are accused of subverting traditional gender roles. (177, 197, 211–3)

If *maize*’s historical importance offers a sense of why economic transformations have deeply affected communities, it also explains why so many have steadfastly continued to produce the crop, despite claims by technocrats that

it is inefficient and breeds poverty. Many members of households continue to work in corn production, where the “struggle to maintain or improve their livelihoods has intensified” even beyond the “degree of uncertainty” normally associated with small-scale agriculture. (5) The fact that rural Mexicans still produce corn, albeit in smaller numbers, illustrates an overlooked response to neo-liberal policies and challenges scholars to rethink debates about the effects of migration. For many households, one response to neo-liberal agricultural policies is to remain on the *milpa* (corn field). “Maize is a form of security for those left behind, for those who cannot migrate or do not wish to.” (11) However, the individuals who continue to rely on corn are also part of households whose members work for wages in *maquiladoras* or abroad in the United States. Since migration remittances actually help maintain *maize* production, it is “not only the household that is transnational, but also the milpa.” (186–7) By recognising that new strategies co-exist with, rather than replace, corn production, Fitting seeks to reconcile scholarly debates that interpret migration as either a vehicle for rural development or a new form of dependency for rural societies. In the village of San José, migration leads to both dependency and development. (183)

While Fitting focuses principally on the rural producers who maintained their subsistence activities, Liliana Goldín’s *Global Maya: Work and Ideology in Rural Guatemala* studies those who left traditional agriculture to work in the industries that have emerged since the implementation of structural adjustment policies. Between 1990 and 2005, Goldín conducted a mix of “semistructured open-ended interviews” of individuals and groups as well as quantitative surveys in the Guatemalan towns of Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, Chimaltenango, and Sacatepéquez in order to ascertain changes in residents’ economic ideologies. (Goldín 35–8) A generation ago, many of the indigenous residents of these towns were agricultural wage workers or subsistence farmers. As the area has become more integrated into regional and international markets, peasants are engaging in the production of petty agricultural commodities for sale within Guatemala as well as non-traditional agricultural goods for export abroad. Others have moved into petty industrial production, which largely consists of sewing clothing at home or in small workshops for domestic and international sale. Finally, others have transitioned into industrial wage labour in *maquiladoras*.

Structural changes in the economy have transformed working conditions in rural Guatemala. Since the implementation of neo-liberal reforms families have relied on an increasing amount of paid and unpaid labour from more and more members of the household. *Maquiladora* workforces are primarily composed of young women and some men, who may have previously been in the household or agricultural fields. For industrial labourers, whether in household workshops or *maquiladoras*, the move has been dramatic. On the one hand, industrial work is less physically demanding. However, it is much more tedious and subjects them to much stronger managerial control and

surveillance. (159) Other areas of production require unpaid household labour. For those who perform petty industrial piecework, high production quotas may require unremunerated labour expenditures from the entire family to ensure that a single worker finishes her or his task. Goldín found that these unpaid labourers held the same economic ideologies as the wage workers they supported. (158) Unfortunately, increased household labour and work surveillance have not necessarily produced more wealth for rural Guatemalans. Low wages for workers and high competition between small-scale industrial workshop owners produce little material profit for most workers. How does this affect their visions of themselves and the economy?

Goldín's main goal is understanding the "changes in the economic concepts and economic perspectives that the people embrace" in the context of these economic transformations. (170) She argues that previous economic ideologies espoused by Maya, which treat accumulation, wealth, and economic differentiation with distrust and even moral opprobrium, are being replaced by a new emphasis on abstract qualities like hard work, investment, intelligence for business, and commerce. (70–2, 110, 160) Throughout her analysis, Goldín argues that individuals' ideologies are shaped by larger economic structures. (75, 106–7, 167) However, the relationship between the two is hardly deterministic. A person's gender, age, role in the household, and not just her or his job, play a strong role in predicting their ideologies. (166) Furthermore, new ideas are not grafted upon a population from the outside. Instead, individuals draw on available local and international ideologies and cultural norms in new ways. In other words, even shifts in ideology represent an adoption of ideas that are widely available for labourers. For Goldín, "cultural frameworks provide diverse systems of viewpoints. Individuals draw upon different facets of their culture depending on their more immediate context." (170)

Goldín's understanding of the relationship between work and ideology is most clear in her analysis of the major shift from Catholicism to Pentecostalism in the area. Among petty industrial producers, Goldín found an "association between having occupations that are considered profitable and that involve risk-taking and changing from Catholicism to Evangelicalism." (77) But this is not to say that a change in religion is responsible for a change in economic ideology. Even among Catholics who have not converted to Pentecostalism, there is a high correlation between occupation and economic ideology. (107) From an economic standpoint, people adopt evangelical religions because they "reinforce these changes and provide interpretive and action frameworks that encourage or accommodate future change. But occupation influences are pervasive." (108)

While recent works in labour studies have moved away from defining worker mobilisation strictly in terms of unions, Mark S. Anner's *Solidarity Transformed: Labor Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America*, demonstrates that unions should not be underestimated as a source of working class power. For Anner, who spent years as a labour activist in El Salvador

during the country's Civil War, the neo-liberal era presented a paradox: at the very moment that the entire region was democratising and state-led campaigns of repression against labour and human rights activists were coming to an end, unions were struggling. (Anner *xviii*)

The new difficulties faced by unions are tied to eroding state protections of labourers' rights and changes in the organisation of capital. (23, 29) Anner traces the way the apparel industries in El Salvador and Honduras, along with the automobile industries in Brazil and Argentina, have been re-structured during the past decades. Multi-national companies in both industries now sub-contract many aspects of assembly and labour management to other firms. In the apparel industry, the company that owns the factory is the labour supplier whose clients are clothing companies like the Gap. Workers are paid by these labour suppliers, not the clothing companies themselves. Like the small-scale garment producers in Guatemala, these firms are forced to keep production levels high and wages low in order to maintain their contracts, a constant threat because of high levels of competition among labour suppliers. Unlike traditional production regimes, the firms that supply the labour are not directly affected by the price of the final product. (24–6) In the auto industries of Brazil and Argentina, many firms began to implement modular production in the 1990s. In this model, distinct aspects of the production and assembly process are controlled by different companies, each of which inhabits a separate space within a single factory. Workers from each sector are paid by different companies, though they are ultimately contributing to the production of a single automobile. (38–42)

The brunt of these organisational shifts has fallen on the shoulders of labourers. Auto producers receive low wages and the automation of production makes them less skilled than previous generations of workers in the industry. (38–42) In the apparel industries of El Salvador and Honduras, most production takes place in Export Processing Zones, which are "social and economic enclaves ...disconnected from local production networks and social services." (27, 29) These spaces are often exempted from minimum wage laws and other regulations. They pay their mostly young, mostly female workforce lower wages than the national norm, maintaining most workers in a state of poverty and forcing numerous household members to work. (30–4) In both the apparel and auto industries, production changes have fragmented workers and made it difficult for them to negotiate as a block, since they theoretically all interact with different companies. (34, 38) Even when unions form, traditional methods of negotiation and resistance must also be tempered. For apparel industries, which are marked by flexible capital, an unskilled workforce, and the availability of production sites throughout the developing world, a strong union may encourage a parent company to close a factory and move it elsewhere. In the auto industry, where capital is less flexible, even something as powerful as a workers' strike may help a company in situations of low sales. For instance, in 1999, when auto sales declined and companies faced a crisis

of overproduction, Brazilian auto workers realised that "a strike would be of little value...and might even be welcomed by the company as an opportunity to sell off some of its inventory while not having to pay production workers." (121) Instead, auto workers' job stability requires the continued production and release of new car models, which demands different types of negotiations. (122)

During the past two decades, workers in El Salvador, Honduras, Brazil, and Argentina have developed new strategies and alliances within and across national lines. Anner uses specific labour disputes in the four countries as case studies to plot shifts in workers' organising tactics. The numerous case studies provide a qualitative thickness that enriches its typologies and affirms Anner's claim that the new forms of solidarity are "the result of trial, error, and reflection" over a multi-decade period. There is no single, correct way to organise in the era of globalisation. (53, 167)

The nature of production and the flexibility of capital has made it very difficult for workers in the apparel industry to organise a recognised union and push for better work conditions without causing management to relocate a plant. Over the years, however, activists have learned that, unlike sites of apparel production, retail stores cannot easily move from their consumers. The "Achilles heel of the global apparel industry was the brand-name image of the clothing manufacturers." (60) As a result, mostly "left-oriented unions" have targeted this weakness in situations "where the labor relations regime is highly unfavorable to workers." (74) Labour organisers in El Salvador and Honduras have engaged in transnational activist campaigns (TACS), which are "built on shorter-term labor and NGO cross-border alliances" with students and anti-sweatshop organisations in the United States. (2) While workers mobilise for union recognition or better factory conditions with local labour suppliers, student groups and anti-sweatshop activists in the United States use the plight of labourers to shame larger companies into intervening on their behalf. While this "shaming mechanism" is particularly effective in the apparel or other "buyer-driven" industries, it is not foolproof. (15, 71) Even when apparel companies buckle under the "shaming mechanism" and push their suppliers to recognise unions, there is no guarantee that new agreements will be accepted by the sub-contracted labour suppliers. (63, 71) Factories are often relocated during moments of labour organising, challenging activists to push for industry-wide organisation and place pressure on local governments. (75, 77) Furthermore, labour unions are vulnerable to tensions with activists in the U.S. and women's organisations, which will be addressed in a later section.

In the Latin American automobile manufacturing industry, capital is less mobile and unions are much more firmly established. Nevertheless, auto workers face many obstacles to successful organising due largely to the new methods of production. Although a strike is easier to execute in the auto industry than in the apparel industry, it does not necessarily bring more results.

First, many companies respond to a labour strike in one country by transferring production quotas to plants in another country. A strike could even be welcomed by a company as an opportunity to cut labour costs. Like their counterparts in the apparel industry, Brazilian auto workers faced with an unresponsive state have sought transnational allies to overcome this problem. Unlike the TACs that apparel workers form with NGOs and non-worker organisations, autoworkers in Brazil have forged more stable alliances with other autoworkers' unions, which Anner calls transnational labour networks (TLNs). In some cases, these networks have prompted workers in one plant to refuse to increase production when companies sought to compensate for labour agitation elsewhere. Rather than shaming parent companies, which does not have as much effect in the auto industry, Brazilian auto workers have negotiated directly with company leaders in the United States to ensure that a new model will be produced in their factories, a promise of job security. (122)

Transnational activism is not the only strategy that labour organisers pursue. Anner shows that less radical, nationally-based unions may employ a "radical flank mechanism" in both apparel and auto industries. These organisations thrive most alongside radical worker organisations. Many companies choose to recognise the conservative unions as an alternative to negotiating with its more radical counterparts. These conservative unions are often quick to accept severance packages for workers at moments of layoffs, instead of pushing for extended work contracts. They also function through a close relationship to management, preferring to negotiate with company representatives than engaging in strikes. In the apparel industry, this takes the form of micro-clientelism, whereas in the auto industry, it "entail[s] a relatively stable form of collaboration between workers and employers." (2)

Anner concludes that local and transnational forms of activism require each other. Although national unions may undercut the power of radical labour organisations, they require the threat of radicalism to survive. Conservative unions are usually ineffective at negotiating for company support without a more radical threat looming. At the same time, strong and active transnational organisations are usually powerless to bring about any change within a country that does not have an active and organised labour movement. Both TLNs and TACs require strong local organisations to be effective but even this is not necessarily enough. Even labourers with strong local and transnational organisations may have difficulties changing their living and working conditions.

For Anner, the state's ability to legislate work conditions and recognise unions makes it one of the most powerful potential allies for workers, even amidst the neo-liberal emphasis on deregulation. In fact, Anner identifies state labour policies and the political orientation of specific national governments as some of the most salient factors in determining the success or failure of a labour organisation. He ranks El Salvador, Honduras, Brazil, and Argentina on a scale of least to most favourable states for union organising. This emphasis

on political structures prompts Anner to address the shift to the Left among many Latin American governments. On the one hand, the political ideology of the ruling party is extremely important. For instance, labour protections eroded in Honduras in 2009 when the democratically elected leftist president was replaced by a coup and the enforcement of labour protections largely ceased. (79, 107–8) Yet, on the other, the election of Lula, a former union leader and workers advocate, to the presidency of Brazil signaled a period of optimism but did not lead to an overhaul of labour legislation, making gains for labour quite modest. (134–6)

## Race and Labour Management

COLLECTIVELY, RECENT WORKS in Latin American labour studies challenge us to consider the heterogeneity of the workforce and the breadth of their coping strategies. In addition to making narratives of labour more inclusive, this heterogeneity forces us to ask questions about how it is conceptualised by workers, managers, and state officials. How does this heterogeneity affect larger perceptions of work and worker management?

In a 2009 article, Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger trace the history and various manifestations of race management in the United States and its colonies during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Race management took many forms, which included managers' attempts to foster "competition among races" to prevent mobilisation or increase production, their "claims to know the fitness of certain peoples for certain jobs," or their efforts to "develop 'lower' races by slotting them into, and disciplining them through, certain types of labour." Rather than dying with slavery on plantations, Esch and Roediger argue that race-management flourished into the 20th century, when it co-existed and even influenced the putatively race-neutral ideas of scientific management that were applied in industrial settings by Frederick Taylor.<sup>6</sup> The case of Latin America suggests that these findings are applicable in wider geographic and temporal contexts as well.

The books reviewed in this essay demonstrate that certain forms of race management, similar to those that existed in the United States, were employed throughout Latin America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, even by state officials and managers who operated in the name of scientific objectivity. In both Mexico and Peru, state officials and reformers believed that it was imperative for their countries that indigenous people, who were perceived as "culturally and racially backward," change their dress, habits, and even livelihoods. (Drinot 13, 37; Fitting 81) In Peru, as detailed above, this was to be achieved by intervening in individuals' working and living conditions. First,

6. Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger, "One Symptom of Originality: Race and the Management of Labour in the History of the United States," *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009), 8, 22.

ruling classes believed that "industrialization was equivalent to civilization and progress" and would create modern workers. (Drinot 13) Second, Indians would learn the value of hard work through obligatory labour in the countryside and from exposure to European culture through the influx of white immigrants. (40) Clearly, race management was occurring in early 20th century Latin America. But has it disappeared?

Far from being limited to the early 20th century, elements of the logic of race management remain in the era of neoliberalism. In Guatemalan garment factories, Korean managers supervise Guatemalan workers, which has changed the way class and ethnicity are articulated. Goldín argues that long-standing divisions between Indians and Ladinos, the non-Indian Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Guatemala, are blurring in the factories as they work alongside one another. She argues that this may be the beginning of an emerging class identity that has strong overlaps with ethnicity. (Goldín 151)

At other times, companies may benefit from national, linguistic, or class divisions among workers, though it is not always clear that they are specifically manipulating ideas of race. For Anner, apparel and auto industries thrive on the fact that workers are divided by language, culture, and distance. (Anner 23) While this fragmentation may not be specifically motivated by racial ideologies, the fact that union leaders are challenged to learn languages and communicate across national lines suggest that companies benefit from it. Interestingly, maintaining divisions among employees is not always how companies seek to prevent mobilisation. In the apparel and auto industries, some companies have sought to decrease class consciousness by "[building] a culture that blurred the distinction between workers and management." To this end, auto companies in Brazil and Argentina required all employees to eat in the same spaces and wear identical uniforms. Divisions between "us" and "them" are being replaced by a common identity based on affiliation to the company. (48)

The logic of race management also appears in contemporary claims that workers may be improved by science and technology. In Mexico and Central America, many believe that wage labour or exposure to free-market economics will transform "backward" populations into modern subjects. Fitting demonstrates that similarities exist between the debates about corn occurring in Mexico and the century-old arguments about the need to acculturate Indians and push them away from subsistence. (Fitting 104–6) What was once couched in the language of bringing culture and civilisation to Indians is now framed in terms of bringing them into contact with the free market, agricultural technology and modern economic principles. Many believe that Mexican peasants engage in subsistence because they "[lack] sufficient access to the market" and are in need of "technology from the global north." (106) The loaded assumptions that undergird this race-neutral language are occasionally articulated by state officials. In 2001, Mexico's minister of agriculture bluntly told a journalist that "We are fighting against a culture...Today, I have a responsibility

to teach them what I learned on my own: to sell, to manage markets, and to make value added products. I'm going to support the entrepreneur." (105) The interaction between market forces and individual characteristics appears in rural Guatemala as well. Goldín argues that many wage workers themselves use abstract concepts like "intelligence for business" to explain why some have succeeded economically. (Goldín 81)

The categorical claims of scientific improvement are strong enough that workers and political activists are forced to politicise state policies, which are widely viewed as objective and outside of politics. In early 20th century Peru, the state claimed that its arbitration and collective bargaining policies were "purely technical" questions of science. (Drinot 69) Anti-GM corn activists in contemporary Mexico face a similar task in their efforts to politicise the neoliberal agricultural policies that are justified using the language of modernisation, rationality, science and efficiency. (Fitting 94, 114)

The racialisation of new types of labour is apparent in the way individuals respond to economic changes in Guatemala and Mexico as well. Goldín argues that in Guatemala, non-Indians interpret aggressive marketing by Maya as atypical and unsuitable "for [their] race." (Goldín 113) If individual or collective character traits are used to explain the rising inequalities associated with structural adjustments, people in both Mexico and Guatemala have invoked their "Indianness" to criticise rapid economic change. Goldín shows that Indigenous people have coded an embrace of capitalist labour and commercial relations in racial terms in order to criticise the new economic order. Both Indians and non-Indians "may represent to others in the community the negative behaviors usually attributed to ladinos, and a way of thinking that is counter to their own views of Indians." (114) In Mexico, many rural inhabitants have co-opted negative discourses about the violent nature of Indians in order to justify their political cause and contentious political activities. "The representation of Indians as violent is sometimes mobilised by residents in defense of their resources, while at other times they employ a campesino identity." (Fitting 122, 148)

### **(Mis)representing Labour in Latin America**

IN *SOLIDARITY TRANSFORMED*, Mark S. Anner claims that labour activism in El Salvador and Latin America as a whole shifted in the 1990s from one in which "international solidarity was a highly politicized affair" into a movement "more focused on concrete work demands, and on broad social alliances." (Anner *xvi–xvii*) This observation offers a solid, if incomplete, first response to those who have wondered what labour politics and social movements would look like in Latin America after the fall of the Soviet Union and the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup> As emphasised throughout this

7. John Beverley, "The Im/possibility of Politics: Subalternity, Modernity, Hegemony," in Ileana

essay, activists' renewed emphasis on work conditions has been coupled with an increased heterogeneity in the wage labour force. The recognition of the heterogeneity of the workforce and its varied strategies for coping with their living and working conditions has altered the lenses with which historians explore the past as well.

The texts featured in this review highlight numerous ways that workers have engaged in collective actions to improve their living and working conditions besides trade unions – often with a certain degree of success. In early 20th century Peru, at least some urban workers took advantage of budding state institutions geared toward improving their living and working conditions. While many Peruvian activists and subsequent historians have interpreted these programs strictly as “vote catchers” that would distract workers from more radical goals, Drinot argues that “workers influenced and made their own the discourse and praxis with which the state sought to reshape labor relations.” (Drinot 7, 208) In other words, active and creative participation in state programs, even when antithetical to the goals of more radical movements, must be understood as a legitimate coping strategy chosen by workers. More recently, rural and industrial workers have formed alliances across class with non-worker organisations. In El Salvador, workers' organisations have made alliances with women's groups, a practice that originated during the height of state violence during the country's Civil War. (Anner 57)

Many cross-class alliances straddle national borders as well. In Mexico and Central America, labour activists have forged short and long term partnerships with NGOs, student movements, and other types of organisations in an effort to improve their working conditions. In Mexico City in 2002, academics, activists, farmers, and NGO representatives participated in protests that successfully pressured the Mexican government to renegotiate certain articles of the NAFTA treaty and temporarily halt the import of transgenic corn into Mexico, indicating the transnational aspects of rural labour mobilisation. (Fitting 65–6)

All of these forms of organising affect workers' lives and suggest future directions for the mobilisation and study of a heterogeneous labour force. However, they suffer from at least two major pitfalls that spring from the heterogeneity of the movement. The first problem is exclusion. The above analyses of Drinot and Fitting emphasise the exclusionary nature of many state policies geared toward workers. In early 20th century Peru, the state institutions designed for workers consciously excluded women, indigenous people, and radicals from state support, suggesting that official notions of who constituted “real” workers could be very problematic on the ground. (Drinot 80–1, 95) More recently, the diminished role of the state in the affairs of the region's workers suggest that more and more will face exclusion from its protections.

The second problem that faces Latin American workers and their ability to organise is the distance between labourers and their allies across class and national lines. In many ways, this distance is one of the primary concerns of Elizabeth Fitting, who demonstrates that distinct goals plague different members of the anti-GM corn coalition. At the national level, many of the arguments against genetically modified corn reproduce highly problematic images of indigenous Mexicans. They are usually romanticised as being a homogenous group of people, carrying out their "traditional" agriculture, and previously immune to global capitalism. (Fitting 14, 76) These arguments are not the same as those articulated by the producers themselves, who are less concerned with genetically modified corn than more pressing issues like their relationship to the state, their continued access to water, and the future of their communities. Although activists are ostensibly championing the rights of rural corn producers, the disconnect between them raises serious questions about the pitfalls of transnational, cross-class organising. The problem is not unique to Mexico. In El Salvador, tensions emerged within the coalitions consisting of workers' and women's organisations. "Flare-ups between women's groups and unions were common, with women's groups accusing the male-dominated union movement of failing to address the particular circumstances of women...The unionists responded that the women's groups did not understand union organising and collective bargaining." (Anner 57) Such tensions are not strictly a function of class differences. Anner found similar tensions between unions in different countries, especially those that sought to organize across the North-South divide, producing an obstacle to effective mobilisation. (*xvii*)

## Conclusion

THE BOOKS REVIEWED IN THIS ESSAY are perfect examples of the shift in labour studies toward more flexible categories of analysis for work and mobilisation. Considering the massive changes in the composition of the Latin American workforce that have occurred since the implementation of neoliberal policies, the scholarly shift could not have come at a better time. However, identifying diverse types of workers in Latin American society and history is only a starting point. These books address different aspects of the new problems that emerge from heterogeneity: how do divisions within the workforce affect larger processes of self-identification, work, management, and mobilisation? While these four books and the workers they study address these problems, it is clear that no easy answers exist. Placing these texts, which all hail from different disciplines, into dialogue shows the promise of combining different methodologies and disciplinary perspectives to the study of labour in all of its diversity.