

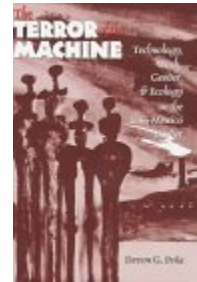
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Devon G. Pena. *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the Mexican Border*. Austin: CMAS Books, 1997. xi + 460 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-76562-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-76561-0.

Reviewed by William Schell (Murray State University)
Published on H-LatAm (March, 1998)



Machine Breaking

As a boy in Lerdo Texas, Devon Pena had terrible nightmares about the train which passed through the polluted industrial section of the Three Points barrio of where he lived nearby a rattle-trap cotton gin and a dangerously defective natural gas pumping station. After a particularly bad dream, Pena's grandmother took him to the tracks to confront the train.

"The train appeared, and my grandmother picked up a rock from the ground. She put it in my hand and said: 'Defend yourself. Don't be afraid of that train. Here, throw rocks at it and defend yourself!' I did. She applauded my new found courage as I confronted my own worst fears" (p. 334). But he did not banish his fears, rather he indulged them. Pena says that he is not a technophobe but, decades later, he is still throwing rocks at machines.

In *The Terror of the Machine*, Pena offers what he characterizes as "a first-time look at the dialectics of domination and resistance in the assembly lines of Mexico's maquiladora industry" (p. 20). But in reality much of Pena's book is an old story oft told, original only in its emphasis on gender issues. In describing the horrors of these "postmodern dark, satanic mills" he focuses on "third-world women" struggling against the dehumanization of the workplace. He "traces workplace stories of struggle—the intrigue and stress, mishaps and successes of workers' direct confrontations with technology and management on the shop floor" as they are carried on by "a subaltern organization created by workers inside

the factory" whose main form of resistance is the slow-down or *tortuguismo* (working at a turtle's pace) and acts of "informal resistance and sabotage" (p. 8).

Pena begins by introducing Juana Ortega, an indomitable, creative and perpetually disgruntled worker, one of many such women whose stories he uses to personalize resistance by female workers to the ruthless, profit-mad maquila management. These vignettes are, to my mind, the most interesting parts of the book which bring to life the deep problems of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and cultural misunderstanding that permeate that transnational maquila workplace. He then launches into a brief (and unnecessary) description of the origins of the modern factory system in Henry Ford's assembly line and Frederick Taylor's time and motion studies (Fordism and Taylorism). These, he notes, were leavened in the mid-century by innovations of managerial sociology which put a smiley face on transnational industrial capitalism and painted the bars of its "iron cage" in soothing pastels. Pena explores physical organization of the maquilas and workplace politics to discover (surprise) that the factory setting generates a "subaltern life [on] the shop floor [which] redefines the politics of production by undermining the Taylorist and Fordist designs of the would-be dominators" (p. 92). He "challenges the perspectives of both conventional and Marxist scholars who tend to view the assembly-line workers as thoroughly deskilled, haplessly exploited victims." Rather Pena sees an "enormous reservoir of creativity and invention in the daily ... activities of maquila work-

ers” (p. 22) and describes “the shop floor [as] a ‘classroom’ where workers first ‘learn’ the strategies of resistance and the nature of collective organization” (p. 108). Pena attributes this subaltern resistance primarily to the transnational and gendered reality of the maquilas, but anyone who has worked in a factory anywhere will be quick to point out that slow downs (*tortuguismo*), wildcat strikes, sabotage, informal worker networks that subvert the official “chain of command,” and attempts by management to identify, penetrate and use these informal networks, are universal.

Since Pena told a personal story, permit me. I worked for two years in a paper mill and there, as in all factories, acts of sabotage to “get the man” were commonplace. One tactic was to bust a roll of paper as it neared completion by bumping it with a forklift. This gave great satisfaction to the perps, but it worked an enormous hardship on “sparehands” like myself who had to cut up the 10-foot long 5-foot high rolls by hand with our paper knives for recycling. What Pena would call an act of resistance, I, and the rest of us putting our backs and shoulders into cutting down the rolls, called getting *****ed. Similarly guerrilla job-actions by one shift, left the next crew to deal with a load of *\$\$*. Pena’s inability to see this other side of workplace “resistance” reveals a certain myopic quality which is also present in this book.

Pena’s main contribution is his examination of the Centro de Orientacion de la Mujer Obrera. COMO began as a grass roots movement in Juarez and evolved during the 1970s and 80s to bring the lessons learned in the maquila struggles to the wider community through worker self-education and by establishing self-managed cooperatives to promote workplace democracy and ecologically sustainable development. COMO grew out of the collaboration of Guillermina Valdes, a University of Michigan trained Marxist sociologist then active in a middle class philanthropic organization, Grupo Damas, and Maria Villegas, a nurse-practitioner who had become radicalized by her work in the clinic at the Ciudad Juarez RCA maquila in the late 1960s. Although the initial push for COMO came from the Villegas’ maquila experiences, she was soon supplanted by the better-educated, upper-class Valdes who became COMO’s jefe. At first COMO pursued a radical agenda, educating women on issues of gender and labor and training community activists. COMO also moved beyond its strictly industrial origins to assist Juarez Valley *ejidatarios* to obtain credit from the corrupt Banrural and to wrest justice from the PRI bureaucrats and by organizing the poorest of the poor—the city dump workers—as SOCOSEMA (Sociedad Coopera-

tiva de Seleccionadores de Materiales). But as the organization gained official status and international recognition, it was coopted by the PRI, and Valdes took a full-time position with Colegio de la Frontera Norte. This effectively split the organization into an official male-dominated government-funded COMO and an informal female-led COMO which, Pena argues, Valdes was responsible for organizing in association with the St. John the Baptist Community, a charismatic Catholic movement in Juarez.

In 1991, Valdes died tragically in a plane crash, and her daughter, Luchi Villava, became director of the official COMO. COMO then took a decidedly neutral position on NAFTA when the rest of the Mexican left vocally opposed it as a green-light for even greater exploitation of Mexico and Mexican workers by the maquila system and for the acceleration of the pollution of the border. Because of COMO’s official (non)position on NAFTA, the final chapters of Pena’s book, which he was to have co-authored with his friend and mentor Valdes, seem one long paradox. Pena lashes out at the awful environmental degradation caused by the maquila program along the border which he accurately calls a Mexican Bhopal and a 2000 mile Love Canal. He predicts that NAFTA “will likely diminish the prospects [for workplace democracy and sustainable development]. Mexico, like the maquila workers who struggle through COMO is at a critical crossroads. It must decide if it wants to succumb to the delusive seductions of free trade ... or it can emulate the creativity and inventiveness of maquila workers and choose the equally difficult path of cooperative development ... Guillermina Valdes once said: ‘It is simply a matter of appreciating the value of your own culture enough to see that it provides plenty of creative possibilities for a more just, more humane future’ ” (p. 173). Pena does not seem to notice the irony of this compared with his earlier characterization of the formation of COMO’s ideological outlook as “reflective of Valdes affinity for the teachings of Erich Fromm and Paolo Friere” [that is, a product of her North American university training] as much as it was a product of “Maria Villegas’s affinity for the working class perspective ...” (p. 139).

Most of Pena’s research is over ten years old and the book does not reflect the years since NAFTA’s implementation nor mention the ongoing anti-PRI/anti-NAFTA revolts. Although other reviewers found Pena’s work to be “action research at its best” and “an exciting read ... powerful, moving, and convincing,” I did not. I believe students will find it dull and repetitious while specialists will find little new or enlightening. Still, whenever re-

viewers disagree so over the merits of a book, its best to judge for ones self.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This

work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: William Schell. Review of Pena, Devon G., *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the Mexican Border*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1755>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.