7 A Tentative Model of Workshop-based Production

Analysis of the field material when put together with more theoretical discussions led to certain generalisations as to (i) the origins and conditions of industrial growth; (ii) the dynamics and mode of appropriation specific to capitalised workshop production; and (iii) the implications of gendered production. These constituted a framework through which I might abstract from the immediate specificity of Santiago and of western-central region of Mexico. I wish to present these generalisations as a preliminary model which, although derived primarily from a single field enquiry, is capable of being explored further, tested and refined in the light of evidence about ‘informalisation’, capitalised workshops and gendered production coming from other localities.

ORIGINS OF CAPITALISED WORKSHOP PRODUCTION

Gender and Clandestinity/Illegality

Capitalised workshop production inhabits a social world where workers sell their labour power but where enterprises are often officially illegal due to non-compliance with labour and tax legislation. Where informal industry has flourished, it has been widely accepted that the letter of the law does not apply to certain types of worker and therefore to certain types of activity. Typically, the labour of women, children and ethnic ‘minorities’ (in a social sense but not necessarily numerical sense) has been seen as ‘outside’ the realm of organised labour, and therefore the work they do has been seen as falling ‘outside’ the orbit of ‘formal’ industry where labour legislation is considered rightly applicable.

Thus, where such deviation from legally established norms and standards is widely tolerated, or considered legitimate for reasons that contradict the rhetoric of democratic rights, then paradoxically, ‘clandestinity’ has only limited social meaning. The disenfranchise-
ment taking place with informalisation does not affect the working population equally: some types of workers are considered by the dominant classes (and others) as less suitable or worthy for protection through the law enforced by the state and more amenable to private forms of protection and control.

At the same time localities with a strong sense of history and regional distinction are none too keen on the state’s presence or interference: a reaction that may unite people across social divisions. There is often a tension between a locality’s quest for autonomy and the practice of political organisation demanding the co-optation and active support of local leaders in return for political favours. The interpretation of ‘illegality’ and ‘clandestinity’ in such localities is ambiguous. The more privileged social strata view workshops as ‘legitimate’ activities that ought to be outside the arm of the law, the state having no right to intervene. Workers consider workshops as ‘illegal’ but see the state as too corrupt, weak or uninterested to intervene on their behalf.

Violence, Male Migration and Semi-Proletarianisation

The origins of an industrial capitalist class and an industrial labouring class lie in a history of violence and displacement. This can be viewed from both a rural and urban perspective. Prolonged warfare and social unrest in the countryside together with the violent destruction of traditional agrarian systems have been prevalent in twentieth century history. Following on the heels of agrarian destruction has come the greater intervention of capital in agriculture in which command over scarce resources in increasingly vested in few hands while many face relative and absolute impoverishment and dispossession. In some societies impoverishment has heightened the mobility of men who leave the locality in search of cash incomes and become semi-proletarians. In the face of sweeping rural impoverishment and lack of local wage employment, female mobility (women migrating without men) tends to be more restricted.

From a rural perspective, the industrialists have sprung from more privileged social or ethnic backgrounds who had first left the countryside to avoid social violence and/or were excluded from access to more productive agricultural resources and therefore unable to tap the higher profits emanating from capitalist agriculture. These migrating men usually had several years’ schooling and kept some limited property back home. The majority took wage