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## ETHNICITY, GENDER, CLASS, AND THE POLITICS OF POWER

*There are many ways of looking at the world, there are many ways of exploring reality. Anybody who believes that he holds the truth, and the whole truth, about any given reality, or because he has a bundle of statistics in his hand, that he knows more than a poet, a novelist, a visionary who does not hold the statistics, is a fool.*

—Carlos Fuentes

THIS PARTICULAR Thursday appears to be a day like any other in the factory. The Caribbean sun beats down on the corrugated *galvanize* metal roof and the din of the many small and large electric fans used to catch any breeze blowing through the open windows almost drowns out the whirring and screeching of the many machines that drive the production process. The movement of hot air caused by the fans almost makes working in the heat bearable; it almost, but not quite, dries the sweat on our bodies. Perhaps, I think, if the workers placed the fans in one direction, in a coordinated movement, the hot air would be expelled and we could find relief. Other times I think that the oppressive heat will prevail no matter what the workers do.

In the hot, stifling air inside the factory, smells become more acute and suffocating. In one part of the factory, there are large machines that produce plastic parts from pellets made of resin. When these are in operation, the odor of freshly molded plastic floods the factory, overpowering the smells that prevail in other departments of the production process. In one department, solder is a prevalent scent, punctuated by the smell of burned flesh or hair when one of the workers accidentally touches the hot soldering irons. In another department, glue is the prevailing smell; in another, grease.

Inside the factory, the styles of fashion vary somewhat. The younger workers favor a casual, sporty look. Jeans are the normal attire for most young men and women, although on occasion some young women wear skirts. The older women almost without exception wear dresses, often ones they have made at home or have paid a kinswoman, close friend, or fellow factory worker to make. Their dresses are covered by gray, cotton aprons. Many wear

their hair in kerchiefs. Vera, an unmarried forty-five-year-old worker, wears nice slacks or dresses to the factory, clearly overdressing, according to the other workers. Her style resembles that of the women office workers in downtown Port-of-Spain. It is rumored by the other workers that she insinuates to her neighbors that she has a more prestigious office job in town, not a factory job. The male supervisors dress in jeans and casual work clothes. A couple of them wear mechanics' overalls.

While the production process at the Essential Utensils Ltd. (EUL) factory does not feature the same sights, sounds, and smells as the sugar production that sustained the Caribbean economy for more than 400 years, it nevertheless has a number of things in common with plantation work. Seasonal variations in production are very important. In the few weeks prior to this Thursday, the factory had been increasing its output of household appliances to meet the demands of the Christmas season.

Another parallel to the plantation regime is that the owners are not above employing coercion to secure increased production. One such technique in the EUL factory is forcing the workers to work overtime. On this particular Thursday, Nigel Tiexiera came out of his air-conditioned office onto the factory floor and announced to some of the supervisors that some of the workers would have to work extra time today in order to meet increased demand. There is little the workers can do when they are forced to work overtime. Tiexiera has on more than one occasion told members of his nonunionized work force that if they do not comply they will be fired. So most of the workers stayed after the normal 4:30 P.M. quitting time. The two workers who said they would not or could not stay were called into the office and warned that they might face dismissal.

At lunchtime the next day, the youngest of the supervisors, thirty-year-old Winston, called the workers around the table in his department, which is on the second floor of the factory and away from most of the noise of the main factory floor. He told them that, because the company had an order for Puerto Rico that had to be shipped the following Wednesday, they would also have to work on Saturday. There were loud complaints from the workers, who had had to work overtime on several occasions during the previous few weeks. In response, Winston, an East Indian with a moustache, dressed in khaki trousers and a Hawaiian print short-sleeved shirt, tried to evoke some sympathy from the workers by observing that Tiexiera was pressuring him too: "Look, I know what you all going to say, but we have no choice and I wish you could help me out."

Susan, a young black woman, exclaimed, "Ha! Tiexiera don't care about we."

Cokie, also young and black, agreed. She wears jeans, and her hair is "Jherri curled" (that is, treated to produce wet, loose curls). She said, "And when it have no work, he the first to jump up and say 'send they home!' "

Winston replied, "But these are difficult times out there."

Then, Denise, a thirty-five-year-old black woman, who is one of the fewer older women to wear jeans regularly and who seems to influence many of the younger women, said, referring to the country's post-oil-boom economic crisis, "He always usin' the excuse of the Recession, but [pointing to an addition to the factory that was being constructed at the time] look out dere—that big buildin' goin' up, the big buildin' he have going up. Like, he ent feel the Recession like the rest of we."

Winston started to appeal to Denise as a sort of "ringleader," but Margarita jumped in: "But Winston, *he send us home* when it have no wuk."

"Look," Winston said, "on Wednesday we didn't have no components and I went ahead and didn't send you home and had you make up parts. Now I'm just askin' for help."

But Cokie objected to his excuses: "You had no right without talking to we."

The workers started mumbling among themselves, but their discussion was cut off when the lunch bell rang. They disbursed slowly, still talking about the developments.

At lunch, Carla, an unmarried twenty-four-year-old East Indian who lives at home with her mother and siblings, went to talk to the workers in some of the production departments downstairs. Many of these are black women in their thirties and forties who have much in common with each other. Many are neighbors and attend the same churches, and almost all have children. Many eat lunch together on the benches in front of the factory. They had also been "asked" to work on Saturday, but for only half a day. They were told that they would receive a flat rate of \$12 (Trinidad and Tobago, or TT)—about U.S. \$3.35—for two and a half hours of work. This was a slight incentive for many workers, some of whom were paid as little as TT\$2.75—about U.S. \$0.75—an hour. When they arrived at work the next day, they learned that on Saturday they would receive only "time and a half," based on their regular hourly pay. Thus, workers making TT\$2.75 an hour were to earn TT\$10.32 for two and a half hours of Saturday work.

Carla began to try to organize collective resistance, emphasizing that Tiexiera "can't fire all de departments." Val, a stocky twenty-nine-year-old black mother of two, who was pregnant with her third child, disagreed loudly, arguing that Carla had to think of people with "responsibilities," that "times are hard," and that this was not the right time for collective action. Val's comments provoked a negative response among the other downstairs workers.

Feeling defeated, Carla went back upstairs and joined Myra, a thirty-three-year-old black woman with two children, who was eating her boxed lunch purchased from a nearby snack bar. When Carla began telling Myra what happened, Myra looked away and kept eating.

Later, Carla said to me, "I went down to talk to dem at lunch and dey still

listenin' to dat Val. She still have control over dem. She bawlin' 'Times hard.' " In private, Myra told me that she would work on Saturday. "My husband retrenched," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

In a fury, Carla then went into the office, saying that she was going to get a list of the prices of EUL's products because she wanted to "publish what going on in a letter to the newspaper." She said to me and other workers, "I don't know what hold Val have on they. She hearin' me and she bawl out loud 'Oh Gaaaawd'—one set of nigger chupidness [i.e., stupidity]. She sayin' 'She ent even have one chile yet and she know what best for we' and 'She too young to have responsibility to see about a family' and ting. She have a real big mout. She just bawl the loudest and they listen. It like they don't want to lift theyselves up. They been workin' here for so long. I leaving in July when I married. I don't care."

Carla went back upstairs and read her horoscope in the newspaper. It said "Don't be afraid to look after your own interests." "That's it then," she said, determined. Thinking about the overwhelming alignment of forces against her—the owners, other workers—she tried to justify her efforts to improve conditions for herself and her fellow workers. "But it just that I care what happen. And don't forget, it have my sister workin' here too."

As the workday ends on Friday, the workers file out of the factory and through its gates, where, according to company policy, each of them have their handbags checked by the security guard. They head for the main road, where they will catch route taxis or *maxi taxis* (privately owned minibuses) for the trip home. They discuss the recent developments in hushed tones. Many, like Carla, are frustrated that the workers "just can't seem to come together," as one whispered, to take collective action. In their minds they are quickly reorganizing their schedules for Saturday, wondering how they will do the shopping and cleaning, and what relative or neighbor they can ask to look after their children while they are working. They await the morning with anxiety and trepidation.

## *Producing Power*

This incident typifies the interplay of the forces of power and production at EUL, which I try to capture in the title phrase *Producing Power*. "Producing power" refers to working through the intricacies of domination and subordination, autonomy and dependency, causation and stasis. With an emphasis on production and process, this view sees power not as a state to be reached but as something wielded, something exercised. Social identities such as ethnicity, class, and gender are implicated in this process through their symbolization in the factory.

But I also mean "*producing power*," in the sense that power is derived from the formal economic process of producing commodities, where acquiring and