

Global productive chains and decent work management technologies: sociological evidences from Brazil

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Abstract

The article presents a reflection on decent work management technologies in the global productive chains. Based on economic sociology and anthropology authors, it discusses the general characteristics of the global productive chains, especially the concept of decent work as a management technology for the labor's international regulation. The empirical focus of this research was a clothing manufacturing productive chain in the south of Santa Catarina. Interviews were carried out with social and economic actors that are part of this sector, in particular, unions and entrepreneurs. As a conclusion, it is important to highlight that decent work management technologies have the formal merit of inserting the decent work guidelines into the contracts between the suppliers and subcontractors. However, the research points out that the asymmetries in the financial negotiations which are typical of the productive chains continue to promote precarious and informal work in the sector.

Keywords: Global Productive Chains; Decent Work; Management Technologies; Precarious Work.

Introduction

Within the scope of economic sociology, there has been an increase of studies on precarious work in the global production chains and on business strategies to deal with the social criticism carried out by consumers and social movements (Raworth; Kidder, 2009; Hughes; Wrigley et al., 2010; Barrientos, 2013). Although the expansion of labor-intensive industries has been an important source of job creation, there is evidence that the participation of developing countries in global production chains is strongly associated with lower production costs and the expansion of precarious work. Studies carried out by non-governmental organizations and unions highlight that international buyers, such as large branded retailers, subject their suppliers to commercial pressure to keep prices low and flexible ordering contracts resulting in low wages, exhausting working hours and unstable economic relationships. (Oxfam, 2004; Miller, 2004; Actionaid, 2007).

The issue that remains open is understanding under what circumstances the insertion of firms in global supply networks can inhibit the precariousness of labor relations and generate decent work. In this

regard, a very controversial problem identified in the literature concerns new management technologies that aim to demonstrate the position of corporations regarding decent work. Is it possible for private regulations such as certifications, codes of conduct and bilateral agreements between companies and unions promote decent work across global production chains, in particular, at suppliers located in developing countries?

These questions, which emerged when the North American sociologist Gary Gereffi coined the concept of global production chains (hereinafter identified by the acronym GPC's), are part of a wide range of research developed since the 1980. The merit lies in the fact that the concept incorporates dimensions that go beyond the economic aspect of industrial expansion worldwide. From a sociological point of view, the analyses around GPC's investigate the international geographical expansion of contemporary production networks, focusing mainly on issues of industrial reorganization, coordination, governance as well as power relations between social actors in the chain. It is, therefore, a line of research capable of understanding and explaining the causes and consequences of the organizational reconfiguration that global industries took on in the last decades after the Washington Consensus (Gereffi, 2013).

However, the first academic analyses using the GPC's approach rarely investigated labor relations, working conditions as well as management technologies oriented towards decent work guidelines. In fact, at the beginning, the literature focused on the dynamics of business organizations, with work being treated mainly as an endogenous factor of the production (Barrientos; Gereffi et al., 2011). With the progressive increase in the centrality of global production chains in developing countries, new research oriented towards labor relations and working conditions has emerged (Santos; Etcheverry et al., 2016).

With the launching of the campaign for "decent work" by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1999), the configurations of labor markets, working conditions, union participation, remuneration and the issues of equity and social protection have come to appear as important topics of debate for the understanding of GPC's. Therefore, this article presents a reflection on the technologies for decent work management in global production chains based on the Brazilian context.

Methodology

The analysis took as a starting point the general characteristics of global production chains. Afterwards, the study addressed the characteristics of the clothing manufacturing sector that, historically, is an economic field marked by precarious work, where women, migrants and ethnic minorities occupy job vacancies which are often marked by informality. The methodologies applied to the study included a literature review on the literature on global production chains and on decent work management technologies. The field research was carried out at the clothing manufacturing pole in southern Santa Catarina and included interviews with the social and economic actors that integrate the sector's production chain at different levels. Representatives of the workers' union, entrepreneurs of different business sizes were interviewed, namely, medium and large companies and textile factions. Data on decent work management technologies in global production chains were gathered through contacts with *IndustriALL Global Union*, the international union federation that brings together unions for workers in the metalworking, chemical, energy and mines and also the textile, clothing and leather sector. Data on the

certification in decent work of the Brazilian Textile Retail Association (ABVTEX) were collected with the institution itself.

Global production chains: history and definition

The genesis of the term “production chains” goes back to the efforts of the authors of world-system theory in the 1970s. Inspired by the theory of dependency, the world-system theory emerged from the concept of economy - Fernand Braudel's world, later used by authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi and Samir Amin (Raikes; Jensen et al., 2000).

The world-system theory (Wallerstein, 1974) proposes an interregional and transnational division of labor between central, semi-peripheral and peripheral countries. On the other hand, the central countries concentrate highly specialized and capital-intensive production while the rest concentrate on the production with intensive and unskilled labor and the extraction of raw materials. This dynamic tends to reinforce the domination role of the central countries. Similarly, in the global production chains, some economic actors have greater power, by dominating specialized activities and exercise coordination and control over the other participants (Gereffi, 2001).

For Gereffi (2014), with the advent of globalization since the last two decades of the 20th century, the concept of GPC's inaugurates a new analytical framework for economic and development sociology. In the sociologist's view, development depends on the strategic integration of countries and companies in international networks and, above all, on the relationship between supplier companies and leading companies (*lead firms*).¹

In fact, globalization has altered the competitive dynamics of nations and companies and has profoundly impacted the configuration of jobs in both developed and developing countries. This phenomenon is clearly observable when evaluating the patterns of international transactions, where an explosive growth in imports in developed economies indicates that the center of production and export of manufactures is present in an increasing set of developing countries (Gereffi, 2001).

However, the externalization of productive processes is not a new phenomenon in capitalism. Since 1980, outsourcing, whether in the form of simple externalization or geographic displacement of activities, has been part of an intense capitalist restructuring. It is, as Dupas (1998) observed, a reformulation in the production and distribution strategies of corporations, previously vertically integrated for the establishment of *networks*, which integrate different companies in the same global project.

Gereffi (1994; 1999; 2001) points out that there are two distinct types of international networks promoted by industrial and commercial capital: chains aimed at the producer and chains aimed at the buyer. The first refers to the strategy in which the big manufacturers, in general, the transnationals, transfer the central coordination roles to the production networks. Chains directed at the producer are typical of capital and technology-intensive industries such as the automotive and aviation sectors, computers, semiconductors and heavy machinery. On the other hand, buyer-driven chains are those in which large retailers, merchants and brand manufacturers transfer production to decentralized production networks in

¹ *lead firms* are the organizations that concentrate the greatest productive and economic decision-making power within the global production chains. Brand merchants, international buyers and retailers determine the global distribution of production.

a variety of developing countries. It is an industrialization aimed at common trade in consumer goods companies that require labor-intensive products such as clothing, shoes, toys, household items and electronics. In general, production is carried out by a network of subcontracted suppliers located in developing countries. In such cases, specifications, product guidelines as well as production prices are passed on by the merchants who order the items.

Corporations such as retailer Wal-Mart, Apple, Nike and Inditex-Zara fit the model of supply chains aimed at the buyer since they plan and/or market, but do not manufacture their products. According to Gereffi (1999) they are part of a new class of factories without factories as the production process segregates the manufacture from the planning and commercialization stages. In this model of production chain, the added value does not come from scale, volume or technological advances, as occurs in chains aimed at the producer. Major retailers (*lead firms*) control how, where and when production will occur while determining what portion of profit each stage of production will have, despite having no productive apparatus and not being directly responsible for hiring (as workers (Gereffi, 2001).

Therefore, the theme of management technologies for decent work in production chains directed at the buyer is particularly relevant: *lead firms* subcontract production to a vast network of suppliers located in countries whose working conditions as well as legislation are effectively heterogeneous.

Management Technologies in Global Productive Chains Management

Technologies can be understood as ways of rationalizing work such as the principles created by the Taylor production system, that is, studies of time and movement, sequence of labor movements, organization and disposition of machinery in the productive unit. In this sense, they are instrumental management technologies. On the other hand, part of the list of management technologies, the set of ideologies and behavioral techniques that seek to introject in individuals the basic and fundamental values in the performance of tasks. They are seminars, training plans, group work and motivation mechanisms created by management researchers with the objective of incorporating individual action in the company's projects and that form behavioral and ideological management technologies (Faria, 1997).

Araújo (2001: 17) highlights that management technologies have as their central objective "to improve business performance, in order to allow the survival of competitive organizations with so many turbulences and constant break of paradigms." It becomes evident from the definitions cited that the authors, when stating that management technologies assist managers in maximizing what companies are able to do and improve business performance, are necessarily referring to the process of valuing the value, vital to the perpetuation of capital. The definition in question expands the possibilities for the use and effectiveness of management technologies in the organizational scope, starting from the creation and application of management methods in all companies, as long as they contribute to its ultimate goal.

Gurgel (2003) when dealing with the issue of subjective control made possible by the various constituent tools from social and applied sciences, the term 'management technologies' is equivalent to 'contemporary management technologies', adopting as a foundation the same logic as Faria (1997) in his concept.

According to the authors that support us and their diverse interpretations and appropriations about the concept of management technologies, we understand as management technologies a set of methods and techniques for organizing and controlling work, which, working internally, externally and inter-organizationally, aims to intensify and reduce the working time necessary for the capital rotation cycle, an essential process for the perpetuation of the process of valuation of value.

However, management technologies are socio-political constructions, that is, they are not restricted to business strategies but are reflexes and they depend on the relationship that capitalism establishes with the dynamics of society itself. At the beginning of the 20th century, Fordist/Taylorist management technologies brought about the coordination of labor relations, through a rigid bureaucracy that neutralized the individuality of workers in the production process. In contemporary society, the formation of interorganizational networks, as well as *clusters* and GPC's, require new logics both in instrumental management technologies and in behavioral and ideological technologies. Over the past 30 years, the development of the so-called flexible company has been accompanied by a global reorganization of the productive sphere as well as inaugurating a new international division of labor. Likewise, new behavioral and ideological technologies, such as the “corporate social responsibility” guidelines, were developed in such a way as to reproduce and legitimize the logic of capitalist accumulation.

Decent Work as a management technology for the international regulation of labor

Therefore, from the 1980s and 1990s, the world economic panorama has changed profoundly. Based on a new infrastructure, based on information and communication technologies and with the determination of the deregulation and liberalization policies operated by governments and international institutions, a truly global economy emerges. So, how to think about an international regulation for industrial relations, no longer based on national norms, but within globally sparse productive activities? There is economic globalization and production, but could we also think of a globalization of workers' rights in the 21st century? How does the ILO stand in the face of this new scenario?

In the face of changes, the concept of decent work emerges as a readjustment of ILO programs and projects. Efforts to launch the concept stem, in part, from the formulation of a fundamental document of the institution: The Declaration of Fundamental Labor Rights (1998). The prerogative is that decent work appears not only on the national agendas of member countries, but, above all, within global production chains (ILO, 2016).

In conceptual terms, decent work is the conjunction of four strategic objectives of the ILO, that is, its existence derives from the fact that it exists: respect for fundamental rights at work², policies aimed at promoting productive and quality employment, extension social protection and the strengthening of social dialogue.

However, how can the guidelines for decent work operate as management technologies for global production chains? The first aspect to be taken into account concerns the very functioning of the production

² For ILO, fundamental rights at work are: freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced labor, the effective abolition of child labor and the elimination of all forms of discrimination in matters of employment and occupation.

chains and the trend observed in some productive sectors in the formation of a network of outsourced and subcontracted companies that relate to a greater or lesser degree with the leading company.

In fact, global production chains are complex inter-country organizational structures that organize the production of goods or services in addition to distribution to consumers. They are structures that organize from the use of production factors, to the various stages of development, production and supply. In this sense, they can take the form of foreign direct investment (FDI) of multinational companies in branches in different countries or even an international supply model. In this, the participation of main companies is defined by terms and conditions of contractual agreements, or, sometimes, of tacit agreements with suppliers and subcontractors to supply specific inputs, goods and services. In the case of IDEs, multinational companies have direct responsibility for labor relations and the configurations of the workforce (gender composition, earnings, profit sharing, benefits, etc.) are exposed to decent work management technologies represented by employment reports. sustainability in a broader corporate governance framework. The international supply model, which is increasingly widespread, may present deficits in decent work. Difficulties arise when leading companies - namely, brand traders or large retailers based in countries with central capitalism and who have no direct responsibility for jobs in companies participating in the supply chain - make decisions regarding investment or even in relation to production that affect working conditions in global production chains (ILO, 2016). It is precisely in this model of the productive chain that the guidelines for decent work have been set as management technology for monitoring working conditions.

In fact, the creation of management technologies aimed at promoting decent work in global production chains transcends the limits of national public labor regulation. In this sense, it is not enough to state that the companies that make up the supply network complies with the national legislation. It is necessary to make sure that the entire global production chain operates based on minimum requirements regarding respect for fundamental labor rights (ILO, 1998).

The occurrence of violations of workers' fundamental rights in global production chains is accompanied by increasing pressures on multinational companies and brand traders to ensure compliance with minimum working conditions in developing countries. Sectors of civil society, non-governmental organizations, media, consumers, multilateral organizations and international union federations are the agents most directly involved with monitoring business behavior in matters of decent work. Above all, through pressure from international union federations, multinationals and brand traders have developed a risk management system and expanded the scope of monitoring working conditions in the subcontracting network (Miller, 2004; Bair; Dickson et al., 2013). It is in this context that the "Codes of Conduct for Suppliers" and the International Framework Agreements for decent work in global production chains appear (Industrial Global Union, 2014; ILO, 2016).

The textile and clothing industry, in scope overall, has been the scene of reports of poor working conditions, low wages and unhealthy conditions for health and safety of (the) workers. Major brands were associated with so-called "sweat factories" (*sweatshops*) and lost reputation in the face of scrutiny society (Bernstein, 1997, Repórter Brasil, 2011; Clean and Clothes Campaign, 2017). As a result, some companies started promoting the "social responsibility" discourse as a form of risk management (Heal, 2008).

In the next section , we highlight the operation of management technologies based on decent work guidelines and the limits and scope in terms of reducing precariousness of work in the sector based on field research carried out at the clothing production pole in southern Santa Catarina.

Results: Textile and Clothing Production Chain in the South of Santa Catarina and Management Technologies for Decent Work

Except for designer fashion, until the 1980s, the textile sector was characterized by mass production that did not suffer great variations from one season to the next. another. However, in the 1990s, retail companies began to expand the range of their products by combining more modern designs with the development of differentiated brands. Thus, the strategy of manufacturing products in developing countries has proved to be profitable in order to lower production costs. The increase in competitiveness forced retailers into merger and incorporation processes and this scenario increased the bargaining power of lead *companies in relation to manufacturers*. The brands started to dispatch production to other countries and subcontract manufacturing, aiming to reduce labor and production costs, thus forming the GPC's of the textile and clothing sector (Gereffi, 1994; 2001). However, the subcontracting of production can reach several levels, generating a true pulverization of textile factions. In these companies, which may even operate informally, state control over working conditions is often inexistent or insufficient.

Brazil is the sixth largest producer in the world, the second largest in the denim (jeans) segment and the third in knitwear production. In the state of Santa Catarina, the textile sector is concentrated in the northern region, with 78.3% of companies in the state and 68.8% of jobs generated. As for clothing and accessories, the largest number of companies is concentrated in the southern region of Santa Catarina. There are 2,072 companies that generate 15,217 direct jobs (SEBRAE, 2010). However, surveys carried out with the employers' sector in the southern region reveal that the number of companies doubles when considering informal units of clothing production (home textile factions).

In fact, the textile-making complex in the city of Criciúma is characterized by the presence of companies of different sizes and with different commercial projects. Most are micro and small companies, about 95% of the total and only 5% are large or medium-sized companies. In Santa Catarina, qualification by business size regarding micro and small companies is governed by Complementary Law 123/2006 of Simples Nacional and refers to annual gross revenue of up to R \$ 3.6 million. The main advantage of taxation relates to bureaucracy and reduction of the tax burden by up to 40% depending on the conditions of the company. Thus, in our interviews, we found that the strong presence of micro and small companies in the region hides a business strategy *sui generis*. Due to the tax advantage of Simples Nacional, businessmen in the industry choose to manage a larger number of micro and small companies instead of fostering a medium or large company. On the other hand, the strategy of relocating production from Brazil to other Latin American countries has proved to be profitable. In our interview with the employers' sector, the advantage of medium and large companies in transferring manufacturing plants to countries such as Paraguay was mentioned, where taxation reaches 17% while in Brazil it can reach 47% of revenues.

Regarding the dynamics of the production chain, it was found that leading companies such as large national and international retailers direct orders to local companies that redistribute and subcontract the production steps to smaller textile factions. In fact, the use of subcontracting has been a practice in the

textile and clothing sector since the 1990s, when global manufacturing companies started production restructuring processes (Hagenauer et al., 2001). The national literature devoted to the theme presents different patterns in relation to its adoption. Navarro (2003) and Lima (2009) state that, according to a first “structuring” model, outsourcing aims at reducing costs associated with technological and organizational determinants; however, a second “predatory” model seeks to reduce costs based on precarious labor relations, which is, therefore, subcontracting labor, temporary work contracts, homeworking, part-time work and unregistered work (socially unprotected).

The recurring media exposure of cases of violation of fundamental rights at work in the textile factories and the registration of large fashion magazines in the so-called “Dirty List of Slave Labor” of the Ministry of Labor and Employment made the Brazilian Textile Retail Association (ABVTEX) to create, in the 2000s, management technologies for decent work for suppliers. The general objective of the certification, according to the entity, is to allow retailers that are members of ABVTEX effective control of suppliers and subcontracted factories regarding the fulfillment of minimum requirements in terms of relations and working conditions. ABVTEX's certification of decent work therefore becomes a management technology that aims to control working conditions throughout the production chain. According to the union of workers in the clothing sector interviewed in the survey, about 30% of companies in the southern region of Santa Catarina have already joined the certification.

In addition to promoting the regularization of companies and standardization in relation to compliance with working conditions, certification has the merit of mapping and identifying the structure of the production chain. In addition, if the companies really observe the certification guidelines, the technology will allow to block the so-called uncontrolled spraying of the production chain and the consequent formation of *sweatshops*.

Finally, we conducted an interview with an owner of a textile factory certified by ABVTEX. We questioned in particular the effectiveness of certification for improving working conditions at the production unit. The administrator stressed that during the seal implementation process, independent audits carried out visits to verify the compliance with the agreed clauses. The interviewee pointed out that compliance with labor legislation was specially monitored. Formal hiring, income according to the category floor, legal work hours, holidays, social security, Guarantee Fund for length of service (FGTS), are part of the criteria evaluated by the auditors. We investigate the administrator's perception of the process and the advantages of certification. However, the administrator made a point of highlighting that the certification process is not accompanied by a greater financial appreciation on the part of the service borrowing companies. On the contrary, the interviewee pointed out that the sector's profit margins have been declining over the years and that there is no negotiation by the *lead firms* to increase the amount paid for the garments produced. The manager even claimed that he intends to change his field of activity because production costs and labor costs - guaranteed by the certification process - have become unsustainable within the dynamics of the subcontracted textile factories.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to understand how the concept and guidelines of decent work became a management technology in the social construction of markets. The research found out how companies use the concept and its guidelines to improve working conditions in a historically precarious production chain. We take as an example the productive chain of the textile and clothing sector in southern Santa Catarina.

In fact, management technologies have followed capitalist development since its inception. They are a set of techniques and methods for organizing and controlling work that can act both internally and externally and inter-organizationally. The management technologies allow us to intensify and reduce the working time necessary for the capital rotation cycle, an essential process for the process of valuing value.

Likewise, the processes of outsourcing and subcontracting the workforce in the textile and clothing sector are strategies to intensify the profitability indexes of large retail companies. However, the formation of an extensive production chain and the use of “predatory” outsourcing has dispersed informal textile factions both in the world and in Brazil and Santa Catarina.

However, labor inspections by the State and public monitoring by non-governmental organizations, media sectors and unions have put pressure on multinationals and clothing retailers to create management technologies to keep up with working conditions throughout the network of contracted suppliers and subcontractors. These are, above all, management technologies for managing the reputation of brands before consumers.

In formal terms, the existence of decent work certification like ABVTEX has the merit of 1) inserting decent work guidelines in contractual relationships between suppliers and subcontractors; 2) effectively map the economic actors that are part of the production chain and 3) curb uncontrolled spraying processes, the existence of informal companies and the precariousness of work in the final links of the production chain. However, our field research revealed the weaknesses inherent in the model. In fact, certification has been seen by suppliers as a gateway to the lead firms' production chain. Nevertheless, unequal power relations and the lack of price negotiation by retailers place a burden on textile factions. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the impasse surrounding certifications: while retailers demand the rules due to risk management and brand reputation, asymmetries in financial negotiations impel textile factions to operate in illegality. Without mentioning clauses that specify revision and rectification of production prices over time, certification is fragile in preventing precariousness and informality in the production chain of the textile and clothing sector.

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