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Forced migration and Imperialism in the Neoliberal Era



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The nature of contemporary migration cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the nature of contemporary capitalism and imperialism. One of the main features of the current global architecture, boosted by the emergence of one of the most distressing global crises since the Great Depression, is the assault on the labor and living conditions of the majority of the working class, and in particular the migrant labor force, which stands among the most vulnerable segments of the proletariat.

The main purpose of this chapter is to analyze some of the key aspects underlying the context in which contemporary migration is embedded, with emphasis on the process of segmentation and growing precariousness of labor markets worldwide. More specifically, it aims to unravel (a) the re-launching of imperialism (policies of global domination) in search of cheap and flexible labor, as well as natural resources from the Global South; (b) the growing asymmetries among and within countries and regions; (c) the increase and intensification of social inequalities; (d) the configuration of a gigantic global reserve army of

labor associated with the emergence of severe forms of labor precarization and exploitation; and (e) the predominance of forced migration as the primary mode of human mobility under conditions of extreme vulnerability. From this perspective, the migration and labor questions are two sides of the same coin, whose currency translates into unbearable conditions of systematic oppression of the working class. To combat this, there must be, among other things, a unity of social organizations and movements in alliance with progressive intellectuals in order to foster social – anti-systemic – transformation processes.

Imperialism Today: The Restructuring of Monopoly Capital

While the monopoly position of the labor aristocracy in the Global North has been eroded in the neoliberal era, the commanding heights of global capitalism remained solidly entrenched there, with increasing monopolization of finance, production, services, and trade, leaving every major global industry dominated by a handful of large multinational corporations (MNCs). In the expansion of their operations, the agents of corporations, or monopolistic engines of capitalism, have created a global network and process of production, finance, distribution, and investment that has allowed them to seize the strategic and profitable segments of peripheral economies and appropriate the economic surplus produced at

enormous and unbearable social and environmental costs. Thus, while labor faced increasing global competition, it confronted an increasingly centralized and concentrated capital, fundamentally altering the balance of class power in the favor of capital.

In the international political economy, monopoly capital has become, more than ever, the central player, to the extent that Samir Amin (2013) portrayed contemporary capitalism as the “era of generalized monopolies.” Through mega-mergers and strategic alliances, monopoly capital has reached unparalleled levels of concentration and centralization: In 2014 the top 500 largest MNCs acquired 31.2 trillion USD in sales revenues (Fortune 2015), equal to 40% of the world’s GDP (World Bank 2015). More important is the fact that, in the neoliberal era, monopoly capital has undergone a profound restructuring process characterized by:

1. The *upsurge of monopoly-finance capital*, i.e., the ascendancy of finance capital over other fractions of capital (Bello 2005). Finance capital began this ascendancy with the onset of an overproduction crisis in the late 1960s, when German and Japanese capital recovered from the devastation of World War II and began to compete with US capital on world markets (Brenner 2002). With the lack of profitable investment in production, capital began shifting toward financial speculation based on an unprecedented reserve of fictitious capital: In 2007 global financial assets, 206 trillion USD (McKinsey 2015) nearly quadrupled global GDP, 57 trillion USD (World Bank 2008). The result has been the financialization of the capitalist class, of industrial capital, and of corporate profits (Foster 2010).
2. The *configuration and expansion of global networks of monopoly capital* as a restructuring strategy led by the large MNCs, which, through outsourcing operations and subcontracting chains, extend parts of their productive, commercial, financial, and service processes to the Global South in search of abundant and cheap labor through *global labor arbitrage* (Delgado Wise and Martin 2015). This strategy, supported by Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and the wide range of reducing labor costs by taking advantage of global labor arbitrage, is exemplified by the export platforms that operate as enclave economies in peripheral countries. This turn toward global production chains has been impressive: “[the] top one hundred global corporations had shifted their production more decisively to their foreign affiliates [mainly in the South], which now account for close to 60 percent of their total assets and employment and more than 60 percent of their global sales” (UNCTAD 2010). This represents a “new ‘nomadism’ [that] has emerged within the system of global production, with locational decisions determined largely by where labour is cheapest” (Foster et al. 2011a, p. 18). Moreover, an outstanding feature of contemporary global capitalism is the degree of network articulation and integration with the operations of large MNCs dominating international trade: at least 40% of all global trade is associated with outsourcing operations, including subcontracting and intra-firm trade (Andreff 2009); an estimated 85 million workers directly employed in assembly plants in the Global South; and over 3500 export processing zones established in 130 countries (McKinsey 2012). This restructuring strategy has transformed the global geography of production to the point that now most of the world’s industrial employment (over 70%) is located in the Global South (Foster et al. 2011b).
3. The *restructuring of innovation systems* through the implementation of mechanisms such as outsourcing (including offshore) the scientific and technological innovation process allows MNCs to benefit from the research of scientists from the Global South. This restructuring reduces labor costs, transfers risks and responsibilities, and capitalizes on the advantages of controlling the patent process (Delgado Wise 2017). Five overarching aspects characterize this restructuring process: (a) The increasing internationalization and fragmentation of research and

- development activities. In contrast to the traditional innovation processes occurring “behind closed doors” in research and development (R&D) departments internal to large MNCs, this trend is known as “open innovation” (Chesbrough 2008).
- (b) The creation of scientific cities – such as Silicon Valley in the United States and the new “Silicon Valleys” established in peripheral or emerging regions, principally in Asia – where collective synergies are created to accelerate innovation processes (Sturgeon 2003).
 - (c) The development of new methods of controlling research agendas (through venture capital, partnerships, and subcontracting, among others) and appropriating the products of scientific endeavors (through the acquisition of patents) by large MNCs.
 - (d) The rapidly expanding highly skilled workforce in the Global South – particularly in the areas of science and engineering – is being tapped by MNCs for research and development in peripheral countries through recruitment via partnerships, outsourcing, and offshoring (Battelle 2012).
 - (e) *The creation of an ad hoc institutional framework* aimed at the concentration and appropriation of products created by the *general intellect* through *patents*, embodied in the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Delgado Wise and Chávez 2015).

Since the late 1980s, a trend toward ad hoc legislation has been initiated in the United States, in line with the strategic interests of large MNCs regarding intellectual property rights (Messitte 2012). The rhythm of patenting has increased exponentially in the last two decades, tied to the logic underlying “free trade” agreements (NAFTA, ASEAN, TFTA) as an imperialist strategy for controlling/administrating global markets by the large MNCs, mainly based in the United States. (According to PCT-WIPO data in the last two decades, the United States held one of every

- four patents granted in 2014.) In fact, this trend can also be conceived as a higher stage in the development of the global networks of monopoly capital, as the New International Division of Labour moves up the value-added chain to R&D and monopoly capital captures the productivity and knowledge of a highly skilled workforce in the Global South.
- 4. The renewed trend toward *extractivism and land grabbing* led by the continuing overconsumption of the world’s natural resources and the expansion of carbon-based industrial production. The growing urbanization and industrialization in Asia, particularly China, has increased demand for raw materials, which, combined with the transformation of commodities from a hedge asset to a speculative asset for finance capital, created a commodities boom since 2002 that has recently declined with the de-accelerating Chinese economy. Soaring prices for commodities have driven the exploration for and production of nonrenewable natural resources into remote geographies, deeper into the oceans and the jungles, in the process exacerbating social conflicts over land and water (Veltmeyer 2013). This new extractivism has worsened environmental degradation, not only through an expanded geography of destruction but also by global extractive capital’s strategy of environmental regulatory arbitrage (Xing and Kolstad 2002). Moreover, despite 25 years of increasingly dire warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the global consumption of fossil fuels continues to rise, “triggering a cascade of cataclysmic changes that include extreme heat-waves, declining global food stocks and a sea-level rise affecting hundreds of millions of people” (World Bank 2012). Given that the revenues of some of the world’s most powerful and profitable MNCs depend on fossil fuel consumption, this pattern will likely continue, setting the world on the path toward a deepening *ecological crisis*.

This planetary “order” or “disorder” encompasses deep and dangerous contradictions

(Harvey 2004) that sparked a global crisis that began in the 1970s, a crisis that opened the door for the introduction of neoliberalism and which it has not been able to shake off. On the contrary, the capitalist hydra with its new faces has only presented false and limited solutions to the current crisis, and even worse, far from opening up new paths toward a phase of sustained growth in the global economy, at each step it has led to a deepening of the crisis and let loose the storm. In the words of Humberto Márquez:

The crisis that faces contemporary capitalism represents a break in the process of capitalist expansion fostered by the core countries, led by the United States, since the 1970s. It is a failed restructuring that has resulted in the collapse of its own core, of the world capitalist system, and above all of the most powerful financial and industrial centres, and which has been swiftly communicated to all of the sectors, networks and corners of capitalism. However, we cannot lose sight of the strategy of restructuring and expansion that has occurred with growth in its principal goal: to concentrate capital, power and wealth in the hands of a small elite of transnational capitalists and, simultaneously, has brought about a drastic deterioration in the conditions of life and work for the majority of the population. (Márquez 2010: 67)

As a result, contemporary capitalism is facing a profound multidimensional crisis (e.g., financial, economic, social, ecological) that undermines the main sources of wealth creation – labor and nature – to the point that it can be characterized as a civilizational or epochal crisis with a potentially catastrophic outcome (Foster 2013; Arizmendi 2016). It is crucial to realize that it demands both engaging in a radical social transformation process as well as constructing a social transformation agent capable of confronting the current power structure. Unfortunately, this power structure has responded to this multidimensional crisis with desperate attempts to maintain this unsustainable and unstable form of capitalism.

The Labor Question Today

One of the main engines of neoliberal capitalism is cheap labor. Costs of labor are lowered by any and all means, as capital takes advantage of the

massive oversupply of labor, reflected in growing levels of unemployment and precarious employment the world over. With the dismantling of the former Soviet Union, the integration of China and India into the world economy, and the implementation of structural adjustment programs (including privatizations and labor reforms) in the Global South, the supply of labor available to capital over the last two decades has more than doubled from 1.5 to 3.3 billion, in what Richard Freeman calls the “Great Doubling” (Freeman 2006). This rapid expansion of the global reserve army of labor has occurred most dramatically in the Global South, where 71.3% of the “reserve” global workforce can be found (ILO 2019).

The exorbitant size of this reserve army of labor is dialectically related to the abysmally low wages and chronic insufficiency of “decent” employment that characterizes contemporary capitalism, since the global oversupply of labor has scaled down the global wage structure and increased the overall precariousness of labor. According to estimates of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the number of workers in conditions of labor informality rose to 2 billion (61%) in 2018, encompassing more than half of the world’s workforce, with 700 million receiving a salary of less than 3.2 US dollars per day and nearly half of those finding themselves in situations of extreme poverty – while the global number of unemployed continues to rise (ILO 2019). This, in turn, has led to growing structural pressures to emigrate internally and/or internationally under conditions of extreme vulnerability.

Neoliberal capitalism restructured labor markets and reconfigured the global working class in the following ways (Márquez and Delgado Wise 2011):

1. *The creation of a dispersed and vulnerable proletariat attached to the global networks of monopoly capital.* The social and productive fabric of the MNCs covers strategic and profitable economic sectors, such as agriculture, mining, industry, services, trade, and finance. The neoliberal restructuring of labor markets has dismantled labor protection and imposed a “new labor culture” based on competitiveness,

while creating a regime of job insecurity characterized by labor flexibility and precariousness. Outsourcing stands out as the main corporate management strategy to cheapen labor costs and generating a permanent threat of layoffs. Business requirements have also led to a new profile of labor: desperate young workers without union experience and willing to work under insecure and poorly paid conditions. The new proletariat is compelled to subject itself to high levels of exploitation, in order to access a source of income. This labor becomes increasingly alienated from its sense of class belonging, and its place in the socio-economic and geographic fabric, given the predominance of what resembles abstract forms of capital – that is, global capital that depersonalizes, even more so than in the past, the relationship between capital and labor in a transnational arena. These abstract expressions of capital leave the proletariat without a human referent for their exploiters, only a faceless, mobile, and de-territorialized corporate entity that, if necessary, can quickly shift production to other factories. This abstract form of capital undermines the development of a consciousness of what happens in the work process and prevents workers from building long-term relations necessary for cooperation and solidarity when confronting employers; the daily struggle to earn a livelihood occupies their vital energies with little social cohesion.

2. *The covert proletarianization of the scientific and technological laborer.* Monopoly capital has managed to absorb scientific and technological labor into an innovation system, protected by patents, that generate extraordinary profits for the large MNCs. In this way, the fruits of technological progress are directly appropriated by monopoly capital. Scientists and technologists constitute a privileged segment of the working class, and do not conceive of themselves as workers, but, rather, as part of the global ruling class, and even promoters of social transformation inasmuch as their innovations affect everything from production patterns to the daily lives of ordinary people. This highly qualified workforce has gradually lost,

directly or covertly, its relative autonomy and control over the means of knowledge production and the tools of their labor (laboratories, research agendas, etc.). In this sense, scientific and technological labor is subsumed by the large multinational corporations, while researchers' awareness of the work process is progressively lost. One of the strongest forms of scientific and technological labor appropriation and subsumption is that of the disguised proletarianization of this type of worker under forms of outsourcing and offshoring, embedded in the dynamics of the restructuring of innovation systems, as previously described. Given the precariousness of labor and lack of worker control over the means of knowledge production, MNCs drive R&D research agendas and appropriate the products of the research.

3. *The real or disguised proletarianization of the peasantry.* A global agribusiness system dominated by large multinational corporations controls all stages of the productive, financial, and trading processes, leaving practically no room for small-scale agricultural production. Like other economic sectors, agribusiness employs subcontracting schemes that degrade peasant autonomy and entail visible, or covert, forms of proletarianization with a high degree of precariousness. "Accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2007) dismantles the peasant subsistence system and expands the presence of large-scale agribusiness production for export, annihilating political attempts at local food sovereignty, appropriating the nature and biodiversity, blocking public resources from being channeled into the peasant sector, and "freeing" the workforce from the land so that it can, in turn, be employed in precarious and unsafe conditions in manufacturing, trade, or services. In order to subsist within the new institutional framework of neoliberal capitalism, peasants are forced to either (i) become a proletariat working for agribusiness, even on lands they might have formerly owned; (ii) migrate to the cities in search of precarious jobs, many of them offered by the large multinational corporations, and in areas such as the maquiladora

industry zones; (iii) survive within the ranks of the lumpenproletariat, through black market or criminal activities; or (iv) migrate abroad to work in vulnerable social conditions and in degraded, poorly paid jobs. These processes of overt or covert proletarianization and sub-proletarianization have exacerbated further the dynamics of semi-proletarianization already in place before the neoliberal onslaught. Despite the social decomposition of the peasantry as a subaltern class that lies even below the proletariat, it is worth noting that some of the most visible and consistent anti-globalization movements come precisely from the ranks of the peasantry and indigenous groups (i.e., Via Campesina, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, CONEI in Ecuador, and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil), which demonstrates that many of these groups retain the social and geographic space necessary to develop counter-hegemonic ideologies and bases of resistance (Scott 1992).

4. *The expansion of the reserve army of labor and the proliferation of pauperism, including the growing presence of a lumpenproletariat.* These surplus workers suffer from the worst living and employment conditions and are confined to the lowest social strata. This is a highly degraded and large segment of the global population. To survive, the poorest of the poor work on the margins of society and, often, on the margins of legality, participating in petty crime, organized crime, human trafficking, and prostitution. They also carry out activities in public spaces, working as mendicants, shoeshiners, announcers, vendors, and street musicians, among many other things. This group also includes door-to-door vendors and informal workers. The dysfunctional nature of their work, their detachment from the institutional framework, and the discrimination they endure prevent these groups from developing a class identity or interacting openly with power, capital, or other categories of the proletariat.
5. *The sub-proletarianization of forced migrants.* Neoliberal capitalism has accelerated mecha-

nisms of social exclusion and dispossession. The most evident result of this is the creation of a population that has no means of earning a living and whose livelihood is precarious at best. These social groups – as will be discussed in the following sections – are forced to migrate domestically or internationally in order to access any source of income that will enable family subsistence. Migration in this context is far from being a free and voluntary movement; rather, it is a structural imperative. A wide range of social subjects are forced to move from their places of origin: peasants deprived of land or unable to make a living out of it; unemployed or poorly paid workers; youths with no employment prospects; professionals without access to social mobility; women lacking access to the labor market; and skilled workers with few or no opportunities for work and income. Those who participate in forced migration are placed in relatively more adverse conditions than native counterparts; they become a highly vulnerable proletariat, or sub-proletariat, facing social exclusion, wage discrimination, the lack of social and labor rights, loss of citizenship (or a precarious citizenship status), and criminalization. This massive contingent of the labor force works under conditions of insecurity, vulnerability, and considerable risk; as proletarian subclass, they are often subject to conditions of super-exploitation which hark back to precapitalist features of coercion, bordering on new forms of slavery (Márquez and Delgado Wise 2011).

Under these circumstances, working conditions erode the social wage, and the social welfare system excludes the subordinate classes from accessing basic needs to such a degree that wages no longer ensure subsistence, and thus labor is super-exploited. This and other violations of basic labor and human rights engender a situation of systemic violence and human insecurity affecting the majority of the world's population.

The Mushrooming of Unequal Development and the Emergence of a New Mode of Unequal Exchange

A major and inescapable feature of the current form of capitalism is unequal development. The global and national dynamics of capitalist development, the international division of labor, the imperialist system of international power relations, the conflicts that surround the capital-labor relation, and the dynamics of extractive capital have made economic, social, political, and cultural polarization more extreme between geographical spaces and social classes than ever before in human history. A conspicuous output of this development is the disproportionate concentration of capital, power, and wealth in the hands of a small elite within the capitalist class. Nowadays, the richest 1% of the world's population concentrates 40% of total global assets (Davies et al. 2008). Moreover, "from 1970 to 2009, the per capita GDP of developing countries (excluding China) averaged a mere 6.3% of the per capita GDP of the G8 countries" (Foster et al. 2011a).

In fostering the above trend, global labor arbitrage has become a key pillar of the new global architecture. Arbitrage refers to the advantage of pursuing lower wages abroad. This allows capital to "earn" enormous monopolistic returns, or imperial rents, by taking advantage of the relative immobility of labor and the existence of subsistence (and below) wages in much of the Global South. Through the mechanism of global labor arbitrage, social and geographic asymmetries are reproduced on a global scale. Social inequalities are one of the most distressing aspects of this process, given the unprecedented concentration of capital, power, and wealth in a few hands while a growing segment of the population suffers poverty, exploitation, and exclusion. Increasing disparities are also expressed, ever more strongly, in terms of racial, ethnic, and gender relations; reduced access to production and employment; a sharp decline in living and working conditions; and the progressive dismantling of social safety nets.

A fundamental mechanism in the promotion of this new global architecture and its underlying trend toward unequal development has been the implementation of structural adjustment programs in much of the Global South and former socialist economies. These programs have been the vehicle for disarticulating the economic apparatus in the periphery and its rearticulation to serve the needs of core capitalist economies, under sharply asymmetric and subordinated conditions. In particular, these programs served the needs of capital through the export of labor in its two modalities, indirect and direct, which are key to conceptualizing this process. On the one hand, the indirect, or disembodied, export of labor is associated with the configuration of global networks of monopoly capital through outsourcing, offshoring, and subcontracting operations to the Global South, as previously described (Delgado Wise and Márquez 2007; Delgado Wise and Cypher 2007). In this case, the main input of domestic origin in the exported commodities is the labor used in the assembly, service, or commercial process. On the other hand, the direct export of labor refers to international labor migration, mainly composed of South to North and South to South flows. In fact, 187 million of the existing 258 million migrants, or 72%, come from the periphery (World Bank 2017; IOM 2018).

It is crucial to realize that the export of the workforce, i.e., the export of the most critical commodity characterizing the capitalist mode of production, labour power, underlies the materialization of a new international division of labor along the South–North axis. This, in turn, implies the advent of new and extreme modalities of unequal exchange. Regardless of the centrality that the concept of unequal exchange had in past decades to explain the dynamics of unequal development, the nature of the ties between core countries and emergent or peripheral countries (as conceived by the Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLAC, as well as among dependency theorists) demands its inclusion in the analysis of contemporary capitalism. It is important to keep in mind that most of the debate on unequal exchange was and remains limited to an analysis of the international division of labor that places

the periphery in the role of source for raw materials and the developed countries as the providers of industrialized goods. And although this division remains relevant for a significant number of peripheral countries, it has stopped being exclusively a feature of new North–South relations. Some recently industrialized peripheral countries – principally in Asia – ever more frequently play the role of providers of industrialized goods. Even more important is the fact that, to this classic mode of unequal exchange, a new factor has been added in the age of neoliberal capitalism, and one that is increasingly playing a key role: the direct and indirect export of the workforce.

In order to analyze this factor, with its dual fronts, it is important to note that these mechanisms of unequal exchange are more disadvantageous to the periphery than the exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods. On the one hand, the indirect export of the workforce, associated with the participation of peripheral nations in adding value to global commodity chains, carries with it a net transfer of profits abroad. This represents an extreme form of unequal exchange, which implies a transfer abroad of practically the total surplus generated by the workforce employed in the maquiladoras, or assembly plants, in the export processing sector. This mechanism, which revives the logic of the export enclave, inhibits any economic growth and development derived from the export process performed under the guise of manufactured exports, by the peripheral nation. In fact, its key contribution to the process of national accumulation is limited to a meagre income flow from low wages that, in the best of cases, contributes to a small multiplier effect by way of consumption. Even more, the installation and operation of assembly plants in peripheral countries are usually supported through generous subsidies and tax exemptions, which put the weight of reproducing the workforce on revenue-strapped governments of the Global South, while imposing collateral damage through precarious labor markets and environmental degradation.

Another aspect of the indirect export of labor power, which has begun to gather force in the context of peripheral or emerging countries, is

the creation of joint scientific–technological complexes, as we have seen, in the restructuring of innovation systems in some of the more developed countries, with the United States in the lead role. By way of these complexes, which function under subcontracting arrangements, associations, or other forms of partnership, intangible benefits are transferred abroad that have a value and a strategic significance beyond the net profits accruing from the maquila and assembly plants. We refer to the transfer of development and technical capabilities, which takes the form of competitive advantages and extraordinary profits, from South to North. The knowledge and technical skills that have historically played a central role in the transformation of peripheral economies to developed ones are now captured by the Global North through the new geography of innovation.

On the other hand, the direct export of the workforce, via labor migration, implies a transfer of the anticipated future benefits that arise from the costs of training and social reproduction of the workforce that emigrates. These costs – as the case of Mexico has shown – are not compensated in the flow of remittances (Delgado Wise et al. 2009). On the contrary, in a more profound sense, this transfer implies the loss of the most important resource for capital accumulation in the country of origin: its workforce. Furthermore, the export of the highly skilled workforce exacerbates this problem by seriously reducing the sending country's capacity to innovate for its own benefit and drive its own technology-intensive development projects.

To analyze these new modes of unequal exchange presents theoretical, methodological, and empirical challenges, which require changes in the perception and characterization of categories typically used to interpret contemporary capitalism. Without disregarding the significant contributions of ECLAC to advance the understanding of these new modes of unequal exchange, it is important to bring to bear Marxist theories of unequal exchange in its dual aspects. In both a strict and a broad sense, these theories provide a solid and fertile conceptual basis upon which to advance the conceptualization of the emergent modes of unequal exchange, implied

by the direct and indirect export of the workforce (Emmanuel 1972). On the one hand, unequal exchange, in the strictest sense, places wage differentials (or differentials in surplus value) derived from barriers to population mobility at the center of the analysis. On the other hand, unequal exchange, in the wider sense, expands those differentials to include value emanating from diverse compositions of capital, such as the differentials arising from scientific and technological progress (Críticas 1979). We take into consideration that the internationalization of capital in the framework of neoliberal globalization seeks incessantly to lower labor costs – including those relating to the highly skilled workforce – while maximizing the transfer of surpluses generated from that labor from peripheral to core countries, which is the purpose in taking advantage of wage differentials in the first place.

Another key piece of this plot is the unbridled growth of social inequalities at previously unimaginable levels: “Currently, the richest 1% of the world’s population possess more wealth than the other 99% of people on the planet. Their power and privileges are used to manipulate the economic system and widen the gap, stealing hope from hundreds of millions of poor people” (OXFAM 2017).

Forced Migration in the Era of Generalized Monopolies

According to recent United Nations (UN) figures, there are 258 million international migrants (UN 2017) and 750 million internal migrants worldwide (Swing 2015). This implies that one out of every seven and a half inhabitants and nearly one of every four members of the working class is a migrant, in most cases exposed to vulnerable, discriminatory, and precarious labor conditions (ILO 2015a). Regardless of the strategic importance of this phenomenon, migration studies and public perceptions of human mobility are fraught with myths that distort reality under a unilateral, decontextualized, reductionist, and biased view. The recent refugee crisis in Europe has hardened this narrative and exacerbated the problematic and

challenges posited by migration in the international arena.

The dominant political and research agendas in the field tend to reproduce – not disinterestedly – much of the prevailing mythology, ignoring the context in which contemporary migration takes place and its root causes. They assume human mobility is a free and voluntary act oblivious to any kind of structural conditioning and/or national or supranational agents. The multiple economic, demographic, social, and cultural contributions made by migrants to host societies and nations are often ignored, hidden, or even distorted, regardless of their legal status and categorization (economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc.), to the point where the former are portrayed as a socioeconomic burden for destination countries and in times of crisis are turned into public scapegoats. Moreover, this narrative has yielded significant dividends in the political-electoral arena, opening a broad avenue for the rise of extreme right and neo-fascist regimes in various countries and regions across the world.

In this regard, it is crucial to realize that in the current capitalist context, migration has acquired a new and fundamental role in the national and international division of labor. Uneven development generates a new type of migration that can broadly be characterized as *forced* migration. Although the conventional concept of “forced migration” does not apply to all migrants (Castles 2003), the most current migration flows are forced *displacements* and therefore require a more accurate descriptor. In the field of human rights, the term “forced migration” refers specifically to asylum seekers, refugees, or displaced persons. From a dominant perspective, most migrants cannot be grouped under this category since these population movements are supposedly carried out voluntarily and freely. However, it is a fact that the dynamics of uneven development have led to structural conditions that foster the massive migration of dispossessed, marginalized, and excluded populations. People are literally expelled from their places of origin and are compelled to search for access to means of subsistence or at least minimal opportunities for social mobility. Under these circumstances, migration has

essentially become a *forced* population displacement encompassing the following modalities (Delgado Wise and Márquez 2009):

1. *Migration due to violence, conflict, and catastrophe.* Social, political, and communitarian conflicts, natural disasters, major infrastructure developments, and urbanization can severely affect communities, social groups, families, and individuals, to the point of forcing them to abandon their place of origin and sometimes their country. This category includes refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons. These modalities, which tend to mainly affect populations in the Global South, have been acknowledged in international law and there are protection instruments in place. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees figures, there are 65.6 million people affected worldwide, including 22.5 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced, and 3.2 million asylum seekers (UNHCR 2015).
2. *Human trafficking and smuggling.* This modality of forced displacement has increased at an alarming rate in recent years, becoming a highly lucrative business due to the restrictive policies of receiving countries and increasing hardship in less developed ones. Human trafficking is associated with coercion, abduction, and fraud and includes sexual exploitation and illicit adoptions among other serious violations of human rights. The global response to the sustained increase in this form of criminal activity – which has become an increasingly profitable activity for organized crime – includes the United Nations’ Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, signed in Palermo in the year 2000, and the subsequent Protocol to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. It is estimated that at least 21 million people are currently engaged in forced labor because of internal and international human trafficking (ILO 2015b).
3. *Migration due to dispossession, exclusion, and unemployment.* As argued in this section, the

most current labor migration falls under this category, which is characterized by extreme vulnerability, criminalization, discrimination, and exploitation. It is by far the largest category of forced migration encompassing around 600 million international and internal “economic” migrants. Instead of adequately categorizing the problems and risks to which these migrants are exposed, they are generally subsumed under the notion of “economic migrants,” which assumes they travel in a context of freedom and opportunities for social mobility in transit and destination countries, ignoring the growing vulnerability, insecurity, and forced disappearances to which these migrants are subjected.

4. *Return migration in response to massive deportations.* This is a growing trend in international migration associated with the irregular status faced by an increasing proportion of migrants derived from a State policy by destination countries – not a criminal act. It entails a process of *double* forced migration: they were forced to leave their countries origin and they are forced to return under increasingly vulnerable and insecure conditions.

In a less strict sense, migration due to overqualification and lack of opportunities can be considered as a fifth type of forced migration. It ensues from the restructuring of innovation systems and the structural imbalances in the labor market and limited institutional backing in peripheral countries, which result in many highly qualified workers being unable to find suitable occupational opportunities in their own country. This category of forced migration encompasses nearly 30 million professionals. While these migrants do not face serious problems when moving or seeking to cover their basic needs, they migrate to fulfil their labor and intellectual capacities, even if they are often subjected to labor degradation and wage discrimination in destination countries.

The Global Governance of Migration Under Scrutiny: The Win-Win-Win Fiction

In line with the recognition of the critical challenges propelled by human mobility, the global governance of migration has become a fundamental issue on the international agenda. Contrasting with other transnational issues such as trade and finance, the creation of a UN institutional framework for the governance of migration has followed a complex and uncertain route (Betts 2010).

Derived from the need to discuss pressing issues on the international migration agenda, a broader initiative for building a global migration regime was envisaged at the UN General Assembly with the launching in 2016 of the High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development (UN-HLD), conceived as a formal event with a strong emphasis on policy issues that would be held at the UN headquarters every 7 years. The first HLD gave rise to the creation of a yearly state-led, nonbinding, related forum, alternatively hosted by a migrant-receiving and a migrant-sending country: the GFMD. To provide institutional support for this emerging process, the UN Secretary-General created an interagency coordinating mechanism, the Global Migration Group, integrated by 15 entities of the UN system “to promote the wider application of international and regional instruments and norms relating to migration and to encourage the adoption of more coherent, comprehensive and better coordinated interagency approaches” (IOM 2017). It is important to note that the World Bank stands as a key member of this group – as well as many other UN initiatives – playing a leadership role in establishing the dominant framework within which the debates surrounding the migration-development nexus have been entrenched.

In September 2016, the UN General Assembly formally designated the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as the UN migration agency. On that occasion, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was adopted by its 193 Member States, giving rise to an intergovernmental consultation and negotiation process that

culminated with the adoption of a global compact for safe, orderly, and secure migration in December 2018.

To varying degrees, this process has been dominated by a perspective which envisions family remittances as an essential tool in the development of migrant-sending, peripheral countries. This perspective is essentially one-sided, decontextualized, and misleading. It overlooks the context in which contemporary migration is embedded, and disregards human and labor rights as central and intrinsic elements of coherent migration and development policies, as well as the exploitation, social exclusion, human insecurity, and criminalization suffered by international migrants. In addition, it masks most of the fundamental contributions made by migrants to the destination countries and ignores the costs of migration for the countries of origin, costs that greatly outweigh the overemphasized “positive” impact of remittances (Delgado Wise 2018).

Despite the insistence of international bodies and governments regarding the alleged positive effects of migration and remittances as detonators of development in countries of origin, there is no empirical evidence to warrant this assumption. Among the cardinal elements of the dominant discourse, we can mention remittances, microfinance, human capital (a term that reflects a narrow economic view), and, perhaps more importantly, the pretention to govern or manage migration without changing or even mentioning its root causes.

It is worth adding that the practices and discourses under the label of *migration management* advocated by the World Bank, the IOM, and other multilateral agencies have been promoted through new narratives that distort reality, depoliticize migration, negate the existence of divergent interests or asymmetries of power and conflicts, and promote an unsustainable and incoherent triple-win scenario in favor of the interests of the migrant-receiving countries, and more specifically, the large MNCs rooted in such countries. In this view a “good migrant,” regardless of his or her status and condition, is respectful of law, flexible to market needs, and eager to contribute to the

development of his or her country of origin (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

Toward an Alternative Agenda: Resistance from Below

The development of social alternatives must address two fundamental aspects. The first one has to do with deconstructing the power of capital and the state – a constituent, structural power that acts as a hegemonic force that must be confronted. Not doing so will nullify any attempt to develop alternatives and justify illusory, naïve, and irrelevant positions. The second consideration involves detecting points of weakness or rupture, or spaces from which subordinate social segments may generate social transformation alternatives. This challenge is at the center of the debate between those who attempt to achieve social change without seizing power (e.g., by limiting change to institutional reform or developing noncapitalist economic forms of organization within capitalism) and those who propose the need for a thorough change: another world, a different economy and society, and a social transformation process that is more equitable and socially inclusive, and sustainable in terms of both the environment and livelihoods. Without going into details, it must be stressed that, from a South-based perspective, the current social order (or disorder) is perceived as an unfair, inhumane, and predatory system: there is a need for counter-hegemonic alternatives.

From a critical perspective (that is to say, one that questions the institutional structure of neoliberalism and, more fundamentally, the structural dynamics of capitalism and imperialism in order to promote social alternatives that benefit the majority of the population), resistance from below – not passive or reactive, but transformative in essence – is understood as a process of social construction that starts by creating awareness: the need for change, organization, and social participation in order to generate a popular power that can then strive for social emancipation. This involves eschewing socially alienated relations that deprive people of their merits, destroy the environment, and damage social coexistence.

As revealed by Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune (Marx 1968 [1871]), revolutionary transformation is not something that can be derived exclusively from theoretical reflection: it is nurtured by the experience of revolutionary struggle and the resistance of popular movements against each and every advance of capitalism, and the systematization of these experiences in a dialectical learning process. In this regard, there are important lessons derived from the theory and practice of social movements in Latin America – particularly, the Zapatista movement (Delgado Wise and Martínez 2017) – that are of special relevance for our analysis. First, the social transformation process must be centered on human life and conceived in opposition to capital and its demand for the highest possible profits. The realization of this first element is necessary but not sufficient, since it can remain in the realm of abstract humanism. Real human development requires social conditions that can enable equity and social justice on all social and spatial levels. Sustainability requires, in turn, that the strategy of development be feasible, realistic, and long-lasting, with solid social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental foundations. This implies the need to redirect the development of productive forces toward what may be conceived as an *alternative modernity*, i.e., the "... possibility of a non-capitalist modernity... [which] would not be an un-finished project; it would be, rather, an ensemble of possibilities explored and updated only from one perspective and in only one way, and be prepared to approach from another side and illuminate with a different kind of light" (Echeverría 2011, p. 70). It essentially means to foster an alternative development of the productive forces that privilege their use value and which are in harmony with nature.

Second, human development cannot be defined *ex ante* as a globally applicable model; it is not a prefabricated, one-size-fits-all design. It requires proposing and specifying concrete strategies, having initially addressed structural barriers, institutional restraints, local peculiarities, regional cultures, and the practices of involved social actors. In this vein, the Zapatista movement has envisioned an emancipatory future that could

be summarized in a simple but eloquent concrete utopia: to build a *world encompassing many worlds*.

To round-up the argument, the current model of world accumulation and its power system cannot be dismantled nor shifted without the development of an autonomous and independent social power. There is currently no collective agent that can confront the power of the major MNCs, imperialist governments and their armies, international financial organizations, and the associated actors that provide them with ideological, diplomatic, and political support. There have been, however, major local, domestic, and international efforts to organize social groups and movements that have defended their rights from the neoliberal onslaught and proposed some alternative ideas and projects. Resistance from below is expanding and growing on the local, national, and, above all, international levels. The forging of a counter-hegemonic social power is advancing and cannot be postponed, as evidenced by initiatives such as the International Peasant Movement: La Vía Campesina, the World Social Forum, the People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights, and the World Social Forum on Migrations, among others.

The conclusion that we draw from the analysis is that the capitalist system in the current conjuncture is facing an epochal or civilizing crisis that necessarily weakens the social and institutional structure of the system, generating forces of change. It is important that in this conjuncture the global working class not take a purely defensive position against the current imperialist offensive, but go on mobilizing the forces of resistance. It is also important that in this counteroffensive the global labor movement be strategic and form alliances with other forces of resistance that share its vision of a world beyond neoliberalism, imperialism, and, ultimately, capitalism.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Immigration and Imperialism](#)
- ▶ [Nineteenth Century British Female Emigration Societies](#)

- ▶ [Racism and Imperialism](#)
- ▶ [Refugees and Empire](#)

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