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# Globalisation at work: unheard voices and invisible agency



The contemporary problematic of globalisation has encouraged a particular mode of knowledge to dominate explanations of social change. Academic and popular discussion of all matters 'global' have predominantly asked 'what is happening' type questions. It has become almost common sense to seek to explain the nature of the beast itself, making reference to technological and market structures as the driving forces of change. In this formulation the everyday lives of people are positioned passively outside the process, receiving the imperatives of global restructuring. For workers this implies that transformations in their everyday lives will follow essentially, necessarily and automatically from new production technologies, the competitive impulses of global markets and the demands of shareholder capitalism. Where agency-centred questions have been raised in the globalisation debate, these have tended to focus upon the decisions and actions of powerful transnational, state or corporate elites. Here the actions, experiences and articulations of workers are simply contained within corporations, transnational trade unions and state formations as sites of global restructuring. Taken as a whole, the globalisation debate has tended to reproduce an implicitly 'problem-solving' mode of knowledge, one that emphasises the explanation of, as opposed to the understanding of, global social change (Cox, 1996: 88; Hollis and Smith, 1990: 1).

This chapter argues that the dominant representations of global restructuring have rendered the voices, experiences and practices of workers, and particularly unprotected or unrepresented workers, unheard and invisible.<sup>1</sup> Not only does this invisibility produce a serious deficit in our understandings of the dynamics of global change, but it also causes us to avert our eyes from the very sites where work and political contestation is taking place in the global political economy. As MNCs increasingly outsource their production and services, they become fractured into loosely connected sites, many of them employing unprotected and precarious workers. The programmes of restructuring in the advanced industrialised countries (AICs), whether 'hyperflexible' or 'flexi-corporatist', run in a seamless web of power with the practices of unprotected workers in the less developed countries (LDCs) of the 'South', and with the 'invisible' work undertaken in the informal sectors of

the 'North'. For a contract worker in a British production plant, the everyday practices of Mexican workers producing the same component for the client corporation may be far more proximate than geography would dictate, and may be expressed ambiguously in terms of competition and insecurity, or in terms of identification and solidarity. For a Bolivian live-in domestic worker in Berlin, the practices of her globally mobile management consultant employer constitute yet another ambiguous and contradictory global working relationship. On the surface they could be depicted as women working flexibly in a global economy, yet their experiences are in tension and their relationship is fundamentally unequal.

As a consequence, if we are to understand work in the GPE, we need to look beyond 'states and firms' to consider the political, geographical and social relationships that workers have with one another, and to the GPE, and how these relationships are historically and discursively constituted. In line with an IPE of social practice, this chapter explores the everyday practices of work that variously enable, contest or confound the emerging social relations of globalisation. The chapter is organised in three parts. The first explores the representation of transformations in work and work organisation within the dominant expositions of globalisation. In what ways are workers rendered invisible by the globalisation discourse? In the section that follows, the treatment of production and work within IPE is discussed. Where workers are made visible in analysis, which workers feature and which remain excluded? Finally, a social practice approach to work is outlined and insights are drawn for the repoliticisation of work in IPE. It is argued that in order to restore and capture the social conflicts, tensions and compromises of the restructuring of work, it is necessary to address the concrete experiences of workers who are differentially positioned in the IPE of work. Given the explosion of working practices into multiple domains, it is increasingly problematic to delineate those practices that are contemporaneous with particular state-societies. Throughout this chapter, I draw on illustrations of working practices that connect to, yet extend beyond, the flexibilisation of work in Britain and Germany.

### Global restructuring and the invisibility of work

The concept of globalisation has been variously described as 'vague', 'ambiguous', 'the cliché of our times' and 'wishful' (Jones, 1995: 3; Held *et al.*, 1999: 1; Scholte, 2000: 1). It is perhaps the empty and mythical nature of the concept that has endowed globalisation with such seductive power, inviting people to fill the void with distinctive meanings. The dominant representations of globalisation celebrate a process of change that is the inevitable outcome of the expansionary ambitions of a global economy and transborder technology, and deplore the politicisation of the process: 'Lately, technology has been the main driver of globalisation ... It would be naïve to think that governments could let integration proceed mainly under its own steam, trusting to

technological progress and economic freedom, desirable as that would be. Politics could never be like that' (*The Economist*, 23 September 2000: 19). In this reading states, societies and political activities 'get in the way' of an economic and technological process of transformation. A kind of 'no alternative' logic prevails, whereby it is assumed that practices will be restructured to conform to a hyperflexible Anglo-Saxon model. Political and social aspects of change are abstracted from the economic and technological imperatives so that particular governments, trade unions and welfare institutions, for example, are cast as obstructions to successful transformation. The social costs of global restructuring are commonly perceived as temporary by-products of adjustment to the imperatives of change. 'People' generally, and non-elite groups specifically, are rendered invisible in such readings of globalisation. People are positioned as passive receptors of global imperatives who, if they are sensible, will seize the opportunities of a globalising world economy.

Representations of the globalisation of production, whether framed in terms of post-Fordism (Hirst and Zeitlin, 1989; Lipietz, 1987), transformations in competitive strategy (Strange, 1996; Porter, 1990) or grand-scale shifts in the organisation of capitalist societies (Rifkin, 1995; Toffler, 1980), all tend to emphasise the common effects of transformation in different places. The restructuring of work is presented as a unidirectional and universal outcome of restructured production, with global forces determining changes in everyday practices as though workers were simply passive observers of a 'bigger' process. Such analysis tends to feed an economic management logic that says that all work must become flexible, casual, contingent, feminised and service-oriented if the opportunities of globalisation are to be seized and the forces of global production successfully 'harnessed'. 'Making globalisation work' has thus received a dialectical double meaning in recent times. On the one hand it has been used to indicate that globalisation has a 'friendly face' that can 'work', and on the other, the restructuring of work itself is presented as a panacea with the potential to ameliorate the pain of globalisation.<sup>2</sup> The surface-level shifts of new production technologies and management techniques are highly visible in such accounts, but the contradictory currents below the surface remain obscured from view. While the introduction of ICTs to the workplace, receives a high profile in accounts of the flexibilisation of work, the temporal practices of work and home life that make their introduction possible are less visible: 'In stressing the shared patterns of global processes, there is a tendency to underestimate how the conditions and relations of everyday life constitute processes of economic and social reorganization' (Feldman and Buechler, 1998: 623).

The everyday experiences, practices and contests of workers are overlooked amidst a flurry of activity in pursuit of the definitive understanding of 'large-scale' transformations. Indeed, international economic institutions have cast labour as a commodity that is simply moulded to fit prevailing economic conditions. The World Bank acknowledges that change is 'difficult

and frightening' (1995: 11), and the European Commission that 'the reorganisation of work often causes uncertainty' (CEC, 1997: 8). Yet, the overriding assumption is that the globalisation process is a given reality, essentially separate from the social and political restructuring that is undertaken in its name, and entirely independent of the everyday thoughts and actions of workers. Indeed, in the effort to construct a discourse of opportunity and manageability, such interventions represent the agency of workers as a problem to be overcome on the path to a more adaptable and flexible workforce. Put simply, there is an implicit warning that the organised actions of workers will incur the wrath of the not-so-friendly face of globalisation.

### **Agency uncovered: perspectives from IPE**

Critical IPE accounts of globalisation have tended to expose and counter the dominant discourse with an emphasis on the power of particular individual and collective agents to drive or resist global change. It must be said, however, that these agents are identified predominantly in terms of production structures at transnational and national levels. In short, IPE has appeared comfortable with production and the empirical study of the firm, and much less comfortable with the study of labour and work, resulting in the 'deafening silence' that is the 'almost total neglect of labour' (Denemark and O'Brien, 1997: 232). As I have shown in my discussion of the firm, transformations in labour and work are variously given their agency through a focus on the actions of MNCs as key actors in production (Stopford and Strange, 1991; Sklair, 2001); the power of the disciplinary forces of neo-liberalism (Gill, 1995); and, much more rarely, the actions of fledgling global trade union movements (O'Brien, 2000; Cox, 1999; Radice, 2000). Meanwhile, others point to the 'embeddedness' of MNCs in national structures (Sally, 1994), and to the competing models of national capitalism, particularly industrial relations institutions and systems of production, that give distinctive character to divergent patterns of change in forms of work (Crouch and Streeck, 1997).

The approaches outlined provide a valuable antidote to the techno-economic determinism of the dominant globalisation discourse. They provide us with insight into the individuals and groups whose actions, knowledge and power are intertwined with global transformation. However, taken together, they sustain a separation of labour and workers from the restructuring of states and firms, highlighting the experiences of workers solely in terms of their relationship to production, narrowly defined. As Peter Burnham has compellingly argued, the category of 'labour' is explored only insofar as it equates with 'trade union bargaining power' (1999: 3). It is not difficult to see how even critical accounts of hyperliberal restructuring could feed a depoliticisation of labour by reinforcing the image of a spent force. The prevailing common sense begins to see the elite-level actions of national governments and corporate managers as the sole legitimate 'researchable' agents in the restructuring of work.

In subsuming work into understandings of production and capital, IPE analysis does tend to treat labour as a singular force, and workers as a naturalised category of class that maps on to a global proletariat. As E. P. Thompson noted: 'There is an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing' (1968: 10). The insights of his historical mode of thought are particularly significant given the way the problem of class consciousness is framed in the light of contemporary changes:

One of the most puzzling developments of the closing decades of the twentieth century has been the precipitous decline of working-class consciousness and organisation at a time of great numerical expansion of the world proletariat ... It was not unreasonable to expect the capitalist crisis of the 1970s would enhance rather than dampen the class consciousness of the expanding world proletariat. (Silver and Arrighi, 2001: 53)

To take seriously the historical contingency of workers' consciousness and experiences is to problematise the above assumption that 'class consciousness', as a monolithic entity, rises and falls in response to capitalist shifts. Workers express a multitude of contradictory and contingent 'consciousnesses' in the deciphering of their experiences of restructuring, and are differentially inserted into relationships with one another, and with global fractions of capital. The contradictions and compromises of workers' experiences thus provide a window on the tensions and inequalities of globalisation. Some intraworker dynamics and relationships actually intensify and enable the programmes of hyperflexibility that are enacted in the name of globalisation. As Dimitris Stevis has it, there are 'competing experiences and expectations depending on the "position" of the worker in the political geography of work', so that even 'formally protected workers may be well protected citizens through other means' (personal correspondence, 2001). To assume that workers represent a singular and coherent group of potential 'globalisation resisters' not only seriously underplays the participation of some workers in enabling hyperflexibility, but it also underestimates the concrete acts of resistance that emerge in the interstitial spaces outside of formal organised channels. Trade unions themselves increasingly acknowledge both the importance of unprotected sites for global campaigns, and the potential contradiction within the sites' relationships to other workers.

In essence, state-societies, firms and 'classes' are too often assumed to 'contain' workers, and are rarely unpacked to reveal the political and social forces engendered by these workers (Amoore, 2000; Vilroxx, 1999). Where labour is acknowledged in analysis, this is conceived as an oppositional force of resistance, embodied in the form of organised and represented workers in trade unions. As a result, while the invisibility and obfuscation of agency in the hyperflexibility discourse is challenged, alternative sources and forms of invisibility emerge in IPE inquiry. The need to address new sources of the invisibility of

workers is rendered all the more acute by the very restructuring process itself, which serves to fracture the firm into a myriad of loosely connected or contracted fragments. As a result, an exploration of the restructuring of work in particular social spaces cannot meaningfully abstract the workforces of individual firms from their relationships with the practices of agencies, satellite plants, workshops and households. There are a number of dimensions to this fragmentation, each of which contributes a layer of invisibility.

First, the rapid growth in outsourcing,<sup>3</sup> contracting out and the use of temporary employment agencies has moved production to sites that are not immediately visible if the firm is treated as a bounded entity. As a result, the contemporary study of MNCs must confront the problem that new flexible working practices do not sit neatly within the bounded firms that tend to be the focus of IPE inquiry. As a MNC outsources some of its core and most of its non-core activities, understanding the social practices of the workplace extends to the practices of homes, sweatshops, supply-chain workshops with a contract workforce, and other ad-hoc and unprotected sites of production. The use of unprotected labour in production for the global economy has led scholars to focus on the increased use of child labour<sup>4</sup> and bonded or slave labour in the LDCs (see Bales, 1999; Klein, 2000). In the OECD countries, the growth of precarious and unprotected forms of employment has pushed workers towards forms of individualised flexibility that carry high levels of personal risk (Moody, 1997; Coyle, 1997; Beck, 2000b).

The trend towards a fractured firm that outsources production and business activities intensifies a second key layer of invisibility, that of gender. As corporations replace full-time protected workers with part-time, temporary or contracted unprotected workers, they also tend to replace men with women (Corporate Watch, 2000). The invisibility of the role of women in IR, IPE and Industrial Relations scholarship has, of course, been widely documented by feminist scholars (see Enloe, 1989; Marchand, 1996). However, the feminisation of work that has accompanied global restructuring makes it particularly important that we 'see women' as actors in global restructuring, and that we 'recognize gender' in terms of the webs of power at work within the process of change (Murphy, 1996; Marchand and Runyan, 2000: 225). At one level, then, this implies making womens' experiences and activities visible in our analyses: '\$16 trillion of global output is invisible, \$11 trillion produced by women' (United Nations Human Development Programme, 1995: 97). Here it is the non-monetised care, family and community, agricultural and domestic work of women that is absent from our understandings of the GPE. At another level, however, making gender visible is about revealing the gendered nature of the power relations surrounding the global restructuring of work. A focus solely on firms and trade unions as somehow representing and 'containing' workers perpetuates a gendered invisibility that sanitises and naturalises processes of restructuring.

Finally, and related, an invisibility persists with regard to the reconfigur-

ation of public and private within the restructuring of work. Janine Brodie depicts restructuring as a 'recoding' and 'renegotiating' of the boundaries between public and private (1996: 387). In people's working lives, this recoding is manifested in the permeability of the boundaries between 'home' and 'work'. The private realm of home and household is increasingly a site of production for the global economy. The ILO report rapid increases in the numbers of homeworkers providing 'optimal flexibility' in the industrialised and developing countries (2000: 114). Households in both 'advanced' and 'developing' regions are simultaneously sites of production and consumption. The clothing industry, electronics and assembly sectors, together with 'non-core' activities such as catering and repairs have found their way into homes. As sites of production, homes are predominantly low paid and unprotected, based on piecework with no formal contract of employment. Households also represent the sites in which the global growth in domestic services has taken place. A 'new domestic labour' is said to be 'flourishing' (Ibarra, 2000: 454) in a climate of 'deliberate economic interventions' by the AICs to individualise and privatise care services (Chang, 2000: 3). Given IPE/IR's predilection for data on change in production and work, it is perhaps unsurprising that the work of, in particular, immigrant domestic workers remains 'hidden'. The ILO standard classification of occupations fails to describe the roles of migrant domestic workers and does not provide data on the extent of this work (Anderson, 2000: 15). As a result, what Chang and Ling (2000) refer to as the 'global feminization of labour intimacy' is seriously underestimated and distorted.

As a consequence of these layers of invisibility, there is a serious obfuscation in representations of the power dynamics of the global restructuring of work. A growing gap between the 'two IRs' of international relations and industrial relations has concealed the connections between workplace and world order (Harrod, 1997a: 105), making an IPE of labour and work ever more necessary, yet problematic within prevailing ontologies.<sup>5</sup> The legacies of positivist IR/IPE inquiry persist in the tendency to view power 'as resource' in our studies and to seek out 'power-wielding' people as the subjects of our research. Work is thus equated with monetised economic activity, and workers are conceptualised as a commodity, so that for those whose working practices are unprotected or subordinate, there is little or no recognition in IR/IPE research. In a sense, it is assumed that those who do not possess power as a resource are not significant to understandings of the GPE. Unprotected workers are the passive victims of someone else's power. It is this 'someone else' whom orthodox (and some heterodox) IPE feels it should be concerned with, whether international organisation, MNC, government or transnational class. So, to be a significant, research-worthy global agent, one needs to have the ability and resources to transcend distance – mobility, flexibility, distance-shrinking telecommunications and portable skills. At a time when work is increasingly undertaken in a range of unprotected spaces, addressing the blind spots in existing IPE research is rendered all the more important.

There is currently a relative invisibility with regard to the meanings and concrete experiences that workers, and particularly unprotected workers without formal representation, themselves ascribe to the pressures and transformations of globalisation at work. The IPE of social practice perspective developed in chapter 2 opens up a number of avenues into the recapturing of worker experiences, and the repoliticisation of work in a global era. To explore work as a set of structured social practices is to render visible the webs of power within which differential experiences of restructuring are played out. The 'hyperflexible' governmental and corporate interventions rely upon a process of individualisation that breaks up shared understandings and affiliations. Attendance to the experiences that workers have of restructuring reveals that patterns of inclusion and exclusion are formed, challenged and reformed over time, constructing and corroding social alliances and reconstituting webs of power (Sinclair, 1999: 158). It is important to understand these divisions and alliances, and to reveal the 'minor' everyday 'silent resistances' that result (Cheru, 1997: 153). While it is undeniably the case that formalised worker representation is being broken up in many state-societies (as in Britain), and represents an 'exclusive club' in others (as in Germany), it is not the case that 'outsider' worker groups are passive and fungible individuals. The insecurity and uncertainty of contingent work is increasingly a shared experience that brings its own foundations for informal organisation, as in the example of the 'Homenet' organisation for homeworkers. The incorporation of the theory and practice of everyday life into our understandings of the restructuring of work can serve to heighten the visibility of workers who have been obscured from view. I do not propose that attention should cease to be paid to the strategies of organised labour, such work is highly significant (see Hannah and Fischer, 2002; Gallin, 2002; O'Brien, 2001). However, organised labour groups must be explored in terms of their power relationship to discourses of restructuring, and to unprotected and informally-organised workers. Thus, underpinned by an ontological commitment to understand work in the broadest sense, as social reproduction, and labour as a diverse grouping that is neither a 'commodity' nor the unified voice of 'civil society', it is necessary to reveal the practices of organised and unprotected workers as they enable, contest or confound the emerging social relations of globalisation.

### **Contradictions at work**

A focus on work as sets of structured social practices reveals a series of contradictions within hyperflexible representations of a benign and uncontested process of restructuring. Such representations conceal the tensions and inequalities of restructuring through an assumption that flexible forms of work and employment are compatible with human security. Indeed it is claimed that a failure to deregulate labour markets and seize the opportunities of new forms of work will result in a loss of security through increased



unemployment and diminished competitiveness (OECD, 1997; World Bank, 1995). Where it is acknowledged that there may be tensions between flexibility and security, the problem is presented in terms of 'striking the right balance' so that employees can enjoy 'greater involvement in their work, more job satisfaction and the possibility of developing skills and long-term employability' (Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 1997: 8). This representation of the 'benefits' of flexible work appeals to images of autonomous workers in an information society, while obscuring the concrete experiences of workers for whom flexibility means acute personal insecurity. The European Commission's Green Paper, for example, focuses on the balancing of work and home life via teleworking, but makes no reference to homeworkers or domestic care workers, whose working time flexibility is more immediate and uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

A focus on the tensions between hyperflexibility strategies and everyday social practices reveals that general deregulation and new forms of work organisation replace one identified problem of poverty (unemployment) with other, less directly visible forms such as income inequality, insecurity, financial exclusion and indebtedness (International Labour Organisations (ILO), 1995). Indeed, implicit within OECD figures there is a correlation between those state-societies that have 'implemented the jobs strategy' and those that have high drop-out rates from education, widening income inequalities and a growing disadvantaged social group (OECD, 1997). The experiences that workers have of hyperflexible forms of work reveal the tensions between flexibility and security. In its most contingent form, flexible working rests upon and requires acute insecurity and instability on the part of the worker (Milkman, 1998; Pollert, 1999).

Second, there is a contradiction between processes of deunionisation and levels of contestation. The restructuring of working practices along UK/US-style hyperflexible lines is widely associated with an assault on traditional industrial relations practices. Direct admonitions to deregulate collective bargaining to the level of individual firms assume that the contests of centralised industrial relations can be minimised. However, an exploration of the ways in which concrete industrial relations practices are challenged by restructuring, reveals a different picture. The loss of formalised channels of collective bargaining in the 'radically restructured' workplaces does not result in a diminution of contestation and dissent.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the traditional channels are replaced with less organised and more fragmented tacit forms of resistance and challenge based on common experiences and feelings. Nor can the neo-liberal assumption that trade unions distort labour markets, inflating wages and creating income inequality and unemployment, be upheld. As Coates has it, 'inequality is not a product of trade unions. It is a product of unregulated labour markets' (1999: 133). Where unions and other civil society groups are involved in negotiating the shape of future forms of work, such as in the German Standortdebatte,<sup>8</sup> the result has been a focus on skills and job

security rather a direct stand-off over pay. A focus on working practices suggests that the experiences of transformation in industrial relations are simply not universal: they are contingent upon a worker's position in the networks of employment, family, welfare, and so on. As formalised traditional forms of industrial relations practice are diminished, it is important that we open up our analyses to reveal new relationships that emerge within the firm and extend into unprotected workspaces (Anderson, 2000).

Finally, there is a contradiction between the global image of empowerment and the concrete realities of increased control. Images of empowerment abound within global blueprints for new forms of work and work organisation. In an elite group are the 'symbolic analysts' whose new 'weightless' portfolio careers in web design, business consultancy or financial services appear to offer flexible alternatives to traditional working practices (Reich, 1991; Coyle, 1997). Yet even within the ranks of these apparent 'free agents', the concrete experience can be 'net slavery', when 'the stock options turn into pink slips when the company goes belly up' (Ross, 2001: 81–82). Then, there are the workers for whom teamworking, quality circles and working time flexibility are said to offer empowering alternatives to the Ford-Taylor scientific management. The experiences of hyperflexible working, as expressed by workers, have much in common with the monitoring and surveillance of Taylorism, intensified by the use of self-monitoring and team 'targets'. At the 'ends' of the supply chain, in the maquiladora factories and export processing zones (EPZs) of the LDCs, are the predominantly women workers for whom images of empowering participation in the workforce are played out in the realities of abuse, exploitation and personal injury (Lui and Chiu, 1999; Soldatenko, 1999).

The disparities in workers' experiences of production in a global era will be explored further below. Here the purpose is to emphasise the common patterns of control and power that lie behind the images of empowerment for many worker groups. In terms of everyday working practices globalisation has come to be associated with a hiving off of peripheral activities into branch-plants, micro-firms, households or the informal economy. This is the concrete reality behind the much-hyped promise of a flexible and productive global workforce. In a very real sense production has exploded into a galaxy of stratified, loosely connected workspaces that are, nonetheless, closely controlled through webs of corporate power. In the example of teamworking, presented as a potentially autonomous and innovative experience, workplace studies demonstrate the reality of monotony, repetition, diminished skills and increased surveillance and control (Danford, 1998; Pollert, 1999).<sup>9</sup> At the heart of expressions of change in everyday working practices is the experience of increased individualisation, intensified risk and heightened tensions between individuals and groups. The image of individual empowerment emerging out of globalisation and flexible forms of work is a constructed discourse that inhibits workers' efforts to organise.

## Divisions at work

Alongside the contradictions outlined above, a practice-centred perspective also reveals patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are significant to the restructuring of work. New forms of work organisation and the rise of flexible and mobile forms of work imply challenges to past practices and a reconfiguring of working relationships. However, an assumed to be emerging 'global consciousness' (Scholte, 2000: 85), or indeed a 'class consciousness', is not necessarily a unifying characteristic. Within what may be considered to be a single 'class', there are vastly different worker experiences, and differential opportunities to organise. There are also significant commonalities of experience that, though they may be uneven, extend across a range of social groups. Such commonalities include the association of globalisation with increased risk and short-termism, the intensification and speeding up of work and feelings of individualisation and acute competition: 'Flexibility means a redistribution of risks away from the state and the economy towards the individual' (Beck, 2000b: 3).

Within the contemporary intensification of risk and individualisation, as in past practices of collectivised industrial relations, the sense of a common experience and struggle has to be 'made', through actions, exchanges, ideas and interpretations. Leo Panitch, in his incisive discussion of the potential for labour to 'strategise' in response to globalisation, is concerned with the abandonment of 'class analysis' in favour of 'civil society'. He argues that leftist scholarship has moved to a pluralist concept of civil society, and in so doing has tended to leave out labour, affording 'almost no vantage point for observing that arena of non-freedom within civil society, the work-place' (2001: 367). Yet, given the fragmentation of the workplace into a myriad of contracted relationships, we have to question whether 'class' can adequately capture contemporary working experiences. The hyperflexibilisation of work cuts across conventionally held 'class' boundaries so that an effective labour strategy would have to engage in a dialogue across groups.

If workers come to know and recognise change in the global economy through the lens of their own experiences, and via their relationships with other workers, this changes the picture somewhat. There is now a need to explore the stratified social practices of different groups and individuals, and to avoid the assumption that these necessarily represent a 'class experience', or an expression of the general interests of civil society. I discuss these here in terms of insider, intermediary and outsider practices, though of course, many groups cut across these ideal-type boundaries and there are important patterns of inclusion and exclusion within the groups. The divisions at work are overlaid by other social divisions and inequalities so that, for example, some workers' experiences of increased risks are ameliorated by financial security, and by inclusion in the defining of the terms of flexibility. For others, the risks of flexibilisation are exacerbated by social exclusion and poverty.

Similarly, a worker's position in terms of state-society, firm and legal status will condition a particular relationship to programmes of flexibilisation. In essence, programmes of hyperflexibility in Anglo-Saxon state-societies are concerned with expanding the ranks of the 'outsiders', making these involuntarily contingent workers the key group, and giving employers open access to this pool of labour. Flexi-corporatism, by contrast, reinforces the status of the 'insider' workers, using them to define and legitimate restructuring, and containing the outsiders by denying them access to the restructuring debate.

### *Insider working practices*

Insider workers predominantly take on one of two central roles in the reorganisation of work. The first is a direct participatory role in defining the terms of new forms of work and work organisation, and in reinforcing the global image of flexibility and mobility. These 'portfolio people' (Handy, 1995) represent a managerial elite, to include business analysts, policy advisors, consultants and auditors and marketing and advertising agents. The intensified 'risks' taken by these groups, such as their eschewal of company pension packages and job security, are matched by the potential rewards – working autonomy and high remuneration. As Coyle argues, there is a stark contrast between those working in the 'weightless industries' who can use the new flexibility to 'turn themselves into stars', and those people for whom flexibility 'boils down to being exploited' (1997: 91). For the insider groups an increasingly mobile and flexible lifestyle serves to reinforce their own security. Indeed, as Beck (2000b) suggests, the security and mobility of these groups rests upon the relative insecurity and immobility of other groups who are excluded from a defining role. Stability is not experienced by insider groups in terms of a single workplace, but in terms of the ability to enter multiple workspaces, as consultants, commentators and managers of change. It should not be assumed, however, that such elite groups do not contest the demands of working arrangements on their lives. For instance, after Merrill Lynch made *Working Mother* magazine's 'best employers' list in 2000, a group of women stockbrokers, who had sued the company for sex discrimination, campaigned by hiring light aircraft with banners and storming a shareholders' meeting (*New York Times*, 30 January 2001: 3).

The second key group of insiders is the core skilled workers whose working practices enable restructuring, though perhaps not as consciously as the first group. The highly skilled German craftspeople in manufacturing, and the software programmers in the British service sector, for example, have become wrapped up in the discourse on restructuring. Their stock options, bonus-led pay structures and performance-related pay, together with the nature of their work, ties their interests into particular programmes of flexibility. In the examples of the UK, US and to a lesser extent Germany, there is a common trend towards skilled workers 'playing the labour market' in a

way that mirrors the 'leanness' of corporate organisations: 'Well-paid technicians, engineers, and designers became independent contractors ... "Employees without jobs", they moved from company to company, "pollinating" the seeds of innovation, according to the new flexible style of corporate organization' (Ross, 2001: 79). As core worker-stockholders and mobile skill traders dominate the 'high' end of the contingent workforce, they become emblematic of the possibilities of flexible work, featuring heavily in governmental reports and media images. The threats of globalisation and the demands of everyday working life are more comfortably reconciled and interchangeable for insider groups than for those working at the margins of the spaces they so fleetingly occupy.

### *Intermediary working practices*

Intermediary workers can be understood as those whose practices provide a 'buffer' function at the interface between the demand for flexible labour and the need for employment and work. In essence the intermediaries insulate the insiders from responsibility for the risks and reprisals of the reorganisation of work. They take radically different forms, from the proliferation of recruitment and employment agents, through informal subcontractors, to the individuals and gangs trading in the supply of undocumented, unprotected or slave labour (Bales, 1999). At one end of the scale management and human resource consultants move fluidly between insider and intermediary functions, maintaining the 'expertise' of an 'external agency', necessary to legitimate their role in prescribing work reorganisation and to lend an air of objective neutrality to restructuring. Currently, for example, there is a trend towards the use of British management consultants on short contracts to oversee the privatisation of industries in Continental Europe. Similarly, Pricewaterhouse-Coopers and Ernst and Young have contracts to monitor the implementation of labour codes of conduct for garment and electronics multinationals. Their 'independence' as intermediaries has been questioned by international trade union confederations, though it is clear that for their corporate clients they diffuse the risks and responsibilities of outsourcing. As the chairman of Ernst and Young describes it, the professional service firms 'provide a more complete solution' (*The Economist*, 7 July 2001: 87), by engaging in both 'audit' and 'non-audit' activities.

While professional service workers are situated at the boundary between insider corporate interests and a pool of human resources, intermediaries may also take the form of traders and buyers of the services of unprotected outsider groups. One such group are subcontractors who buy in contingent labour for a specific contract with a client corporation. In the automotive component, electrical and garment manufacturing sectors, and in service sectors from logistics and transportation to cleaning and catering, such practices surround a larger client MNC and serve to absorb the slack in a lean

production system. Intermediary contractors diffuse the responsibility for stock inventory, terms of employment and labour costs 'down the line' to SMEs, 'shop houses' and homeworkers. As one contract production worker for an automotive component supply firm explained: 'In a lean system, someone somewhere has to take up the slack. It is usually the weakest link in the chain'.<sup>10</sup> Not dissimilarly, Naomi Klein argues that trade liberalisation and labour law reform has enabled large MNCs to 'no longer produce products... but rather buy products and brand them' (2000: 5). The result has been a proliferation of subcontractor roles, and an arms-length relationship between the 'insider' corporate managers of the client MNC and the workers producing for a subcontractor: 'Larger firms spread their risks of production by subcontracting. Subcontractors, in turn, pass on the risk by contracting out to homeworkers. The latter ... are not considered as employees and thus fall outside the scope of labour protection' (Lui and Chiu, 1999: 171).

The growth in outsourcing and contracting out production and services, as documented by Lui and Chiu in Hong Kong and Taiwan, effectively diffuses risk disproportionately along a supply chain, reducing the responsibility (or perception of responsibility) the customer firm has for work done in its name. In terms of working practices, the intermediary traders and buyers will outsource to sites that demonstrate a higher instance of poor pay and intensified work loads, and greater use of temporary, unprotected or illegal labour than the MNCs they supply (European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), 2000; Klein, 2000). Research into the roles and practices of these intermediary actors is almost totally absent from the contemporary agenda in IPE. And yet a focus on the diffuse webs of production and supply begins to reveal an array of complex relationships between worker groups. The experiences of the 'outsiders' among them remain relatively invisible in our understandings of the contemporary GPE.

### *Outsider working practices*

Outsider groups are those who are excluded from a formal role in defining the terms and nature of new forms of work and working practices. This is not to say that their working practices do not play significant roles in shaping or contesting transformation. Though we may not consider them to 'wield power' in a direct sense, their practices and relationships lie at the heart of the webs of power that constitute contemporary restructuring. The much-prized labour mobility and flexibility of the insider 'portfolio people' is reproduced through the practices of outsider 'precarious people' (Cox, 1999: 87) – a reserve army of contingent workers in factories, offices and homes. The 'outsiders' cannot be defined in terms of a single class, and indeed the overwhelming trend is towards a fracturing of common working identities, a 'patchwork quilt characterised by diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life' (Beck, 2000b: 1). In this sense the outsiders are themselves divided into an

array of disparate individuals and groups precisely in order to destabilise and disrupt the potential for organisation and to provide optimal flexibility:

Every corporation wants a fluid reserve of part-timers, temps and freelancers to help it keep overheads down and ride the twists and turns in the market ... One thing is certain: offering employment – the steady kind, with benefits, holiday pay, a measure of security and maybe even union representation – has fallen out of economic fashion. (Klein, 2000: 231)

Thus, though outsider groups are fluid, segmented and difficult to identify, it is precisely for these reasons that they need to enter our understandings of global restructuring. The ‘rise of the permatemp’ documented by *Time Magazine* is indicative of the ironic permanence of temporary and contingent work (12 July 1999). Despite barriers to the formal organisation of their interests, and direct efforts to position workers in competitive rather than collaborative relationships with one another, the experiences of outsider workers exhibit common patterns and conflicts that must be understood if meaningful dialogue between protected and unprotected workers is to take place. First, there is an expression of a consciousness of individualism and ‘hypercompetitiveness’ (Vilroxx, 1999; Sinclair, 1999). The use of HRM techniques such as the benchmarking of the performance of production plants,<sup>11</sup> coupled with the ‘storming’ effects of JIT production,<sup>12</sup> leads workers to feel that the greatest threats exist within the supply chain itself. The volatility and irregularity of production that is commonly associated with efforts to respond to the perceived demands of global markets, is understood by workers to be created by the manipulation of orders to fit JIT, to suit shareholders reports, or to respond to ‘last minute’ short-run contracts. Similarly, outsider groups associate the use of quality circles and teams with attempts to encourage them to compete with one another, and this is resisted via tacit and non-direct means (Rubery, 1996; Danford, 1998; Moody, 1997). Such heightened competition between individuals often takes on a gender dimension in which women in precarious working situations both sustain neo-liberal restructuring and pose a threat to traditional masculine working roles (Hooper, 2000: 60; Chang and Ling, 2000).

Second, and a related point, outsider groups widely associate globalisation with a diminution of collective identities and group representation (Towers, 1997). This is, of course, a phenomenon that is widely documented by industrial relations scholars in their studies of deunionisation. However, the changing practices of the unions themselves reveal much about the character of contemporary change in the workplace. UK and US trade unions have responded to challenges by becoming individual service providers for their ‘consumers’, thus reinforcing individualisation and excluding contingent and non-standard workers (Williams, 1997). Stabilising and protecting core workers has the effect of further destabilising the already precarious contract workforce. For a flexibility-seeking corporation, a protected and stable core of

workers increases the incentives to create a buffer of temporary or outsourced working practices. This contributes to the polarisation of a core group of workers who may organise to protect themselves from restructuring (or to negotiate an insider role in the form of restructuring), and a larger group of workers in contingent, outsourcing or homeworking roles whose practices may undermine these efforts, making dialogue problematic (Gallin, 2001). The polarisation of worker groups is taking place in close spatial proximity, so that it cannot be understood purely by reference to geographical development divisions. Research has shown, for example, that restructuring has produced dramatic increases in socioeconomic and spatial inequalities within the cities of the developed world (Sassen, 1994; Enloe, 1996). Feelings of belonging and alienation transcend distance so that precarious workers in the advanced industrialised world may share some of the characteristics of workers in developing countries working in the same supply chain.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, their practices may be remarkably similar and they may feel that they compete directly for their personal security.

Finally, the social practices of paid work are perceived to become increasingly similar to the social practices of unpaid work in the home. The British media has observed this trend in terms of 'family life mirroring the workplace' as 'services such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, DIY and laundry are "contracted out"' (*The Guardian*, 6 February 2000). Thus, as Brigitte Young argues 'the growing participation of professional women in the labour market is accompanied by the largely "invisible" development of paid work in the private household' (2001: 316). To trace the webs of power in the restructuring of a large European or North American MNC is to cross the permeable boundaries of public and private, to see the relationships between 'flexible' professionals and the 'flexible' cleaners and childminders working in their homes.

Meanwhile, for the most 'flexible' contract workers, the 24 hour instantaneous demands of care and household work are contemporaneous with the demands of production for the global economy. These 'precarious workers' (Cox, 1999: 87) convey acute experiences of what one woman working in electronics assembly termed 'knife-edge flexibility' in paid working practices and absolute rigid constraints in unpaid family work. Commenting on her husband's opposition to new working time arrangements, an agency cleaning worker indicates no clear boundary between paid work for the MNC, and the unpaid and informal work 'outside': 'I don't know why they fuss on so much about the new hours. I have worked like this as far back as I can remember. It is the same here as at home'.<sup>14</sup> In industries such as textiles, garments and electronics, where the production chain runs deeply into unprotected sites, women at this ultimately flexible end of production take on acute personal risks. Their labour is a complex blend of private household and public enterprise production and, as a result, they are often not legally acknowledged to be employees. Work that takes place in ad-hoc workshops and in family living rooms or on kitchen tables tends to be both unprotected and invisible



(Sassen, 1994: 115; Hsu, 1996). The rise of the 'multi-activity society' (Beck, 2000a: 42) interweaves the social practices of work, family, leisure and consumption, giving rise to new political questions and potential sites of political organisation.

### Politics at work

A focus on the contradictions and divisions that arise from the restructuring of work demonstrates that work and workers need to enter the globalisation debate on a level that reveals the political nature of changing practices. Is it possible to sketch the terrain of an emergent politics of transformation in working practices? As large firms fracture their activities and workers experience intensified insecurity, can we identify spaces of potential political organisation? At one level the most visible political contests could be said to be the strategic activities of nationally or transnationally organised trade unions (O'Brien, 2000; 2001). Here the contradictions of globalisation may create the pressures and opportunities for 'global social movement unionism' (Lambert, 1999), and extend IPE inquiry into the political economy of labour (Harrod and O'Brien, 2002). The roles of trade unions in forming alliances with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), participating in the highly visible 'anti-globalisation' protests (Waterman and Wills, 2001), and adapting to engage with workers in the informal sectors, suggest that 'organised' labour could become a more open political mechanism for a global civil society (Somavia, 1999; ILS, 1999a).<sup>15</sup>

However, at the level of social practices the study of firms, unions and organisations as primary sites of political activity in the GPE is problematic. Put simply, the fracturing of traditional sites of production leads us to question the representativeness of trade unions and other institutionalised political agencies. In a report for the ILO, Richard Hyman captures the 'gap' between the image of a homogeneous labour internationalism, and the concrete experiences of different worker groups:

It is evident that the traditional core constituency of trade union membership has dwindled, while there has been expansion at two extremes: those with professional or technical skills who may feel confident of their individual capacity to survive in the labour market; and those with no such resources but whose very vulnerability makes effective collective organization and action to achieve or perhaps even contemplate. (Hyman, 1999b: 3)

We are reminded that mechanical and organised forms of solidarity are imagined and constructed in ways that are historically particular (Hyman, 1999a; Thompson, 1963). As production is actively shifted into unprotected domains, programmes of restructuring have rendered past myths of solidarity more difficult to sustain, making it impossible to assume 'the existence of a

“normal worker””, and raising the need for ‘organic’ solidarities based on ‘direct experiences, immediate milieux and specific patterns of social relations’ (Hyman, 1999b: 3; 1999a: 96). Challenges to existing workplace political institutions have broken open past patterns of solidarity and allegiance. There are clear dangers but also opportunities here. The dangers lie in assuming that the workplace, in being deunionised, has become depoliticised, thereby reinforcing emerging disparities in working practices. The opportunities lie in a recognition of the common experiences, feeling and challenges within these diverse practices. In contrast to the idea that labour must ‘operate globally’ in order to match the ‘scale’ of MNC activity (see Herod, 2001), workers everyday thoughts and actions defy a global/local opposition. The apparent ‘global’ activities of organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, Women Working World Wide, HomeNet and the Self-Employed Women’s Association, are informed by the everyday experiences of workers in precarious sectors. Likewise, the struggles that are labelled ‘local’, such as plant-level industrial action and campaigns, or the everyday acts of disruption in a stretched lean production system, are undertaken within frameworks of thought that blend the ‘near’ and ‘far’ in personal histories. Contrary to the assumption that the ‘crisis of industrial relations’ has removed the politics from work, the form and nature of change in work and its organisation remains politically open, contingent and contested.

## Conclusion

The starting point of this chapter was a recognition that the dominant representations of global restructuring have rendered the voices, experiences and practices of workers unheard and invisible. Where in previous chapters I explored the contested nature of the restructuring of work through the lens of the policy programmes generated by state-societies, and the corporate agendas of MNCs, here I have mapped the political relationships of worker groups that transcend state-firm categorisations. In the wake of the Seattle-style visible and direct expression of disquiet with globalisation, IPE scholars are seeking to restore the ‘P’ to IPE (Hay and Marsh, 1999), and to uncover the agents who propagate or defy globalisation. Yet, where political struggle and agency has been uncovered in IPE inquiry, this has predominantly taken the form of individuals, groups and institutions who are perceived to ‘wield’ the power necessary to engage with the debate on global restructuring. National governments, corporate agencies, international economic institutions, and (much more rarely) trade unions, civil society associations and new social movements, feature in the contents pages of IPE texts and journals. Where workers do feature, they are assumed either to be contained within the parameters of the aforementioned collective agencies, or to be outside these boundaries as passive victims of change. Thus, in a very real sense, the capacity of ordinary people to comprehend, contest or give consent to global restructuring is

seriously underestimated. This chapter has attempted to reopen some of this political terrain by asking which groups are visible in IPE analyses, and exploring the grounds on which others are considered insignificant and excluded.

A first order question to be raised in the consideration of the relationship between the GPE and ordinary working practices, is whether unprotected and precarious workers actually matter to IPE inquiry. Do they have a rightful place on our research agendas? I have argued that shedding light on the experiences and practices of a range of worker groups is not simply about highlighting what we might consider to be 'grassroots' or 'ground level' political activity. Indeed, I have shown that our conceptual categories of 'global' and 'local' are significantly problematised and transcended by the concrete thoughts and practices of people in their everyday lives. Not only does the neglect of unprotected workers further entrench them at the margins of globalised social relations, but their invisibility also obscures central aspects of transformation in the GPE. Even for those studying the activities of MNCs in mainstream IPE, an understanding of 'life in the supply chain' brings significant insights. The fractured firm moves production into unprotected sites, cutting across public/private boundaries along complex supply-chains so that it becomes difficult to trace lines of responsibility and relations of power and control. The failure to bring workers' experiences into the global restructuring debate actively allows the MNC to commit this sleight of hand without a trace of it in our analyses. While anodyne business management literature extols the virtues of 'successful outsourcing', IPE is slow to catch up with critical readings of the social power relations of outsourcing practices.

Raising the profile of unprotected workers not only exposes the 'new' sites in which work is done for the GPE, but it also makes visible the political contestation taking place over the reality and representation of the restructuring of work. Following the analysis of this chapter, workers do not simply passively respond to a global force that is somehow 'greater' than them and beyond their reach, rather they actually both constitute and contest the meanings of that force for their everyday lives. In their frameworks of thought and action, workers engage with the restructuring of their own practices: differentially, unevenly and contradictorily, and within the constraints of prevailing webs of power. The assumption that the perceived dictates of globalisation and flexibilisation are transmitted uncontroversially through the layers of organisations, states, firms and workers, is subjected to serious challenge. The insecurity that is evident in concrete working practices directly undermines the benign images of security, empowerment and choice that accompany doctrines of flexibility. It becomes clear that complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion emerge from transformations in the nature and form of work, with increased security for some resting upon and requiring intensified risk for others. For the insider 'portfolio person' the risks of flexibility can be reconciled comfortably with the opportunities offered by mobility. Meanwhile, for the most 'flexible' precarious worker at the end of the supply-

chain risk and insecurity are intensified. An understanding of such relationships is vital to the mapping of potential political terrain that may connect formally and informally organised workers. Viewed in this way the restructuring of work is inherently political, contested and contingent. While we choose to depict or ignore particular ‘realities’ of global change, highlighting the sanitised spheres of technology and corporate strategy, we leave the ‘messier’ realms of work and labour in deep shadow. In doing so we risk obscuring the politics of restructuring that gives the character and form to contemporary change in the workplace and in a wider world order.

## Notes

- 1 This focus on the relationship between epistemological bias and invisibility owes much to the work of Roger Tooze and Craig Murphy (1996). They suggest that poverty and the poor have been made invisible by an IR and IPE predilection for empiricist epistemology and positivist methodology. For further discussion of the positivist and empiricist underpinnings of international theory, see Smith (1996).
- 2 IMF Managing Director Horst Köhler outlined his view of the future of the IMF as ‘an active part of the workforce to make globalisation work for the benefit of all’ (2000a: 2). Similar themes are evident in the British Government’s White Paper on ‘Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor’ (Department for International Development, 2000), and *The Economist’s* ‘The Case for Globalisation’ (2000: 19).
- 3 The Outsourcing Institute (2000) estimate that outsourcing is growing in the US at around 15 per cent annually. While it is clear that this practice is growing across the OECD countries, its rate is difficult to estimate as the boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ provision are increasingly fluid. For example, some German firms report the part-purchase of a supplier, making the production ‘in house’, yet maintaining the relationship of an external supplier. The supply of cleaning, maintenance and catering services is commonly outsourced in British companies, though is rarely recognised and reported as outsourcing, as it is not considered to be a production function. In terms of research on outsourcing, business journal articles on ‘how to outsource’ are burgeoning (see Elmuti and Kathwala, 2000), though there is little critical analysis of the nature and effects of outsourcing (see Bittman, Matheson and Meagher, 1999).
- 4 The ILO estimate that there are around 250 million children (5–14 years old) working in economic activity worldwide. For 120 million this work is full-time and excludes schooling. For the remainder this is combined with schooling (ILO Bureau of Statistics, 1998).
- 5 Harrod and O’Brien (2002) bring together the insights of labour studies, IPE, industrial relations, IRs and the sociology of work. The collection addresses the common problematics that global restructuring brings to these disciplines.
- 6 The ILO use the term ‘homeworker’ to define people working at home on tasks that are generally low paid, insecure and undertaken on a piecework basis, usually with no direct or formal contract. In contrast, a teleworker may be a manager, a senior professional or other employee who works flexibly between home and office via ICT links.
- 7 During 1999 the UK lost 12 days per 1000 employees due to industrial action. In Germany, where trade unions retain a central role despite declining density, 1 day was lost per 1000 employees (EIRO 1999).

- 8 The German Standortdebatte is the debate between the social partners surrounding the competitiveness of Germany as a location for production and investment.
- 9 The 1998 British Workplace Employee Relations Survey reveals that though two-thirds of workplaces report using teamworking, only 3 per cent of these actually devolve decision-making autonomy to the level of teams.
- 10 Confidential focus group interview, South Wales, 16 June 1998.
- 11 It is not uncommon for workers to be made directly aware of their individual performance vis-à-vis competitor plants and contractors. This can take the form of daily or weekly bulletins of benchmark performances, or visible screens on the factory floor displaying targets.
- 12 JIT production implies a reduction of slack or buffers in the system, requiring minimal materials and labour inventory, and an electronic data system, linking the customer to the firm and the supply chain. For large electronics MNCs this commonly manifests itself in weekly or bi-weekly estimates of production runs, necessitating instantaneous responses in working practices.
- 13 Soldatenko's (1999) study of Latina garment workers in Los Angeles reveals the complexities of feelings of shared experience and alienation. The intraworker and inter-ethnic conflict within sweat-shop conditions problematises the treatment of workers as a collective body of resisters. A central theme in the explosion of the subcontracting chain is what Soldatenko refers to as the difficulty in 'forging an effective culture of resistance' (1999: 319).
- 14 Confidential interview with contract workers of electronic component multinational, UK, 24 February 1998.
- 15 The Clean Clothes Campaign Network, for example, includes trade unions, women workers' groups and networks and worker education bodies. The purpose is to improve the working conditions of garment workers worldwide.