Geographic limits to global labor market flexibility: The human resources paradox of the cruise industry

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1. Introduction

As production becomes more globalized, geography comes to play a greater role in determining how industries will secure their labor forces. Theoretically, globalized labor markets provide a means of achieving optimal labor market flexibility. Yet, in practice, human geographies set limits to the degree flexibilities can actually be found even at a global scale. This paper examines labor market flexibility as it is manifested in the highly globalized labor market of the cruise shipping industry.

It seems a general consensus exists both explicitly and implicitly that global neo-liberal capitalism creates a “malleable” and “responsive” employment situation that promotes non-standard work and provides management with a great deal of leeway to mold flexible work regimes to fit its needs (Oladinde, 2008, p. 57). Thus the relaxation of labor supply rules in labor-short states has resulted in the growth of a “transnational working class”, that “exhibits great 'labor flexibility', increases the pool of army reserve of labor and furthermore, intensifies labor subordination to capital” (Kong, 2007, p. 14). In other words, with the emergence of global labor markets, “companies are now free to search the world for the most rightless and disempowered workers…in a position of having to accept bargains of desperation” (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008, p. 18). Within this broad purview, “labor other than as an occasional short term impediment, is no longer a problem for capital” (Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 371). Deindustrialization in the Global North and the rise of sweatshop labor throughout the Global South attests to this. Yet even for globalized industries, maintaining a steady labor supply can represent a significant challenge. This reflects a broader failure of even the most nuanced strategies for conceptualizing globalized production. For example, even the global production networks (GPN) approach which has been lauded by many economic geographers for its ontological strength (e.g. Dicken et al., 2001; Henderson et al., 2002; Hess and Yeung, 2006; Coe et al., 2008), has not produced much work that treats labor as a fundamental component of global production networks. Instead, GPN research has tended to focus on how economic governance sustains accumulation, while the social relations of production have heretofore received little attention (Cumbers et al., 2008).

Labor in the cruise industry provides an ideal empirical study area within the GPN approach as its labor market is perhaps the most globalized aspect of one of the most globalized of any industries, and therefore provides a snapshot of potential labor–capital relationships in the advent of more liberalized global work regimes. While there are many industries that operate transnationally, the shipping industry in general and the cruise industry in particular are unique in the ability to leverage an extremely liberalized labor market that allows companies to recruit the most globally diverse set of workers possible. This includes positions that have often been considered low or semi-skilled that remain highly restricted to local labor forces.

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in most countries (Nonnenmacher, 2008). With work occurring in a
deterritorialized context on board ocean-going ships, cruise lines
can legally recruit workers from wherever they choose. A common
cruise ship is sufficiently large for more than 5,000 passengers and
crew members. As I observed in Charleston, South Carolina,
which is the home port for one particular vessel, the ship
is rooted in the uneven nature of labor supply. I extend the sugges-
tion that while transnational workforces allow employers to tap
into the widest possible labor markets, with seemingly endless
possibilities for contributing to strategic operational flexibility,
there are geographical limits to sourcing talent. Due to political,
demographic and cultural characteristics of labor supply countries
or regions, the ability to recruit suitable workers varies signifi-
cantly from place to place. Even in lightly regulated global labor
markets with a seemingly endless surplus of workers willing to ac-
ccept difficult working conditions, low wages, and many forms of
risk, the geography of labor recruitment within the cruise industry
limits the actual size of the reserve army of workers. A combina-
tion of a need for skilled workers, cultural characteristics of local
labor markets, and worldwide demographic shifts limits the degree
to which companies can easily replace workers at low cost. Thus
workers who embody the qualities that are necessary for a cruise
ship job are not necessarily easy to locate, even though cruise lines
operate in a regulatory environment that is generally conducive to
their recruitment efforts.

This article examines this paradox in greater detail. In particu-
lar, I focus on the tension that exists between the industry's
demand for a flexible labor force, and the need for workers display-
ing a specific skill set appropriate for work on board cruise ships. In
practice, these two needs are not always reconcilable and as such
cruise lines have found that there is a limit to labor flexibilities that
operate in a regulatory environment that is generally conducive to
their recruitment efforts.

This article serves to shed light on these limitations by focusing
on seafarers in the cruise industry. Although the context of this
article applies to seafarers of all nationalities, data collection pri-
marily involved Filipinos due to their ubiquity on cruise ships
where they comprise close to one third of all crewmembers indus-
try-wide, and because Manila hosts a critical mass of manning
agencies that could be sourced for interviews (Wu, 2005).

This study draws on over 80 semi-structured interviews con-
ducted between February 2007 and March 2009 with various
stakeholders associated with cruise ship work. Roughly 60 of these
included interviews with workers. In Manila, I conducted inter-
views with workers in the streets and cafes that surround manning
agencies. Additionally, two manning agencies arranged for me to
speak privately with various (roughly 20) workers who were pres-
ently at the agency conducting business. Also in Manila, I inter-
viewed recruitment managers from eight of the ten major
manning agencies that supply the cruise lines with Filipino work-
ers. In Miami, Florida and Charleston, South Carolina, I conducted
interviews with workers of various nationalities who had come
ashore while their ship had docked in port. Interviews with non-
Filipinos helped to balance the data by avoiding an over-reliance
on Filipino sources and forge a more holistic image of the cruise
industry. As the home port for one particular vessel, Charleston
yielded particularly rich interviews. On Saturdays, I was able to
meet with many of the same workers over the course of
thirty months during its weekly turnaround. Also in Miami or by
phone, I interviewed three corporate human resources managers
from major cruise lines, two personnel trainers and two port
chaplains. In all cases, names of people and companies are changed
or omitted in order to maintain anonymity.

This article begins with a discussion of labor flexibilization and
how such processes relate to labor concerns in the cruise industry.
Here, I pay particular attention to what labor flexibilization means
for cruise ship workers, both in terms of their job duties as well as
their vulnerability in the workplace and job market. This is fol-
lowed by an analysis of the limits to labor flexibilization on cruise
ships in light of broad demographic and economic changes. The
paper concludes with a discussion of future concerns for the industry
and its workers.

2. Flexible production and labor flexibility

Macroeconomic changes in the past few decades have made the
issue of flexible production a central topic for economic geography.
Although often loosely defined here I refer to labor flexibilization
as a process characterized by labor forms increasingly constrained
by time, space and organization and which are increasingly adaptable
to the changes in the marketplace (Villarante, 2006). Flexible
work generally involves a move towards non-standard employ-
ment characterized as work by contract, organized on an individual
rather than collective basis, without full-time benefits (Kalleberg,
This coincides with a movement away from unionized workforces
and includes the increased use of contractually-based “contingent”
workers who can be hired or laid off as business cycles demand
(Belous, 1989; Peck and Theodore, 1998, 2001; Peck, 2000; Carnoy
et al., 1997; Barker and Christensen, 1998). Operationally, flexible
employment involves any work that is either not full-time or
where the duration of employment is indefinite (Ozaki, 1999).
This numerical flexibility gives companies the ability to quickly and effi-
ciently control staffing levels at minimal costs (Standing, 1999).
This shift has been global as temporary staffing services have
grown in international importance over the past decade as states
have liberalized their labor markets enough to allow temporary
contractual work to blossom (Peck et al., 2005; Coe et al., 2007,
2009). In the Global North low-end service positions in cleaning
(Aguiar and Ryan, 2009; Savage, 2006), care giving (Rhee and Zá-
bin, 2009), and hospitality (Mcdowell et al., 2008; Tufts, 2009)
have been made increasingly flexible, characterized by part-time,
precarious, gendered and often migrant workforces, often provided
via staffing agencies. For example, in London this has become
something of an industry norm (Lai et al., 2008; Mcdowell et al.,

Flexibility can also be functional in that workers are increasingly
expected to perform a variety of tasks potentially outside their offi-
cial job duties (Ioannides and Debbage, 1997; Kalleberg, 2003;
Storper and Scott, 1990). Companies increase productivity by
allowing fewer workers to perform the tasks that might be re-
quired of a greater number of individuals in a rigid structure. In
such cases, a limit in quantity of workers does not preclude the
quality of the individuals who remain, and in fact might generally
point toward the employment of higher-skilled people who can
better adapt to changing workplaces (Ozaki, 1999). In short, for
workers, flexibilization can mean anything from decreased job
security, an expansion of job duties, or even flexible working hours.
As such, labor flexibility is presented in both positive and negative
terms.

With regard to the later, flexible work regimes represent in-
crease insecurity for workers (Tombs and Whyte, 2006; Allen
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