

Teaching about Sweatshops and the Global Economy

“How often do you see students protesting the exploitation of labor,” a friend and fellow political economist, asked me late one evening. “They deserve our support,” he insisted.

Of course they do. That is why last Fall I taught “Sweatshops and the Global Economy,” a first year seminar at Wheaton College, a small New England liberal arts college, where I have worked for over two decades.

But teaching a first year seminar about sweatshops was not always the act of solidarity I had imagined. In class, I found myself confronting many of the same arguments I had encountered writing a reply to the defenders of globalization and critics of the anti-sweatshop movement (Collins and Miller, 2000).

That is hardly surprising. After all, every entering student at Wheaton is required to take a first year seminar. Engaging those students, not the group of sweatshop activists I had somehow convinced myself would be taking my course, was something I struggled with all semester.

Those struggles are much of what I report on in my article. I developed techniques (exercises, arguments, and discussion strategies), and found materials (videos, pamphlets, personal testimonies) that worked -- engaged the students in a critical analysis of sweatshops, of the effects of globalization, and of the role of women in the world export factories. But many times my efforts fell short. I try to report honestly what I learned from those efforts as well.

Inside Sweatshops and The Global Economy

“Sweatshops and the Global Economy” was one of eighteen sections of Wheaton’s seminar program for first year students. The sixteen students who selected my seminar were much like those in my other classes, although a bit more open to thinking about their place in the world economy. One of them was a sweatshop activist and several others were concerned about sweatshops and curious about what they might do to combat their spread. Other students were there because they were interested in economic issues, and some merely because they had to take a first year seminar.

More of my students were women than men, about two-thirds, which is typical of Wheaton, a former women’s college. All but one of the students were white, and most came from seemingly privileged backgrounds. A few had attended prep school. But one student was from inner-city New York, two were the children of school teachers, and another came from backwoods Maine.

My students’ academic skills varied widely: from students who read critically and wrote skillfully, to those who read with difficulty and had problems writing. I suspect that their mix of skills was typical of a second tier liberal arts college, Wheaton’s rank in the U.S. News and World Reports ratings.

The political sophistication of the students varied greatly as well. One had never heard right and left used as political terms. A few possessed a critical sense of the inequalities of today’s economy. But others, though readily allowing that third world economies were riddled with inequalities, took umbrage at any suggestion that the rewards of U.S. society were distributed unfairly.

Perhaps the one trait most of my students shared was that they were quieter than my other students. That is not unusual for a group of first year students. With a few exceptions, the bulk

of my students were struggling to find their voice. This was true of the men as well as the women and of some of my very best students.

The content of my sweatshop seminar is much like that of the few other sweatshop courses that I know about, all of which are taught by sociologists. Like those courses, it covers the return of sweatshops to the United States, the proliferation of sweatshops in Latin America and Asia, the globalization of the clothing, athletic footwear, or toy industries, and union, consumer, and student efforts to combat sweatshops. [1]

In one important way, the content of my course differs from that of other sweatshop courses. As a political economist, I place far more emphasis on confronting the arguments of mainstream economists who maintain that sweatshops better the lives of the world's poor and that the anti-sweatshop movement is counter-productive. Confronting those arguments also helped my seminar conform to the "The Great Controversies" theme of the First Year Seminar program.

The seminar reflected my training in political economy and my experience teaching economics to conservative students in different ways. For instance, I dedicate time to making the case that women who work in the world export factories we call sweatshops are exploited. That is something that instructors in other disciplines might not feel obligated to do. Also, to be able to confront the critics of the anti-sweatshop movement, the course explores broader themes about the economics of globalization and world poverty.

Exercises in the Political Economy of Sweatshops

I developed or borrowed from others several exercises in political economy as tools for engaging students in the study of sweatshops. Let me tell you about two of them.

Exercise #1: Exploiting Commodity Fetishism

Believe it or not, the right place to start any sweatshop course is with Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. No, I don't mean with a long-winded exegesis of Marx's explanation of how commodities become the bearers of social relations in a capitalist economy (Marx: 1967).

But I do start with the assertion that purchasing commodities brings us in contact with the lives of the factory workers who manufacture them. Buying jeans, t-shirts, or sneakers made in Los Angeles, Bangkok or Jakarta, or the export zones of southern China and Latin America, connects students to the women who are working long hours in unhealthy and dangerous conditions for little pay in the apparel and athletic footwear industries. Students in the anti-sweatshop movement, without having sloughed through Marx's Capital, understand that connection and want desperately to put a stop to the brutalization and assaults on human dignity suffered by these women whose labor manufactures their commodities.

Sweatshop organizers know that commodities can reveal underlying social relations. [2] For instance, the "Rethinking Schools" curriculum on sweatshops and The Smithsonian sweatshop exhibit, "Between A Rock and A Hard Place," recommend the following exercise to introduce students to sweatshops. Have students look at the tags of their t-shirts, identify the countries where their clothes are made, and then find those countries on a map. The Smithsonian website also provides data on U.S. apparel imports from different countries and the prevailing average hourly wage in their apparel industries.

The global production game, as the Smithsonian website calls it, got my course off to a good start. On the first day of class, students helped one another read the tags of their t-shirts. Students placed flags on a world map showing where their clothes were made, then told us about the prevailing wages in the apparel industries in those countries. [3]

Many of my assignments built on these initial connections. Workers' personal testimonies (e.g., Liu, 2000) and other readings acquainted us with the lives of apparel, toy, and footwear workers in China, El Salvador, Indonesia, Mexico, Thailand, Viet Nam, as well as Los Angeles and New York in the United States. A library assignment, a standard feature of a first year seminar, asked students to develop an annotated bibliography about one group of workers (in a particular industry or country) and then present their findings to the class.

Among these materials, Made in China, the National Labor Committee pamphlet, was especially effective (Kernaghan, 2000). It is filled with short summaries and pictures describing the horrifying conditions at Chinese factories producing goods for U.S. corporations, including Wal-Mart and Nike, and closes with a list of imprisoned labor organizers. In some of these factories young women work as long as 70 hours a week, are paid just pennies an hour after pay deductions for board and room, and often live in dormitory rooms with as many as 15 other workers.

Several videos about sweatshops are now available, most distributed by Global Exchange or the National Labor Committee. My favorite is "Global Village or Global Pillage." (Brecher et al, 2000) Its animation engaged my students. Its interviews with women across Asia and Latin America made clear the truly global effects of "the race to the bottom." Users of sweatshop videos need to be careful, however, since some repeat the same themes and sometimes even parts of the same interviews.

During the semester, my students referred repeatedly to some of these stories. One was a video interview in which National Labor Committee director Charles Kernaghan holds up to the camera a newspaper advertisement with a picture of a young woman at work on a factory sewing machine. The ad reads, "Rosa Martinez produces apparel for U.S markets on her sewing machine in El Salvador. You can hire her for 57-cents an hour." Then Kernaghan holds up the

same ad, published one year later, but it now reads, “you can hire her for 33-cents a hour.” (National Labor Committee, 1995).

Another was the anthropologist Patricia Fernandez-Kelly’s “Maquiladoras: The view from the inside.” Her article brings readers inside an apparel factory in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, just across the U.S. border from El Paso, Texas. We accompany her to an interview which includes an on-the-job sewing test, suffer along with her as she confronts the unrelenting pace of the work on the line, and learn about the lives of her fellow workers. Despite the fact that these women earn the minimum wage and work 48 hours a week (conditions better than those of most apparel workers in developing countries), we are convinced when Fernandez concludes that, “the life profile of a maquiladora woman is a saga of downward mobility.” (Fernandez-Kelly, 1997: 214)

Exercise #2: What is a sweatshop?

The answer to the question what is a sweatshop is less straight-forward than you might think. Most anti-sweatshop groups use a legal definition to track the return of sweatshops to the United States. They define sweatshop operators as employers who violate two or more labor laws, from the prohibition of child labor, to health, safety, fire and building codes, to forced-overtime and the minimum wage.

Other sweatshop critics, such as labor economist Michael Piore, insists that the term sweatshop should be reserved for "a specific organization of work" characterized by "very low fixed costs" (Piore, 1997: 136). In sweatshops, workers are usually paid by the piece. Other fixed costs -- rent, electricity, heat -- are held to a minimum by operating substandard, congested, unhealthy factories, typically overseen by a “sweater” or subcontractor (Piore, 1997: 135).

Still others of us favor the broader, looser use of the term sweatshop as a vivid metaphor for a lousy job. We worry that a narrow definition of sweatshops lets off the hook too many low wage employers who might meet minimum wage and safety requirements, but seldom provide their employees with an adequate standard of living.

After discussing the different definitions of sweatshops, I asked students to read several newspaper and magazine articles that use the term sweatshop, and to decide if the article used the term appropriately. The goal of the exercise was to sharpen their analytical sense of what constitutes a sweatshop, a term mainstream economists complain is nothing other than a vague, ill-defined pejorative. We read “Sweatshops of the Streets” about bicycle messengers (Lipsyte, 1995), “The New Sweatshops” about asbestos-removers and immigrant flower pickers (Begley, 1990), about workers on cruise ships – “sweatshops at sea” (Reynolds and Weikel, 2000), about “Sweatshops for Janitors” (Cleeland, 2000), and even why “adjunct profs at our colleges might as well be sweatshop workers.” (Scarff, 2000)

To my surprise students found this exercise to be something other than the instructive lark I had thought it would be. Applying a consistent standard to defining a sweatshop is indeed a difficult exercise. Beyond that, the responses of several students were either defensive or openly hostile. It was one thing to label export factories in the third world or even immigrant populated factories in the U.S. apparel industry sweatshops. But to suggest that a broad swath of U.S. workers labored under sweatshop-like conditions while being denied equal opportunity or a chance for advancement was quite another. Some students instructed bicycle messengers to go back to school, disputed that cruise ship conditions were as bad as reported, and suggested that farm work has always been hard. Other students took the exercise as intended and tried to parse each example with a consistent definition of a sweatshop. They learned a great deal, although I

worried that I had robbed them of some their certainty about what constituted “sweatshop” abuse.

Confronting the Critics of the Anti-Sweatshop Movement

“The overwhelming mainstream view among economists,” reports economist Paul Krugman, “is that the growth of sweatshop employment is tremendous good news for the world's poor.” (Levinson, 1997) While a maverick on some issues, Krugman, like most economists, is convinced that low-wage world-export factory jobs, the very kind we usually call sweatshops, better the lives of these workers and their families.

As a political economist, I felt a special obligation to take on those arguments. My seminar devoted time to understanding exactly what economists have to say in defense of sweatshops. In one class we developed a list of their arguments, which I then typed up and asked students to respond to point by point in the next class. I then typed up and distributed our responses as an “indictment of sweatshops.”

This is a difficult assignment, perhaps a bit over the heads of some of my students and more appropriate for upper level economics and social science majors. And it is risky business as well. Sustained exposure to these arguments can dull anyone's critique of sweatshops, and allows more conservative students to inoculate themselves against most any indictment of sweatshops.

Still I am convinced that taking on the mainstream economist's defense of sweatshops was worthwhile. Articulating these arguments in the seminar gave progressive students an opportunity to practice responding to arguments they would surely confront outside of the seminar. At the same time, the exercise provided an opportunity to speak directly to the positions my more conservative students held, even if they could not articulate them. The result

was some of our most spirited discussions. Also, I was quite pleased with my students' performance when I gave them the in-class assignment of reading and analyzing The New York Times Magazine article, "Two Cheers for Sweatshops," by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who won a Pulitzer prize for their coverage of China. Most students were able to identify the arguments WuDunn and Kristof relied on to defend sweatshops and to fashion a response to them.

Taking on these arguments is risky business for yet another reason. The defense of sweatshops offered up by mainstream economists is a challenging one. Their argument turns on two elegantly simple and ideologically powerful propositions. The first is that women freely choose to enter these jobs, and the second is that these sweatshop jobs are better than the alternative employments available to women in developing economies. Worse yet, both propositions have a certain truth to them.

From the perspective of mainstream economics, every exchange, including the exchange between worker and boss, is freely entered into and only takes place because both parties are made better off. Hiring workers to fill the jobs in the world export factories is no exception and, as they see it, that alone demonstrates that these factories are not sweatshops or sites of exploitation.

Of course, in some cases workers do not freely enter into sweatshop employment even by the usual standards of wage labor. Sometimes workers are held captive (e.g., the Thai women working in the El Monte factory outside of Los Angeles) or find themselves working jobs far different than those they were recruited to do from their rural villages (e.g., that is often the case in China). Even the most conservative of my students acknowledged that those practices must be opposed.

But in most cases, women do choose these jobs, if hardly freely or without the coercion of economic necessity. The ability of the exchange perspective of mainstream economics to obscure the underlying power differences in those exchanges was enough to convince a few students that these jobs were neither sweatshops nor exploitative.

The antidote to this argument I used in my course came from an unusual source: an economist, Linda Lim, who during the 1990s wrote quite critically about gender analyses of the oppression of women on the global assembly line and who today is dismissive of the efforts of the anti-sweatshop movement.

In her earlier work, Lim reports that in East Asia, “the wages earned by women in export factories are usually higher than what they could earn as wage laborers in alternative low-skilled female occupations.” (Lim, 1990: 109) But at the same time, the wages of women in the export industries are lower than the wages of men who work in those industries and lower than those of first world women who work in the same industries. That is true, even though third world women’s productivity “is acknowledged to be higher than that of either of these other groups.” (Lim, 1997: 223) Even for Lim that makes these women “the most heavily exploited group of workers relative both to their output and other groups.” (Lim, 1997:223)

Whatever Lim’s work suggests about the relative attractiveness of these factory jobs, it went a long way toward convincing my students that the women who work in the world's export factories are exploited. The fact that even for dresses made in the United States typically just \$6 of a dress that retails for \$100 goes to the woman who actually sewed it (Bonacich and Applebaum, 2000: 2) further convinced my students that the labor of these women is the source of profit for manufacturers and retailers.

Later in the course I stumbled upon a more effective response to the mainstream economic argument. It is simply this: Their argument is irrelevant for determining if a factory is

a sweatshop or if workers are exploited. Sweatshop conditions are defined by the characteristics of a job. If workers are denied the right to organize, suffer unsafe and abusive working conditions, are forced to work overtime, or are paid less than a living wage, then they work in a sweatshop regardless of how they came to take their jobs or if the alternatives they face are worse yet. That realization helped several of my students who had been struggling with the dilemmas presented by the exchange perspective of mainstream economics.

Sweatshops and World Poverty

Still, neither of these responses speaks directly to the contention that sweatshop jobs, whatever their problems, are good for the world's poor because the other jobs available to them, especially in the informal sector and rural agricultural, are yet worse.

This is no fabrication of mainstream economists. Michael Todaro, an economist with some progressive credentials, writes in his economic development textbook that, "Perhaps the most valid generalizations about the poor are that they are disproportionately located in rural areas." (Todaro, 1999: 151).

But this is no reason to dismiss the concerns of the anti-sweatshop movement. It does, however, suggest that the plight of sweatshop workers needs to be seen in the context of pervasive world poverty and the gaping inequalities of the global economy. Like most teachers trained in economics and political economy, I relied on too many handouts of data and charts during the semester. But two handouts caught my students' attention and helped to expose them to the pervasiveness of world poverty and the tremendous privilege afforded to most all of them by the world economy. One was a World Bank table reporting that in today's global economy nearly half of the world's population lives in poverty, making do on less than \$2 U.S. a day. The other was a sketch of the global distribution of income, published by The United Nations

Development Programme, resembling a champagne glass. The richest 20% of the world's population, who receive 82.7% of the total world income, fill out the mouth of the glass, while the bottom 60%, who get just 5.6% of the world's income, fill in the stem.

The global economy, to the extent that we live in a truly unified market place, connects us not just with sweatshop workers, but with oppressed workers outside the factory gates as well. By pointing out these connections I hoped to convince my students of the need to build a movement that would demand more for working people across the multiple dimensions of the world economy. Campaigns to improve conditions in the world export factories should of course be part of that movement. After all, struggles against sweatshops lead to improved working conditions in the United States, including the minimum wage, the forty-hour work week, and other protections. But that movement must also tackle the often worse conditions of low wage agriculture workers, poor farmers, street vendors, domestic servants, small shop textile workers, and prostitutes. Only when conditions for both groups of workers improve might we be able to say honestly, as something other than a Faustian bargain, that more world factory jobs are good news for the world's poor.

Making a Difference

My syllabus promised to pay special attention to what we should and can do about sweatshop labor. Throughout the semester, we discussed successful examples of consumer and student activism, e.g., the National Labor Committee campaign against Gap in El Salvador. Early on in the semester we outlined what we thought should be done about sweatshops and developed a labor code to be implemented internationally. When we returned to that labor code in the last weeks of class, most students wanted to amend it to make it tougher, insisting that it impose a living wage.

But this was not enough to overcome most students' sense of political helplessness. Even at the end of the semester during our most extensive discussions of trade union, consumer, and student activism, many were still struggling to find their voice. During the Fall semester my students did not organize to push Wheaton, currently a member of the Fair Labor Association, to join the Workers Right Consortium that insists that producers of college logo apparel submit to independent monitoring and pay a living wage. But this Spring three students from the seminar have been active in the sweatshop debates on campus, and I heard them reply to the defenders of sweatshops with arguments we developed in the seminar.

I still hope that some of my students will do yet more. I know that many of them were moved when they read economic journalist William Greider's words, "the recognition that human dignity is indivisible should be the bottom line of the global economy, not profits per se." (Greider, 1997: 356)."

End Notes

1. Bob Ross, a sociologist at Clark University, who teaches a freshman seminar and an upper division course on sweatshops, advised me as I constructed my syllabus and selected books and reading materials for my seminar. I use three of the same books Bob does. The outline of my syllabus and a list of helpful website locations are contained in appendices to my article. My complete syllabus is posted at <http://www2.wheatonma.edu/Academic/AcademicDept/Economics/Syllabi/Syllabi.html>

2. Robert Pinsky, the former poet laureate, also knows that commodities can reveal social relations to his readers. For instance, in his poem “Shirt,” which I use in class, Pinsky contemplates “nearly invisible stitches along the collar turned in sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians” and recalls, “the infamous blaze at the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven. One hundred and forty-six died in the flames on the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes.” (Pinsky, 1996: 84-85).

3. This exercise works with almost any audience. A few years back, I saw Medea Benjamin, the Director of Global Exchange, begin her plenary address about sweatshops at the summer conference of the Union for Radical Political Economists by asking the audience to look at the tags of their t-shirts and find out where they are made. That group of aging political economists seemed every bit as engaged in the exercise as my students were.

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