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Theme: The Nature of Work in the Globalised Economy

The Spatial Restructuring of Work and Automotive Maquiladoras

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The spatial restructuring of work and fragmentation of work activities across borders is an ongoing and expanding process in the current global neoliberal environment. Cross-border ownership is increasingly commonplace with corporate locational decisions principally informed by considerations of heterogeneity of place.

Cross-border capital mobility is a clear consequence of the globalisation process. Social Structures of Accumulation (SSA) theory provides a useful perspective for placing globalisation in an historical and institutional context and tracing its consequences for spatially-bound workers. The spatialization school places special emphasis on the manner in which SSAs produce differential labour outcomes at local levels in explainable ways. The ongoing spatial restructuring of work is part of a larger globally-based labour control strategy. A reliance on strategic differentiation across locations is fundamental as the more and greater are differences in the organisation of work, the more the potential for worker solidarity is eroded. The degree of differentiation is influenced by corporations' ability to consciously implement preferred functional differences and to actively exploit existing ones in the local environment.

The paper takes the Mexican maquiladora automotive industry as an operational example of cross-border spatialization and its effects. It asks if and how the organisational capacity of its labour is undermined by: 1) consciously constructed functional differences abetted by technocratic control and flexible production systems and; 2) the active exploitation of existing local differences. The industry's immersion in the global neoliberal environment is evidenced by the diffusion of social and technical controls at maquiladora plant-level through computerised standardisation and parameters; the implementation of flexible accumulation systems; attacks on unions; flexibilisation of employment contracts and out/off-sourcing. The implementation of these controls is heavily dependent on the specifics of place, while the specifics of place themselves can serve as additional, pre-existing sources of differentiation. Based on findings from semi-structured interviews and a case study of Ford Motor Company across multiple plant sites, a conceptualisation of strategic differentiation is developed - four key forms that corporations engage in at local levels and the impact of each on workers' positions in not just the local but the global economy.

