

“Blurred Lines: Examining Mollona’ evidence of relations of production in the Labour workforce in Sheffield”

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Introduction

I have chosen for this essay, the ethnographies of Massimiliano Mollona which he conducted in Sheffield. I will reference two pieces of work: “Factory, Family and Neighbourhood: the Political Economy of Informal Labour in Sheffield” published in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 2005 and “Steel lives: an ethnography of labour in contemporary Sheffield” written during his PhD in Social Anthropology in 2002/2003. I will demonstrate how Mollona was influenced by Karl Marx in his review and understanding of the economy of Sheffield and how he applied Marx’s theories in his ethnographies. I will also show how he was able to rethink critically some of Marx’s key beliefs as well as more general economic concepts. In order to achieve this, I will address the various blurred relations emerging in Mollona’s ethnographies by specifically zooming into the notions of Patriarchal status, Fragmentation and Coercion/Consent.

Patriarchal Spillage

Patriarchal status is a term used by Mollona to define the concept of men exploiting their status in society and controlling groups of people. I have purposely added the word “spillage” as I wanted to underline that the patriarchal power was being exercised within the factory walls but the hunger for control spilled into the community and at home. Mollona demonstrates how within the family, bonds of kinship are taken advantage of as unpaid labour. He references Leopoldo Fortunati, who himself states that the domestic and informal economy is a form of capitalist appropriation of unpaid labour through bonds of kinship. In his work, “The arcane of reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital”, Fortunati demonstrates that family members have become commodities. He goes on saying (page 126) “they are commodities and insofar as labor-power is “bought” by capital and produces capital, reproduction workers do not belong to themselves but to capital - they are capital”. This is very well illustrated throughout Mollona’s work where he provides multiple examples of male wage workers becoming the representatives of the capitalists in the household. He shows precisely how biological fathers still provide most of the income of the extended families, how they employ their children in local industries and manage the incomes of their wives and kin. Capitalist relations are reproduced through kinship relations. In his ethnographies, Mollona illustrates on multiple occasions how Teddy has a total grip of his family’s labour power and controls their output and the money flow. Teddy is the embodiment of capitalism and there are countless examples of those compelling character traits. Not only his wife Freda and children provide free labour in the household by cleaning/cooking/painting, they also work for enterprises controlled by Teddy in the informal economy (prostitution, gardening, drug handling etc.). Claire, Teddy’s daughter, is the general manager of the Elysium brothel. The brothel is a microcosm of capitalism: different classes of women who serve different types of customers and charge different rates for their labour. The concept of exploitation is also very evident at Elysium where the

Eastern European girls receive 20% of the revenues made and the owners split the rest. During Snooker nights, Teddy also exerts his power over his cheap labour by disciplining them in public, believing that he is showing leadership when in fact he is merely reproducing the managerial and organizational capitalist behaviors he experiences in the factory. This extends the spatial boundaries of the walled factory as Mollona so beautifully puts it. Mollona clearly shows that the family is a business in itself, where the owner (the patriarchal male) 's main objective is to generate profit by ensuring productivity is optimized and the cost of labour is minimized. So the male would assign jobs to his family members, supervises their work and pay each member as he sees fit. On the other side of the fence, the relatives see the father figure as an exploitative boss, who takes advantage of the family bonds and profits from their labour. But the bonds of kinship are not just used in the home to raise capital but also penetrate into the factory floor to generate even greater capital. In Morris factory, apprentices are kin and children of friends of the elder workers. So as the capitalist mindset spills into the home, the home spills into the factory. Therefore this two-way flow makes the different relationships of production and exploitation even tighter and almost impossible to untangle.

Let's look at how this dual mixture of work and family is made possible through the concept of coercion and consent.

Coercion and Consent

Traditionally, realist hegemony describes the dominance of one state over several others, while gramscian theory defines hegemony as a combination of coercion and consent which is not merely exercised by the state, but by civil society as well. In his ethnographies, Mollona challenges the concept of subjectivity of the workers made by Burawoy and claims that the workers' culture is not just forged in the workplace through social relations residing in the factory but this culture is also crafted outside the factory. He looks back at historical context and claims that the capitalist's control over labour and the workers's consent was historically and maybe silently negotiated in the neighbourhood: churches, schools. This is very interesting as Mollona challenges the concept of pure class exploitation where the proletariats are victims of bourgeoisie manipulation and shows that it is not as a clear cut as it may seem. Exploitation can be blurred by the evident notion of consent. Even a factory owner, in the case of Mr. Reed, owner of Morris, understands they are profits to be made in the informal economy. He turns a blind eye and lets his employees carry out extra activities within working hours and within his factory, as he knows this can only benefit his second endeavor and boost the invisible profits of CISCO, which is where his real interest lies. So yet again, there is this dual world of seen/unseen/ spoken/unspoken behaviors. Mr. Reed does not enforce supervision on the shop-floor and workers are left free to conduct a variety of informal activities. Mr. Reed gives unspoken consent to the elder workers to exploit the labour of the apprentices and subcontractors within factory walls and also outside as he understands that this can only intensify his profits. The elder workers give unspoken consent to multinational steel corporation owners to exploit them as they are themselves the subcontractors in those contexts. In turn, the young workers accept, even reluctantly, being exploited by the elders as they have often family ties with their exploiters. This is another example of spillage between informal and formal economies. Mollona shows that the informal economy of the neighborhood intermingles with the formal production process at Morris. At the same time as this consent ballroom dance is taking

place; there is clearly a coercion of the labour throughout the production process. As mentioned above, through their power and authority, on the shop floor and in the neighborhood, the elders coerce the young workers into production. At home, the same people then coerce their wives and children into informal production by enforcing their patriarchal authorities. Although there are clear distinctions between hegemonic capitalism, which relies on the worker's consent and despotic capitalism, which relies on their coercion, once again Mollona illustrates in his rich ethnographies how coercion and consent cohabit. Through this observation, Mollona challenges Marxism's view that capitalism does not entail great and linear developments but rather paradoxical evolutions and local adaptations.

We will now explore how fragmentation enters the various strata of this local adaptation.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a general term used to demonstrate how a society can be divided into a collection of interest groups. For Marx, the social division of labour implies in Capitalism the fragmentation of capital between different owners and the fragmentation between capital and labour. Mollona's ethnographies show how globalization has reshaped the spaces of the factory, the family and the neighborhood. He focuses intensely on the notion of fragmentation and illustrates how fragmentation is experienced on different levels. Let's take a look at the fragmented labour first. Capitalism has fragmented the workforce into Artisans "skilled casual labourers" and proletarians "unskilled labour". Different types of relationships and struggles take place within the factory floors between the Artisans and proletarians. In addition the informal economy has also fragmented the workforce. Within the informal economy emerge different subclasses of workers and as a result, a different level of class conflicts. This is clearly evident within the walls of Morris factory. As the elders control the informal labour process, the younger workers rely on the wage of the factories for survival. The Youngers even go on to accuse the Elders of being capitalists and of making profits on the back of their own informal activities, as it is those same elders who also control the markets and casual labourers. At Morris, the ideology of "family business" and informal social relationships on the shop-floor has fragmented the workforce even further. Mollona demonstrates that due to the informal arrangements (for example how workers are remunerated), the workforce is split between the younger workers who are subsumed to capital and the elders, who are not and who act as self-employed. So although all those individuals work together, somehow capital and thirst for profits have found a way to turn some of the workforce into an exploitative bourgeoisie. This is not just a generational divide between the elders and the much younger workforce. Mollona goes deeper into his observation by demonstrating that the informal economy of Morris for example has fragmented the workforce into a "core" and a "periphery".

Fragmentation spills into all strata of the community. State welfare and housing policies have fostered the transformation of nuclear families into extended ones. As Mollona demonstrates, the state, through its welfare legislation, has played a key role in this evolution as the state gives more social benefits to lone persons. This in turns discourages marriages, breaks the stable nuclear family and encourages more of an individualistic economic strategy. However, Mollona continues to explain that because state benefits do not cover the high rent being charged by local entrepreneurs and community leaders (which is in itself another exploitation made possible by the state relocating working class families away from

their own housing to rental accommodation), individuals have no choice but to pull together into what is defined as extended families. This fission within the household fragments how family members interact and value one another and leaves room for the alpha male to manage and control the capital of the ever extended families. Fragmentation is also reproduced in the neighborhood by social and economic policies. The increased poverty of the local economy fragments the communities and divides the households. If we take the example of Sheffield, Khaled's Pub could be seen as just a local pub. However due to the closure of local job, medical and welfare centers, Khaled's Pub has become an economic and welfare institution. Although one could assume that customers visiting Khaled's Pub be defined as one group/class, fragmentation also split its punters into sub classes. Even around the snooker table, the cliff lads are sub divided between owners and workers. Groups of people are physically fragmented within the space: 1 room for the Yemenis, 1 room for women and Cliff lads can be found in the snooker room.

Mollona talks about "invisible boundaries" (page 51/193, *Steel Lives*), continuously highlighting the concept of fragmentation. He demonstrates that late capitalism does not entail the dissolution of the working class. Rather, it increases both the fragmentation between space of wage labour, nuclear family, civil society and between space of casual labour, extended families and local politics. Unlike industrial capitalism which subsumes labour through the organization of production in the factory, late capitalism consumes labour inside and outside the factory and permeates the entire form of life. I believe that Mollona takes his insight and understanding of capitalism to a different level and provides granularity and an evolution of capitalism, not fully exposed under Marxism. We will now explore additional nuances Mollona was able to make around the concept of Hierarchy.

Perceived Hierarchy

Hierarchy is a term used by Marxism when asserting that an individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by their role in the production process, and argues that political and ideological consciousness is determined by class position. When reading Mollona, I get a sense that hierarchy is not as clear cut as classified by Marxism. It is not just about the bourgeoisie and the working class. It seems that the notion of hierarchy and power exertion is extended into every walk of life. The working class could be seen as a whole, as a group in itself but Mollona demonstrates that hierarchy and classes are everywhere. It exists in the formal economy, in the informal economy and it surely exists at home. Mollona goes as far as explaining that the chain of hidden production in Attercliffe is made stable by the social hierarchy that underpins the economy of the neighbourhood (page 271 of *Steel Lives*). The working class is split into sub classes where you will find mini bourgeoisie and mini working class. Again and again, this pattern of hierarchy is reproduced. Allowing this pattern to reproduce itself stems from what each individual experiences in their own life. So in the factory itself, people will experience "real" hierarchy set by the company but also will perceive other types of parallel hierarchy based on how they value their own labour and the labour of others. This is extremely well illustrated by Mollona. He shows for example that the social relations, taking place at Khaled's, mirror the hierarchy and distance through which the hot workers of Morris, interact with each other on the shopfloor. It is yet another example of blurred boundaries between spatial spaces, like the shop floor of a factory and the social space of Khaled's pub.

Let's take a look at how those perceptions of hierarchy can be linked to the Marxist notion of false consciousness.

False Consciousness

False Consciousness is a term used—primarily by Marxists—to describe ways in which material, ideological, and institutional processes are said to mislead members of the proletariat within capitalist societies, concealing the exploitation of certain classes. In his ethnographies, Mollona challenges in some way this definition. Although he states that some workers are not consciously aware of their place in societies, Mollona also demonstrates how some workers are aware they are being exploited and consider their managers as capitalists. The exploitation is not concealed but very much apparent throughout the different layers of the economy. Mollona shows that there are 2 forms of class consciousness: consciousness of the artisans and consciousness of the proletarians. Mollona shares with us that even the Attercliffe artisans, never thought about themselves in terms of 'class' (page 103 of *Steel Lives*). Mollona challenges the working class concept highlighted by Marx. On page 323 of "*Steel Lives*", Mollona expresses, that unlike Marx simplistic historical trajectory of working class consciousness from a non-alienated feudal world to an alienated capitalism, working class consciousness mixes different moralities and experiences of 'labour' and 'capital' crafted in different times and spaces of production. He shows in his ethnographies that the co-existence of the mix moralities in Morris have actually increased the chance of survival of the firm, whereas the strong political consciousness of the craft workers of UNSOR, has been one of the factors that led to the closure of the hot department. However and even if Mollona has clear evidences of different levels of consciousness within the working class, I get a sense that most workers are alienated about the meaning of their lives. In those ethnographies, I feel that the workers do not have the luxury to ask themselves the question about what is their lives about but spend their time constantly working to pay the bills and to survive. And as a result, I feel that the workers in Sheffield are alienated from aspects of their human nature.

Conclusion

Mollona successfully shows that the capitalist labour process did not develop in Sheffield in the pure form described in Marx's theory but as a mixture of industrial capitalism, petty commodity production and subcontracting. He illustrates how people have adapted to existing economical state of desolation and how they actively combine formal employment in the factory and informal activities in the household and in the community. We clearly see the organic connection between domestic/informal economy and the wage economy. We understand that the transformation of wage labourers into domestic capitalists suggest that capitalist relations take different forms depending on different contexts and in turn capitalism subsumes labour in many different ways. Mollona's work consistently shows nuances between the relations of production which are not visible in the more academic concepts of Marxism. Mollona utilizes a constant pendulum movement to look back and forth at how social phenomena evolve. Mollona demonstrates that there is exploitation from "upper" to lower

classes but also shows that exploitation happens within a class. He goes beyond Marxism's definition of exploitation, where Marx lays clear-cut boundaries between Bourgeoisie and Proletariat and how the Bourgeoisie exploits the Proletariat. Throughout my reading of Mollona, I wondered if exploitative behavior is inherent to a human being's DNA instead of being "class based". Throughout Mollona's ethnographies, I felt individuals were always able to find and define another group of people as a "lower" sub-group and as a result, systematically exploit them. Is exploitation really part of human's nature? Or like Marx put it, maybe it is capitalism that destroys its two sources of wealth: nature and human beings.

Mollona's thesis "Steel Lives" is dedicated to his father. Mollona states in the "Acknowledgements" section of his ethnography, that he was fascinated by stories his father used to share about working people. This may have given him a passion for ethnography which I see as a form as storytelling. In turn and throughout reading his work, I felt fascinated by his key listening skills, his fair representation of workers' lives and how he was able to challenge key Marxism concepts and show rich nuances which would have been impossible to see with the "untrained" eye.

Bibliography

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