

Informalization of Metropolitan Labour Forces: The Case of Irish Immigrants in the New York Construction Industry.

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses Sassen's model of informalization in advanced urban economies, and in particular, its application to the construction industry in New York City. The validity of the model is assessed in light of the ethnographic accounts of Irish construction workers, which deal with both the formal and informal economies within the construction sector. While the findings are generally compatible with Sassen's model, the paper concludes that greater attention needs to be paid to the role of ethnicity as an independent variable operating in the labour market.

INTRODUCTION

The upward trend in Irish emigration in the 1980s has seen tens of thousands of people quitting Ireland for the metropolises of core countries, not only in Europe but also the United States. The numbers of Irish in London, Munich, Sydney, New York, Boston and Chicago have swelled in recent years. Attempts to explain this movement of labour range from micro-level entrepreneurial models which focus on individual motivation to macro frameworks which focus on international economic restructuring. It is the latter which concern me in this paper. In particular, I will discuss Sassen's model of informalization in advanced urban economies, and its application to the construction industry in New York City. The validity of the model will be assessed in light of ethnographic accounts of Irish construction workers. Their testimonies illustrate the workings of both the formal and informal economies within the construction sector. While my findings are generally compatible with Sassen's model, I will argue that greater attention needs to be paid to the role of ethnicity as an independent variable operating in the labour market. The data are based on fieldwork and indepth interviews carried out amongst New York City's illegal Irish community between August 1987 and August 1988. Some follow up research was also conducted in May 1990.

ECONOMIC INFORMALIZATION IN GLOBAL CITIES

The capacity of global cities to absorb new immigrants from peripheral areas has been linked to the changing needs of advanced capitalism (Sassen-Koob 1986; Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987; Sassen 1988, 1991). While manufacturing plants in far-flung peripheries are staffed by indigenous workers, immigrant workers from these peripheries *also* serve the needs of capitalist enterprise through their participation in emergent informal economies in the metropolises. The evolving pattern of international business organization tends to rely on flexible and disposable workers in both locations.

According to Sassen, advanced industrialisation contains conditions that induce the formation of an informal sector in cities like Los Angeles and New York (1986, p. 2). The recession of the mid-1970s, triggered by the oil crisis, particularly affected developed countries, causing a profit squeeze. Increased labour costs, coupled with competition from cheaper produced goods, has made the decentralization of work arrangements and informalization in the manufacturing and service sectors in global cities considerably more attractive (Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987, p. 54). Smaller firms are better placed to produce customized goods and services to meet the increased demand from both the expanding high-income and low-income populations of global cities (Sassen 1991, p. 87). These firms operate at narrow profit margins in a competitive environment and thus, must keep labour costs low. This, argues Sassen,

encourage[s] non-compliance with regulations regarding wages and working conditions and induce[s] informalization in a broad range of economic activities (1991, p. 87).

In such circumstances, employers increasingly turn to immigrant workers, a high proportion of whom are undocumented, and are, therefore, willing to work 'off-the-books.' In addition, the threat of easy replacement – the fact that the employee may be hired and fired solely at the discretion of the employer – makes immigrant labour power more flexible. This flexibility acts as a major incentive to the employer in the informal sector.

Broadly speaking, the informal sector includes all employment outside the regulatory apparatus governing pay and working conditions, social insurance and taxation. Although the informal economy is similar in description to the secondary labour market or competitive sector in a dual economy model, Portes and Sassen-Koob point out that the latter is comprised of legal enterprises while the informal economy operates at the very margins of the law (1987, pp. 31-32). Indeed, Sassen maintains that informalization is not an intrinsic characteristic of the labour process

itself. Rather, the presence or absence of informalization is determined by the boundaries of state regulations (1991, p.80). In fact, the boundary between formal and informal economic activity is somewhat anomalous and begs analytical specification.

Castells and Portes have argued that 'the absence of institutional regulations may rest in *different elements* of the work process: the status of labour, the conditions of work, the form of management' (quoted in Sassen 1991, p. 81, my emphasis). My research among Irish construction workers suggests that different levels of formality and informality operate in any given workplace. On the one hand, an illegal worker with false documentation may secure a position in regulated, unionized employment. On the other hand, a legal worker who is either a citizen or a resident alien may work in an unregulated sweatshop or for an unlicensed construction firm. Crucially, the informal economy does not depend for its survival on an immigrant labour force, although in practice, immigrants and in particular illegal aliens, are most likely to seize the opportunities provided by unregulated work.

The proliferation of economic activity in a range of industries in New York City – notably in construction, apparel, electronics, furniture and fittings – leads Sassen to conclude that the traditional mass production manufacturing sector, and the regulatory apparatus that shaped that sector's employment relations, are irreparably weakened. The service sector industries which have become the driving force behind large urban economies in the 1980s are characterized by 'greater dispersion or inequality in occupations and earnings, a proliferation of jobs in lower-paying echelons, and weak or absent unions' (1991, p. 94). Such conditions, in turn, foment further informalization.

To assess the validity of Sassen's model, I will explore the experiences of illegal Irish immigrants in the New York city labour market, focusing in particular on male workers in the construction industry. In practice, undocumented or illegal Irish immigrants are, by definition, informal workers since they do not enjoy the legal protection which the state normally affords its nationals. Nevertheless, the Irish are found in *both* the formal and informal economies, a fact largely attributable to the uniquely privileged position conferred upon them by their ethnic status. Paradoxically, while their ethnic identity creates better opportunities than those available to other immigrant groups (and some indigenous workers), it also makes them susceptible to a variety of exploitative practices in both the formal and informal sectors. In the Irish case, therefore, an attempt to delineate workplace characteristics which are exclusive to one or other sector, proves highly problematic.

THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The construction industry in New York has seen a steady expansion in the past few decades. According to New York State Department of Labour statistics, New York City had over 10,000 registered construction firms in 1988 (Sassen 1991, p. 88). The average number of workers in these firms is 11, with over 80 per cent of all firms employing fewer than 10 workers. A major trend in this sector (as in many other industrial sectors) is a decline in unionized employment and a parallel expansion in informal, 'off-the-books' job opportunities which are increasingly taken up by new immigrants.

Construction work in the city is organized on a two-tiered system, with one sector of the industry operating in the formal economy and the other in the informal economy. Construction outfits working on commercial buildings in downtown Manhattan and on public contract projects, such as maintenance of the subway system, tend to be unionized and highly regulated. In Manhattan, for example, construction union 'locals' (chapters of national trades unions) which are ethnically controlled, jostle for control of new construction jobs. By prior arrangement, Irish-run locals operate on the West side of the city, while Italian-run locals operate on the East side.

In contrast, commercial and residential alterations and renovations are almost the exclusive preserve of independent contractors or subcontractors who rely to a great extent on non-union labour. Most of these firms are unlicensed and carry out construction work without the necessary permits (Sassen 1991, p. 88). Since they already work outside the regulatory apparatus, they are more likely than the larger licensed operators to hire undocumented aliens. For employers in the informal sector, immigrants constitute a 'reserve army' of labour whose wages can be held down because of the everpresent threat of replacement, (Portes & Sassen-Koob 1987; Edwards 1979). The flexibility of these workers is heightened because of the ability of the employer to fire 'undesirable' illegals at will. The employers also make savings from the tax and social security obligations which they do not honour. These are the primary factors which give companies in the informal sector their competitive edge and which have contributed to their proliferation.

The majority of Irish men who came to work illegally in the United States in the mid-1980s found work in the booming construction sector. Not all ended up in the informal sector, however. Immigrant workers with specialized crafts such as carpentry, masonry and plastering have filled a vacuum in domestic skills. Irish workers with skills in short supply and with good union contacts gained access to well-paid, unionized jobs in the formal sector. At the other extreme, those with limited contacts and limited skills (the 'JFK carpenters' whose credentials

materialize rather dubiously at the point of arrival) generally work for small contractors, or set up on their own. These workers are confined within the informal economy. Despite their different locations within this industrial sector, both sets of workers find that they are subject to excessive surveillance, exploitation and control because of their illegal status.

ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT: THE BROKER AND THE ETHNIC NETWORK SYSTEM

Almost all immigrants rely on their own efforts or use first order contacts (such as friends and relatives) in gaining their initial foothold in the labour market. The most effective first order contacts are those who operate as brokers in the ethnic community, matching recent immigrants (clients) with prospective employers (patrons). The power of the broker lies in his access to people who control resources such as land, jobs or money. Brokers are the middlemen or intermediaries in a clientelistic system, (Bonacich 1973, p. 583; Hazelkorn 1986, p. 327). They mediate transactions between patrons and clients, ensuring a reciprocal exchange between both parties. The prototypical broker in the Irish ethnic enclave has established himself as a valued employee (usually a gang foreman) or is a union agent. He uses his own position to negotiate jobs for others, just as the broker in the *padrone* system imports contract workers for industrial agents (Yancey *et al.* 1976, p. 393). Clientelism flourishes in the ethnic labour market of New York, because of the dependency of Irish illegals on that labour market for economic survival:

'I know a guy who is a very good welder. There are only a small number of guys in Ireland who can do gas welding as it is a particularly specialized job, and it is difficult to get someone to do it here. The foreman asks M. if he can recommend anybody for a job. M. says he has a friend in New Jersey who might be interested. He calls Ireland that night and tells one of the lads to get over on the next flight. That guy starts work on Monday morning. That's how it works.'

'A friend of my cousin's was a delegate for the [construction] Union. He had told me that if I was ever unemployed to give him a ring. So I did. By the following Monday I had become a member of the Union and had a Union job in the city.'

It has been the practice to hire Irish illegals on the basis of a recommendation from a union agent or power broker. The prospective employee will be asked to produce some documentation such as a social

security card, but the authenticity of the documentation – which is almost always false – is not questioned. (False social security cards may be obtained quite easily from illicit traders in the streets off Time Square in Manhattan. In addition, illegal immigrants may obtain social security cards/numbers of dead or retired people through brokers in the community). There is an implicit rather than explicit acknowledgement of the illegal status of the employee. This is important, because unionized companies are highly regulated and must conform to the letter of the law.

An industrious broker can use his position to displace other immigrant workers with hand-picked workers from his own ethnic group, as one beneficiary explains:

Peter had been a construction worker in both Ireland and England before coming to the States. He got work with a subsidiary of a major construction company which has a big contract with the Transport Authority. Peter was initially the only Irishman on the construction crews, which were made up of immigrants from Antigua, Trinidad, Jamaica, Spain, Italy and Portugal. A vacancy came up and Peter got MM, a mutual friend, onto his construction crew. More workers were needed and the foreman asked if there was anyone else Peter could recommend. He phoned some lads in Philadelphia, and they came up and joined another crew. The amount of work increased and extra help was hired. Another Irish guy and myself were taken on. Within 10 months, nearly 20 of the 80 men on the crews we worked with were Irish, most having got their jobs through Peter.'

In some cases brokers operating in Ireland secure jobs for people emigrating to New York, but these tend to have contacts only in the informal economy:

'My cousin called his son Michael in New Jersey and told him I was going out. I left my town in the Spring of 1984 and fifteen people left the same week. When I contacted Michael he picked me up in his truck and put me to work 6 days a week, from 7 am to 7 pm for \$275. He also fixed me up in a dogbox of an apartment which was very cramped and unsanitary. There were two other guys from my town there, who Michael had invited over when he visited Ireland the previous summer.'

Since the kind of jobs available in the informal economy tend to be less attractive, access is more easily obtained by new immigrants, especially the less skilled. Positions can be obtained on the basis of a casual encounter or contact. Chris was a butcher in Ireland and his first

job in New York was as a butcher in a meat factory in Brooklyn. He soon tired of the long hours and the length of his commute and switched to construction work:

'I happened to be in a bar one night with my friend, Barry. He is a carpenter and we got talking to the bartender who introduced us to someone who was starting a construction job. I didn't let on I had no skills, and we were both hired for the job.'

Just over a year later Chris was working as a foreman for an American construction company. Having picked up the rudimentary skills of construction in that time he has plans for expansion:

'I have started to get some of my own jobs *through contacts* as well. I am doing houses at the moment, subcontracting off a guy with whom I play golf. He was backed up on the job, and so contracted some of the work to me.'

Once ensconced in a job on a construction site the immigrant becomes part of an occupational matrix which is itself tightly woven into the larger ethnic community. News of jobs travels largely through word of mouth, so it is incumbent on the immigrant to extend his network of contacts. Ethnic contacts and ties must be cultivated because of the exigencies of survival and the structure of job opportunity in the illegal immigrant market. The interviews I conducted are replete with advice on the importance of contacts. Brian sums up his own highly instrumental view of the labour market:

'People you meet at work are of no consequence except as job contacts, that is what it boils down to. You are friendly with them only because they are potential job contacts.'

Many recent immigrants who work as independent contractors (almost invariably unregistered) doing residential or renovation work find themselves in a bind. The amount of work they can secure is limited because their illegal status impedes them from advertising their skills openly. An illegal who advertised his services openly runs the risk of bringing himself to the attention of tax officials, and/or immigration officers. Illegal entrepreneurs like Chris must rely almost totally on word of mouth — on the personal recommendation of the current client who can refer them to the next client. It is not just the structure of the labour market which can be described as informal. The interactions which occur between employers, brokers and employees on the one hand, and

contractors and their customers on the other are all characterized by a high degree of informality.

For example, when Stephen and Eamonn started taking on jobs in construction their landlady proved to be a crucial contact. They had renovated an apartment for her previously, and she had a business partner who was able to pass on some jobs to them. Once people saw their work, word travelled fast. They did not advertise but relied strictly on word of mouth and referrals from people for whom they have successfully completed a job. Similarly, when Paul and Sean decided to go into business together informally, Paul contacted someone for whom he had worked two years previously repairing sidewalks. The contact put them in touch with their first job doing a sidewalk on Lexington Avenue. Their work was complimented by another builder on the block who asked them to help with renovating a building nearby.

Contacts in the extended community are the crucial ones. As is the case with all immigrant groups, the Irish illegals make use of the ethnic network to improve their position. They move beyond the obvious first order contacts – such as close relatives and friends – to make use of second order contacts which are ultimately more influential in the community-at-large:

‘With regard to contacts – you need the right ones. Americans and Irish Americans are the good contacts. It’s the people of your own kin that can’t really help you, and are really no good to you.’

These indirect contacts within the ethnic network provide important channels for the dissemination of ideas, influences and information (Granovetter, 1973). The fact that the new Irish are without documentation, however, limits their advancement and consequently confines them almost exclusively to the ethnic enclave.

Stories of the easy money to be made generally proved to be unfounded. Indeed the interviewees were anxious to point out that several obstacles stand in the way of advancement. For example, all were agreed that an immigrant worker could not get into the high earning stakes without first ‘serving time.’ Advancement tends to be incremental and most of the interviewees had changed jobs frequently, with a view to bettering their position and increasing their earning power. This experience bears out the evidence accruing from other studies of undocumented immigrant groups which found that the illegals’ wage rates rose steadily with increasing migrant experience (Massey 1987a, p. 268). Wage rates are generally lower than in the formal sector, but special skills and experience are rewarded through a differential wage structure. Legislative changes in the mid-1980s, however, have had the effect of restricting access to jobs for the undocumented, and have indirectly

depressed average wage rates in the new Irish community. Consequently, many illegals who enjoyed the benefits of employment in the formal economy have found themselves demoted into the informal economy.

IMMIGRATION LAW AND ACCESS TO JOBS

The picture painted thus far is of an immigrant labour force constantly in flux. At the time I was conducting my research, this fluidity was beginning to change. The change can largely be traced to the introduction of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (1986) which paved the way for the imposition of fines on employers who knowingly hired illegal aliens after November 1st, 1986. Under the provisions of the Act, all employees who were hired after May 31st, 1987 are obliged to complete a form verifying their employment eligibility and identity (Form I-9). Those who were hired between November 7th, 1986 and May 31st, 1987, had to complete the Form I-9 before September 1st, 1987. The employee is required to furnish his employer with *two* pieces of original identification such as a passport, social security card, birth certificate, alien registration form, driver's license, etc. In the wake of the Act, there has been a decline in the level of job mobility within the immigrant community. During one week in November 1987, for example, the Irish Immigration Reform Movement received over eighty phone calls from Irish immigrants who had lost their jobs because they were unable to complete the I-9 form. Those who were in jobs before the sanctions on employers took effect have been inclined to remain in those jobs as the prospect of finding another has become increasingly daunting.

The desire to be retained in employment often entails greater risk-taking on the job. Not only are construction jobs dangerous, but the Irish are more willing than others to volunteer for the dangerous tasks:

'Irish guys work hard, they take a lot of chances I think because they are afraid of losing their jobs. They will push harder to make a name for themselves so that they don't get laid off. But sometimes they push so hard they end up getting injured and having to stay off work for weeks at a time. They'll take the chance on dangerous work, not because they are crazy but because they want to be kept on. The Irish guy goes home each evening and worries if he is going to be back at work tomorrow.'

The work ethic is thus positively and negatively reinforced: people work hard because of the monetary rewards but also out of fear of losing their jobs.

According to one immigrant activist the effect of the law is to marginalize the illegal Irish within an already marginal sector of the New York labour market:

'The law hasn't had the desired effect. The kids can still get jobs but the possibility of exploitation goes up, and there will be lower pay. The law is driving all of us further underground.'

Smaller construction companies operating out of the suburbs will continue to need labour, and are unlikely to be selective about their employees. Such companies are unlikely to fall within the ambit of the Immigration authorities, who have targeted larger employers in their efforts at increased regulation. As job opportunities decline, the small contractors will be able to exercise even more control over the Irish immigrant labour market. As employers 'of last resort', they will consolidate their position of powerful patronage in the community. Irish workers face lower wages in this sector and no union benefits. The larger construction outfits, such as companies with city contracts which offer more secure, regulated employment, will be increasingly closed to immigrants who cannot complete the I-9 form. This would suggest that attempts at regulating immigration at national level, will have the effect of accelerating the rate of informalization at local level. Faced with exclusion from unionized jobs, more and more undocumented workers will turn to small contractors or set up as (unregistered) independent contractors in their own right.

The provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (1986) have exacerbated the situation of illegal Irish immigrants whose tenure was already very precarious. The law has had the effect of contracting the immigrant labour market still further. The most coveted jobs within the construction sector (skilled, unionized, secure positions) are now the least accessible. Moreover, the overall demand for construction labour may well be in decline, given the recent downswing in the New York construction industry. In early 1990, new construction starts in Manhattan reached the lowest point since the mid-1970s. The chief source of the depression is attributed by industry experts to a major slowing in commercial office projects (*Irish Voice*, March 17, 1990, p. 1). If the decline in the construction industry is a sustained one, it may have serious repercussions for the illegal immigrant workforce. They may be forced to move elsewhere within the United States (there are already indications of a flow to the sunbelt cities of the South and California) or they may have to return to Britain or Europe. Indeed, recent figures released by the Irish Central Statistics Office suggest that many emigrants may be returning home.

POWER, CONTROL AND EXPLOITATION

Whether they are working in the formal or informal sector, all Irish illegals by virtue of their undocumented status are subject to excessive control and exploitation on the job. Indeed, even those who have penetrated the formal sector find that they are subject to management controls more characteristic of the informal labour market. In terms of the working lives and conditions of Irish construction workers, the distinction between formal and informal sectors becomes increasingly ambiguous.

The new Irish are regarded as willing and compliant workers. As a local curate in 'Irishtown' (the name is fictitious to protect anonymity) remarked:

'The new Irish have a great name for work. They are in the prime of life, they make good wages, and they adapt well to the production line methods where you simply can't sit around. They do the work in half the time [of other workers].'

Despite their reputation as dependable workers, the illegal status of these immigrants creates a situation where they can be more easily exploited by unscrupulous employers. This exploitation generally takes the form of excessive supervision and control on the job, and violation of standard ethics and practices.

Work on construction sites which is very physically demanding is often tightly controlled:

'The foreman would stand over us, and it really got on my nerves. The work was complicated but I really resented the constant supervision...when the whistle blows you start working. When the coffee break comes you don't sit down because you are on company time. The foreman stands over you and shouts...I think for most of the guys it's a case of leaving your brain at home when you leave in the morning.'

'In Ireland the lads show up on the construction site 5 minutes late, here the workers are there half an hour before they are supposed to start. Coffee breaks are taken standing up.'

Other workers are denied any sense of security or continuity in the job:

'Membership of a [construction] Union does not confer a right to work...it is always up to the company to decide whether or not you will work. They hire on a day-to-day basis.'

As an illegal looking for a job, the immigrant has little choice but to accept the terms of employment as laid down by the potential employer. As the labour market tightens, the immigrant finds himself with less and less bargaining power. The relationship between employer and employee becomes increasingly exploitative. Employers have little sense of loyalty to their employees. As legitimate members of their own community, they are frequently unwilling to involve themselves in the underworld of the illegal immigrant. If the latter is faced with a problem, the employer generally tries to disengage himself immediately:

'I was working as a mechanic and getting sponsored by my America boss. I had a lawyer on the case and had already paid him part of the fee. After my accident the boss completely disowned me, even though we had been on friendly, sociable terms. He owed me three days' pay when I had the accident, and he paid me for three days, not even a full week, even though I had worked many long hours for him on weekends and evenings without pay. I lost the job and my sponsorship at the same time.'

The most common forms of complaint have to do with rates of pay and length of the working day. Undocumented construction workers may be paid at a lower rate than other unionized and non-unionized workers, although they are all doing the same tasks. However, it should be pointed out that Irish immigrants generally fare a lot better than non-white illegal immigrants. Many of the former hold coveted unionized positions in the construction sector because of their ethnic contacts and the highly skilled nature of their work. In contrast, other immigrant groups, such as Mexicans and Dominicans are typified as a source of menial, low wage labour. This helps to explain why they tend to receive significantly lower earnings than other workers with similar human capital (Portes and Borocz 1989, p. 621). For immigrants whose legal status is tenuous, the situation is exacerbated. A study of undocumented Dominican workers in New York City, for example, showed that they tended to be concentrated in small firms, in non-union jobs. Their earnings were 40 per cent less than those of documented Dominican workers. Men averaged \$150 per week in 1988 (Pessar, 1988). In contrast, even the lowest-paid Irish construction worker earned twice that amount per week. Those who did not pay taxes could take home even more. Several interviewees also pointed out that non-English speaking Europeans (both legal and illegal) were less well paid than themselves, because they had greater difficulty negotiating with employers.

Even on a job where all the workers are unionized, at least two differential rates of pay may apply – one for legal workers and one for the undocumented. The union knows that the latter have no recourse

under the law and therefore cannot complain. (Labour racketeering practices in some New York construction unions in the 1980s made it possible for some contractors to hire non-union labour in return for bribes paid to union agents. Thus, a contractor could have as many as four categories of workers under his control: unionized legal ; unionized illegals; non-unionized legal and non-unionized illegals. Rates of pay varied accordingly).

Immigrants in the construction sector do not constitute a homogeneous group. They are stratified according to race, ethnicity, skills and experience, as well as legal status and that stratification determines to a great extent their labour market experience. Indeed, Massey argues that legal status in itself is not the principal determinant of differential wage rates:

On average, undocumented migrants do earn lower wages than legal migrants, but they do so not because they lack legal papers, but because they compare unfavourably to legal migrants on variables that determine wage rates. US wages are principally a function of English language ability, time spent on the job, skill level, and close kinship with a legal migrant (Massey 1987, p. 267).

This explains why Irish immigrants – with good English, a high level of skill, and close ties to Irish American power brokers – tend to do better in the migrant labour market than their European, Central and South American counterparts, all of whom have access to a much smaller pool of affluent employers. It also explains why Irish illegals have been successful in penetrating the formal labour market, and why other immigrant groups have been unable to do so.

Differential treatment of undocumented workers precludes the development of inter-ethnic solidarity groups. It also prevents the formation of a workers' coalition which might organize around shared interests. Even within the Irish ethnic group the existence of clientelistic linkages between employer and employee precludes the emergence of intra-ethnic solidarity, as illegal immigrants strive to ingratiate themselves with their employers in order to safeguard their own interests. Vertical rather than horizontal alliances characterize the immigrant workplace.

It is the 'old timers' – the Irish born bosses and foremen – who come in for the most criticism from new arrivals. Most independent contractors and construction union agents in the Irish enclave are first generation immigrants who came to the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s. Lacking formal education and skills, they went into the construction industry. The successful ones worked their way up in the union hierarchy or set up their own contracting businesses. They are, therefore, the 'gatekeepers' who control access to jobs in key areas of the construction

industry and upon whom the illegals are most dependent. Second and third generation Irish-Americans are much less likely to be involved in blue collar work, having had the opportunity of a college education denied their parents or grandparents.

Employers in the informal sector maintain their competitive edge by extracting the maximum amount of labour at minimum cost. For example, a group of employers operating in the same geographic region may form a cartel to lower their labour costs. According to one informant, five construction outfits (three of whom were Irish) in a New Jersey city got together and decided to fix wages. They dropped the carpenters' pay from \$100 to \$80 per day, and labourers' from \$80 to \$60 per day. The informant called a meeting of his co-workers exhorting them to withhold their labour until they got the right price, but nobody wanted to rock the boat. The general sentiment was that if they protested the employers might turn them into the Immigration authorities.

Occasionally, some of the smaller construction companies have cash-flow problems and it is generally the employee who suffers the consequence:

'I was working for a furniture removal company. All I wanted was a job. I didn't know if it was good money or bad money, at least I was earning money. And then the checks started to bounce. You would work an 80 hour week and be owed \$500 and he would give you \$300 and owe you \$200. There was always money on the long finger. He hired Irish illegals exclusively and really took advantage. We were totally overworked yet there was no such thing as time and a half when you did overtime.'

Companies can siphon off part of the employee's pay in other ways, as Brendan learned when he took a job in a demolition company:

'The pay was \$35 per day. The guy was supposed to be withholding some of the money to help me get a green card, but it was a big rip off. He wasn't doing anything at all.'

The employers use a variety of strategies to extend the working day and thus get more return from the labour:

'The Irish companies will always try and squeeze a bit more out of you, tacking on an extra half-hour here or an hour there. As a bricklayer I can earn a minimum of \$150-\$200 per seven-hour day. The Irish companies pay by the hour though - \$20 per hour - so you have to work a seven and a half hour day to get up to \$150 - the average wage.'

'The only reason the Irish are employed is because they [the employers] have a hold over them. So on the job there is no double time, no time and a half. They know the score, but they are more interested in getting people without papers. It costs less to hire illegals.'

Safety and health regulations are frequently flaunted. At several of the meetings of the Irish Immigration Reform Movement, it was pointed out by lawyers and others present that workers were being exposed to unnecessary risk in the workplace. For example, workers were allowed to go on scaffolding in dangerous weather, even though they had no insurance cover for injuries received at work. Construction work in particular is fraught with danger. In the absence of adequate supervision and training, workers are at greater risk of injury. Without proper treatment, some injuries can become chronic conditions, which may ultimately make the injured party unemployable. Other workers may be exposed to hazardous substances without being aware of the consequences. One informant who had been working with an Irish construction firm, specializing in the removal of hazardous substances, criticized their exploitative work practices:

'On the job they try to cheat you out of your lunch break and your coffee break. If they give you an hour they try to take it back somewhere along the line. They constantly expose the workers to hazardous substances but if you complain you are out the door. They violate the regulations by not issuing enough protective clothing and mouth filters. Since I raised objections about this, I haven't been called into work.'

'The money is not the issue. The issue is the way the operation works. They get people to work Sundays, all through Christmas vacation to finish a job. And then in January there is no work. There is constant pressure to get the job done quickly and cheaply and little concern about exposure to hazardous substances.'

Here the profit motive takes precedence over considerations of ethnic loyalty or solidarity across generations.

Another technique for extracting the maximum effort from immigrant workers is to stimulate the pace of work by covert means. Construction companies may hire a 'pushman' to increase overall productivity. Tom and his partner currently employ about 10-12 workers. Labourers get paid \$100 per day, bricklayers about \$150 per day. One of the bricklayers is a personal friend. Unknown to the other workers, the latter negotiated separately and is being paid \$300 per day. However, he will only work

on the job for a week or two. He is what is know in the trade as a 'pushman' – working in one corner of the building he will put the blocks up quicker, speeding up the pace all round. The pace the pushman sets allows the foreman to put pressure on the other workers. According to Tom, the week the pushman worked they laid 4,000 blocks. The following week they laid 1,800 blocks and the job went on over the weekend.

'Its a dirty way of cheating but you get the job done quicker. Its more efficient to pay the pushman \$150 extra per day, and to get the job done than to pay all the tradesmen an extra \$30 each as added incentive.'

Not surprisingly, there is a high degree of alienation amongst Irish construction workers. They complain of the lack of autonomy on the job and the necessity of 'switching-off' mentally during working hours. Work is viewed primarily as a means to an end – often a weekend of drinking before the treadmill starts over again on Monday morning. One construction crew whom I observed closely over the period of research regularly binged on the weekends. They worked night shifts doing underground construction work, so their working week finished on Saturday morning. Some of the crew would go straight to the bar after work – dirty, exhausted and with a full pay packet in their pockets. They would drink steadily throughout the day and night and into the following day. Sometimes these binges would go on until Monday morning, ending only because the working week was starting over again. They explained the weekend drinking-bout by pointing to the drudgery of their work:

'When I'm on site all week the only thing that I think about is when is this going to be over and what am I going to do at the weekend. You work and sleep for five days each week, and you have to have release at the end of it.'

The experience of work is occasionally tinged with a sense of unreality – with immigrants speaking of their working selves as if it is in some way detached from their 'real' selves:

'Often when I sat down for coffee on the 56th floor scaffolding I would survey the city and wonder what the hell I was doing there. Its not really until you get a chance to look around that the scale of the thing really hits you.'

In the immigrant's social and cultural milieus, this fractured sense of self is reflected in the close affinity and orientation toward 'home', which is almost always conceived of as Ireland, and almost never as New York.

OCCUPATIONAL IMMOBILITY

After the initial adjustment period, many immigrants discover that although they can find remunerative work, there is little sense in which they can structure a career path for themselves. Ironically, many left jobs in Ireland because promotion prospects looked bleak. They felt unchallenged and unrewarded by their work. As immigrants without legal status their occupational mobility is equally inhibited. While there has been in the past, a high degree of lateral mobility – moving from one construction firm to another, for example – there is little upward mobility on the job. In the short term the monetary rewards are more attractive, but material gain in itself does not smooth the path toward the attainment of occupational goals. Illegality, the intervening factor, is an everpresent barrier to upward mobility. Few regard construction work as a lifelong career yet, as illegals, most other channels of work are closed off. Advancement and security can only be provided through occupational paths to which they have no access:

'There is no work open to the Irish, except in construction and for the girls jobs as nannies. Some guys are happy at that because the money is good. But it is only temporarily good. Twenty years from now you would need something more to fall back on. We have a lot to contribute to society through government jobs and city jobs, but we can't.... I am very frustrated at the fact that I can get laid off, and that I have to stick with the union and with jobs in the construction industry. The money is good but there is no future. In a few years you are totally burnt out.'

Even if opportunities become available at work, there may be a reluctance to accept additional responsibility. For example, accepting promotion may involve an immigrant in further lies and subterfuges to conceal his identity. His relationship with his superiors becomes a tenuous one, because he has breached the trust placed in him. His authority may also be impugned by subordinates who find out his real identity or illegal status:

'One of the business partners asked me to be a foreman. At first, I didn't want the responsibility. I suggested that they promote an

American co-worker who is older than me. *I didn't want to get into something which might complicate my situation further.*

'When I was a foreman for a company I did a job for a guy. The job ran fast and everything was done according to his specifications. The guy was recently looking for a manager and he offered me the job. It would have suited me great, but I couldn't take the job because of my legal status. I have had a business relationship with the guy for three years and *I didn't want to complicate* that by asking for sponsorship. Then he would know that I was illegal up until that and he had always done things strictly above board. It really killed me to turn it down. I'm only here to get the right break and that could have been it, but I couldn't follow it through.'

Setting up one's own construction business is an alternative, but the illegality issue means that this path is also fraught with problems. It is difficult to raise the necessary capital and credit rating, as well as insurance coverage. Without adequate insurance coverage, the company or individual contracted for the job is personally liable for injuries, accidents or damage that occurs on the job. The level of risk attached to the work makes independent contracting work unattractive to all but a minority of immigrants. Companies cannot advertise openly in the ethnic press for fear that they will be targeted by Immigration officials. Business referrals mainly come through word of mouth. Once a job is completed, the illegal has no legal recourse if clients default on payments.

CONCLUSION

A conceptual shift has occurred in migration studies from the view of international migration as 'aggregate movements of individuals in response to differential opportunities, to a view of this process as a movement of workers propelled by the dynamics of the transnational capitalist economy, which simultaneously determine both the "push" and "pull" factors' (Zolberg 1989, p. 407).

According to Sassen, change in the organization of work in global cities is a direct result of the changing needs of international capitalism. The informalization of global city economies has created new job opportunities in the secondary labour market, which are particularly attractive to immigrants. Immigrant labour plays a distinctive role in the labour process by virtue of its exploitability:

Immigrants ... are often employed in firms where the system of control rests not on techniques of production and elaborate organiz-

ational arrangements, but on the powerlessness of the workers. Control is not structural, but immediate and personal (Sassen 1988, p. 42).

Given that *illegal* immigrants are afforded no constitutional protection in the United States and that they are increasingly concentrated in the informal sector, their powerlessness in the workplace is most acute. The kinds of clientelistic controls exercised over Irish illegals in the ethnic enclaves of the labour market, and the exploitation to which they are subject, have been documented above.

According to Sassen, immigrants without documentation working in the informal economy constitute:

...a pool of cheap labour which is included through participation in the indigenous workforce, and excluded through the assignation by national authorities of a criminal status as undocumented or illegal aliens (1988 p. 36).

But within the illegal immigrant sector, there are important differences in terms of degree of inclusion and exclusion. One cannot assume that all illegals, regardless of nationality or ethnic identity, share a commonality of experience in the labour market. In fact, immigrant labour is stratified on the basis of racial, ethnic and legal status, as well as economic location. Irish construction workers for example, occupy a relatively privileged position in the informal economy and many have succeeded in penetrating the formal sector within the construction industry. Firstly, as Irish nationals they have privileged access to employment networks within the Irish ethnic enclave. A tradition of patronage and brokerage within the Irish ethnic community serves newly arrived illegals and eases their passage into employment.

Secondly, the ability to speak English gives Irish illegals greater negotiating power than their Hispanic or European counterparts in the workplace. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find differential wage rates in operation in the informal sector (where wage rates are more variable) for people performing the exact same work. Proficiency in English also makes it easier for illegal immigrants not only to state their case publicly, but also to have their story reported in the national media. A white, English speaking, generally well-educated constituency is more likely to gain media attention than other minority groups. The success of groups like the Irish Immigration Reform Movement in highlighting the plight of Irish illegals (who constitute a very insignificant number in comparison to the total illegal population) must largely be attributed to this factor.

Thirdly, the Irish illegal is not likely to face the kind of racial prejudice with which many immigrants (both legal and illegal) from non-white peripheries have to cope. As white immigrants from a 'seed' country – a country which has provided generations of emigrants whose labour power helped to build the United States – the Irish illegals are perceived as potentially more assimilable than many legal immigrants arriving from the Southern and Eastern hemispheres today. From the purview of the older Irish ethnic communities in New York City, the influx of white immigrants – regardless of their legal status – provides them with the opportunity to rebalance the racial composition of their neighborhoods. Taken together, these factors were crucial in providing an opening for the Irish (both the new immigrants and Irish Americans) to mobilize effectively in order to push for legislative reform which would allow more legal Irish immigration to the United States.

In summary, Irish illegals occupy an *intermediate position* within the United States labour market. On the one hand, they may be perceived as relatively deprived in comparison to legal immigrants. They have little or no access to the kinds of jobs for which they may be qualified. They have little or no job mobility or opportunity. On the other hand, they may be perceived as relatively advantaged in comparison with immigrants from non-English speaking, non-white peripheries. They see that they are better off than many Hispanic and Black groups in the United States, both documented and undocumented. Their preferential 'context of reception' (Portes and Borocz 1989, p. 620) differentiates the Irish illegals from the majority of illegal aliens, and allows them to seek and obtain better pay and conditions in the labour market. While they remain largely excluded from the primary labour market, many Irish construction workers have succeeded in penetrating the formal sector of the construction industry. The remainder occupy the upper stratum of the secondary labour market.

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