

MARX, THE CHIEF, THE PRISONER AND THE REFUGEE

GAVIN CAPPS, GENEVIEVE LEBARON AND PAOLO NOVAK in conversation

with ALESSANDRA MEZZADRI

Abstract

The last chapter in this collection preliminarily interrogates the potential relevance of Marxian analysis and methodology for the study of what would appear as ‘marginal’ categories in the study of political economy; namely, those that are either often (mis)represented as remnants of a pre-capitalist or a non-capitalist past, or inaccurately theorised in residual or exclusionary terms vis-à-vis the main working logics of global capitalism. This chapter gathers the reflections of three scholars of, respectively, Southern African tribal chieftaincy, prison and forced labour, and refugees and border studies, on the possibility to deploy Marxian methods and categories to capture the features of three main figures; the tribal chief, the prisoner, and the refugee. Crucially, in the process of thinking about these figures, which takes the narrative form of a collective interview, we learn both what Marxian political economy can offer as well as what are its main methodological shortcomings.

Introduction, by Alessandra Mezzadri

As explained in the general *Introduction*, the contributions included in this volume explore the potential of bringing *Marx in the Field* through three different lenses. The first lens implies analysing some key categories and tropes in Marxian analysis that are crucial for the study of our Global Present (e.g. Jan, Hanieh). The second lens entails, instead, exploring how Marxian main categories and concepts may appear concretely in the field, in ways that may seem fairly distinct - yet analytically and logically compatible - with those historically sketched by Marx in his work (e.g. Bernstein, Selwyn). Indeed, learning from Jairus Banaji (2010), when researching and ‘doing’ political economy, we should always distinguish logics from history. Finally, the third lens involves an engagement with actual methods of enquiry – either those deployed by Marx to study, for instance, accumulation and/or exploitation (e.g.

Toffanin, Stevano), or those one could deploy today to produce an analysis consistent with Marx's method (Mtero et al, Harriss-White). In effect, as we have seen by the end of this volume, all contributions adopt at least two out of these three lenses to explore the usefulness of Marx for historical and contemporary field research. Many, then, also analyse how Marxian analysis could/should be 'contaminated' with insights from other theoretical traditions (e.g. Mezzadri, Lombardozzi).

Some contributions develop the agenda of *Marx in the Field* with a focus on what can be defined as more 'traditional' objects of enquiry in Marxian analysis; such as accumulation, exploitation, class formation or class struggle. Others, instead, engage with it on the basis of areas of enquiry that have been traditionally far less explored by radical political economy; such as child labour, nutrition, health or surrogacy. This final chapter continues mapping some other counterintuitive areas of enquiry for Marxian analysis. In fact, it sketches some of the benefits and perils of adopting Marxian methods of enquiry for the study of categories that not only have not figured prominently in political economy, but which have been often been portrayed as lying outside or beyond its primary scope. The first category briefly analysed in the chapter is that of the African chieftaincy. In significant parts of the Global South, including in emerging economies, chieftaincies remain a key organizational form of socio-economic life. Modernist accounts may portray them as symptoms of backwardness and remnants of the past, and Orientalist accounts may romanticize them as enclaves untouched by the logics of capitalist life. However, these realities are instead contemporary, coeval to capitalism, and in fact often fully integrated into capitalist logics. Can Marx come to the rescue, against these reductionist depictions?

The second category addressed is the prisoner. In effect, studies of labour unfreedom have benefited from an engagement with Marxian analysis (as also argued by Lombardozzi in this volume) – despite critical voices in the debate remain hardly numerous, and liberal (ahistorical) depictions of ‘modern slavery’ are increasingly taking centre stage (for a critique, see O’Connell Davidson, 2016). However, far less studies discuss unfreedom and its link to labour or labouring within contexts of legal coercive institutions. When it comes to the actual wholly unfree subject, namely the prisoner – body locked up in a correctional facility - can Marxian ideas of unfreedom still help guiding the analysis at all, and if yes how?

Finally, the third figure briefly explored here is that of the refugee. Arguably, given its mobility beyond national boundaries and complex legal status, the refugee has often escaped Marxian theorisations in its own right, and has instead only been either tangentially or instrumentally addressed by political economy. What are the main features of this instrumentalism, and to what extent can it be overcome? Below, three scholars whose work has focused on these three figures answer three questions each on the possibilities and challenges of bringing Marx – respectively - to meet the chiefs, to visit a prison, or in refugee camp. Obviously, given its length and structure, the chapter hardly hopes to map definitive answers. Rather, it aims at initiating a debate to be continued elsewhere, and at confirming - once again - the usefulness of interrogating our present through Marx’s method, to reveals both its strengths and flaws.

Marx and the Chiefs: Three Questions to Gavin Capps

Question 1. There has been a tendency to represent tribal structures and kinship relations in large swathes of the Global South as lying outside the logics of capitalism, and hence beyond the reach of the Marxian method of analysis. What are the limits of this approach?

There are certainly numerous studies which have fallen into this trap. Some may have developed analyses opposed to or aimed at overcoming Marx. Others may not reject Marxist analysis but nonetheless theorise capitalist and kinship/customary structures as separate yet articulated spheres. However, Marx comes to the rescue against such dichotomies. Marx's essence/appearance distinction, in particular (see also Bernstein, this volume) can transcend ideal-typifications of capitalism, either by contemporary opponents of Marx or by some overly schematic Marxist approaches.

For instance, my work has shown the benefits of placing the modern African chieftaincy within Marxism, by developing a category appropriate for its concrete analysis within historical materialism. This ambition was prompted by two reasons. The first was practical and due to the resurgence of the chieftaincy as both a political and economic actor in the context of the new scramble for Africa's natural resources (Bernstein, 2014). The second was theoretical, and followed the publication of key works that in different ways argued that the chieftaincy (in its combined features of tribal structures and kinship relations) was beyond the conceptual reach of Marx's critique of political economy and hence could not be explained in terms of value relations (e.g. Mamdani, 1996; Berry, 2001, 2018).

Indeed the key problem of these works was that in their attempt to rightly oppose the ideal-typification of capitalism by orthodox Marxists, they actually embraced it. For them, if within a context capitalism does not appear as it 'should' (or, rather, as 'Marxism' narrowly understood expects it should) then it must be something else – an assumption which itself is associated with various intellectual and political traditions claiming heritage from Marx, most particularly the once-fashionable 'articulation of modes of production' approach, which was dealt its decisive blow by Jairus Banaji (1977) but also Gibbon & Neocosmos (1985).

Yet, Marx draws a critical distinction between the phenomenal forms and essential relations of capitalism, arguing that the former not only systematically obscure the latter, but that they can also assume a variety forms in concrete social formations, which do not necessarily correspond to those deployed by Marx for illustrative purposes in his analysis of capitalism in *Capital*, but can nevertheless be explained by it. Two crucial points follow. First, that Marx deploys a very specific method of abstraction for moving between phenomenal forms and essential relations, a method which rests on establishing the hierarchy of mediations that connect them, mediations that must necessarily vary in each case and therefore which must not only identify the conditions of existence of these phenomena but explain why they assume the specific forms that they do and with what effects. This is where the science is. And this can be found in the structure of *Capital* itself, as earlier assumptions are modified and reworked through the method of 'progressive complication' (or 'dosed abstraction') that runs through the text, and which moves us from the fundamental dynamics of capitalism to the forms it assumes on the surface of society (Callinicos, 2001: 239).

And second, in any case, Marx himself made no claim that the ‘Western’ experience of capitalist development would be identically repeated elsewhere, and indeed spent the latter part of his life appropriating greater swathes of material about the development of capitalism on a global scale and the diverse forms it was taking. So, the question I had to ask myself was how can we extend the abstract categories of *Capital* to the social form of the modern African chieftaincy, using this method and hence how could or indeed should I develop the appropriate mediations? The answer was to be found in the concrete specifics of my case.

Question 2. Let’s get to these specifics. You have studied in-depth the Bafokeng chieftaincy in South Africa. Can you describe the concrete case you analysed, and identify which concepts/passages in Marx were crucial for this analysis?

The modern chieftaincy, in many parts of Africa, has been largely treated as a symptom of pre-capitalist relations. Some theorisations have highlighted its contemporary features and roles; however, they have tended to see the chieftaincy as a mainly political phenomenon. Its development and exercise of local political power was theorised as an expression of the colonial bifurcated state attempting to resolve ‘the native question’ (e.g. Mamdani, 1996); and its exercise of control over communal land was seen as a form of rent-seeking (Berry, 2001, 2018).

However, the modern chieftaincy has always exercised also a key economic role – and covered a specific class function in African political economy. In fact, in many instances it covered a compatible role of that of landlordism in relation to the capitalist transformations mapped by Marx. One concept developed by Marx is particularly useful to understand the chieftaincy – that of modern ‘landed property’

and its monopoly over ground rent. Marx develops this concept in *Capital Volume Three*, although obviously the concept is crucial for its discussion of primitive accumulation in *Volume One* (Marx, 1974a).

For Marx, the rise of modern landed property is crucial to the historic genesis of the capital relation, as it operates the separation of producers from the means of production. It is the violent imposition of new property relations effectively ‘based on the monopoly of certain persons over the definitive portions of the globe, as exclusive spheres of their private will to the exclusion of others’ (Marx 1974b, 615) – that decisively separates the mass of the direct producers (‘peasants’) from their means of livelihood and hurls them on to the labour market as ‘free and “unattached” proletarians’ (Marx 1974a, 669) (see Capps, 2016: 458).

Now: obviously there are differences between Marx’s new capitalist landlords and the African chiefs; however, this difference is phenomenal, not essential. On the other hand, Marx himself would have never expected otherwise, as he clearly writes that ‘wage-labour and landed property, like capital, are historically specific social forms; one of labour, and the other of the monopolized earth, both in fact being forms corresponding to the same economic formation of society (Marx, 1981, 954)’.

The issue is, does the chieftaincy cover a role similar to that of capitalist landlords? The answer is yes, albeit obviously historically the form in which the relation appears is hardly that described by Marx.

Since colonial times the chieftaincy mobilized migrant labour through customary channels for the support of the white settler-colonial productions. In fact, chieftaincies were central to the support and reproduction of the Migrant-Labour System (MLS), which supported mining across Southern Africa (O’Laughlin, 1996). It was chiefs who collected the taxes that compelled peasants to produce marketable surpluses or engage in wage labour outside the communal land, or again imposing the cultivation of some crops (forced cropping’). They were key brokers of the colonial systems, and the chieftaincy itself was crucial for the reproduction of this process of ‘accumulation without dispossession’ that represented what Jairus Banaji (2003) would define as the specific ‘form of exploitation’ characterising many southern African regions. In short, the chieftaincy did not only resolved ‘the native question’; it also actively managed ‘the labour question’ (Capps, 2018). As such, chieftaincies should be understood as embedded in value relations, not simply as political rent-seeking agents.

Bafokeng, in particular, should be conceptualised as ‘tribal landed property’, i.e. a form that internalised, expressed and mediated the contradiction between the imperatives of colonial capitalist accumulation and exploitation in Africa, and the communal landed property relations supposedly embedded in and reproducing customary relations. Compared to other regions, in Bafokeng, the power of the chieftaincy to mediate access to land and control the labourforce has not not only been based on rent; rather, it has been further complicated by the presence, within the region, of platinum reserves. In other regions, especially gold-rich regions, (white) industrial settler-capital and the ‘customary’ chieftaincy were spatially separated, the former in key mining areas and the latter in rural areas, together with the cheap labour reserves. In Bafokeng, this spatial separation did not exist, as mining reserves crossed

chieftaincy's communal land. Hence, here the chieftaincy could not only claim ground rent for mining extraction, but also mining royalties (Capps, 2012a; 2016).

While royalties were initially mediated by the apartheid state, which worked as trustee according to South African Law, in the 'New' South Africa the ANC changed approach with its move to black economic empowerment. At this point, the Bafokeng chieftaincy, whose royalty fee was forcibly reduced by the apartheid state during a previous confrontation with Impala, the regional platinum company, used the newly established 'black economic empowerment agenda' (BEE) to claim a role as stakeholder in the mining company, *de-facto* using its function as 'tribal landed-property' to get a more direct share of surplus value – not merely rents - generated through mining. With the new BEE agenda, ironically, the ANC policy had abolished the rule of 'tribal-landed property' in Bafokeng (Capps, 2012b), only to turn the chieftaincy into a fully-fledge capitalist agent, which soon started diversifying out of its historical dependence on mining, while reconstituting itself as a distinct fraction of newly established black economic elite (Capps and Mswana, 2015).

Notwithstanding the dangers of generalisations, the case of Bafokeng shows that a full range of Marx's categories of political economy may be extended to circumstances where they were previously thought not to apply due to the communal – or better, phenomenal – form of land tenure (Capps, 2016, 2018). This entails exciting possibilities to continue deploying Marx for the study of our present.

Question 3. In terms of practical methods of enquiry, how would you describe your approach to data collection, and which lessons would you derive for a future generation of fieldworkers in the 21st century?

As Lenin puts it, historical materialism can only be based on ‘the concrete analysis of the concrete situation’ (Ali, 2017). However, the concrete hardly comes from nowhere; it must also be studied in its historical instantiation. The study of any concrete category must also be historical, to capture the development of the form in motion, its trajectory. Moreover, it must be multidimensional, to capture its many determinations (see Mtero et al on class, in this volume).

Studying the chieftaincy as the synthesis of many determinations and relations in their historical materialist form, has meant the need to rely on fieldwork methods capable of grasping and exploring these determinations in both their own specific trajectories - allocating them analytical/explanatory weight - as well as in their totality. Hence, I worked on multiple sources and on multiple fronts; archival, historical, and field-based. Mostly, in Bafokeng, where I conducted my research for several years, I had to recognise and navigate the complex power relations that structure and pervade fieldwork in highly unequal rural settings (Breman, 1985), and this led me to uncover a long history of group land-buying, which, it later transpired, is not only critical to grasp the contemporary politics of the area I explored, but also of similar cases.

In the field, my starting point was that a study of social relations should, in the words of Wendy Olsen (1992:58), “examine both sides of each relationship”. In the BaFokeng case, this meant gaining access not only to the tribal administration, but also to a range of other actors, organisations and institutions situated at different

levels of a complex political economy, and locked in shifting relations of conflict and alliance. Moreover, it meant doing so in a fieldwork situation dominated by a highly sophisticated local elite, which was at once aggressively mindful of its public image, alert to the potential power of academic work, and presumptive that I would share its worldview. From the onset, this presented considerable methodological and ethical challenges which had to be politically thought through (Capps, 2007).

The actual data collection methods I deployed were fourfold. First, detailed interviews with key informants in each of the main organisations and institutions identified as relevant to the study; second, intensive local level research in a small sample of BaFokeng villages, including through a structured household questionnaire; third, research in the archives of key government departments; and, finally, a quasi-ethnographic commitment to living locally in a BaFokeng village and participating in the community's more politically significant gatherings and events (Capps, 2007). It is as a result of all these combined methods of analysis that I managed to bring *Marx in the Field*.

Marx and the Prisoner: Three Questions for Genevieve LeBaron

Question 1 You have worked extensively on prison labour, and labour unfreedom in general. In your view, where does prison labour sit in classic Marxian debates on unfreedom?

In the contemporary economy, prisoners produce goods ranging from artisanal foods sold in high-end grocery stores to luxury motorcycles. They fight fires, roast coffee beans, and build furniture for college and University dorm rooms. Prisoners are

sometimes paid just pennies a day, or nothing at all; in some jurisdictions, they are paid minimum wage but the government is allowed to appropriate wages towards covering the costs of incarceration. Prisoners are some of the most vulnerable and unfree workers in the economy, given the extent of control that corrections officers wield over their lives and bodies, given that they are often legally mandated to work with no say over their pay or conditions, and given the serious challenges they face in organizing (LeBaron 2015; LeBaron 2018a; LeBaron 2012). Nevertheless, in 2018 prisoners across the US went on strike, in part to protest the labour conditions they describe as modern-day slavery (cf. Johnson 2018).

Prison labour is often overlooked within debates on forced and unfree labour in the global economy. Broadly speaking, especially where Marxist perspectives are concerned, debates about contemporary unfree labour have tended to focus on unfree labour that takes place within the private economy where workers are being exploited by recruiters, producers, and private businesses (LeBaron and Phillips, 2019), as well as forms of unfreedom that relate to what is often described as ‘de-proletarianisation’ (Rioux, LeBaron and Verovsek, 2019). Where prison labour has been examined, it is often described in relatively generic terms, as an interchangeable form of contemporary slavery motivated by corporations’ insatiable demand for a cheap, exploitable workforce (LeBaron 2018a; LeBaron 2015).

The unique dynamics of unfreedom involved in prison labour, and its unique place within the capitalist economy, warrant more nuanced and extensive investigation. Prison labour is legally possible in the US because of a loophole in the 13th Amendment to the US constitution which banned slavery and involuntary servitude

except ‘as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted’ (US National Archives). Unlike private forms of unfree labour, the main architect and beneficiary of prison labour systems is typically the state. In the United States (US), for instance, the vast majority of prisoners work for the government, including state-level and federal government corporations, as well as towards prison maintenance and facilities work – not for private companies. Even where states loan their prison workforces to corporations, they typically bring in income since companies are often mandated to pay minimum wage (though may receive other benefits that lower their costs of production, ranging from tax cuts, discounted or free space and electricity, and assistance with worker surveillance and management).

Since the early days of US capitalism, prison labour has been used as a tool of social market, and racial discipline and terror, and to habituate the bodies of prisoners into the dictates of the waged labour market. It has played different roles in different eras and geographies of capitalist development, but across the board, it has been an important tool of state efforts to create and forge capitalist labour markets and push those whose labour is worth the least into reliance on wages. It has always involved complex interplay between race, class, gender, and criminal justice status. As such, it doesn’t fit neatly into existing Marxist debates on unfreedom. It presents an especially major challenge for those theorists who see unfree labour as incompatible with capitalism (Rioux, LeBaron and Verovsek, 2019); these theorists have tended to overlook prison labour rather than confront its widespread usage in some countries across multiple centuries of capitalist development. It’s time for that to change.

Question 2. In the concrete study of the what Ruth Gilmore (2007) has called the 'prison industrial complex', how do gender and race interplay with unfreedom, and to what extent does Marxian understandings of unfreedom capture this process?

Labour unfreedom has always been deeply intertwined with race and gender, since the very onset of capitalism. As put by Marx (1991; *Volume One*, chapter 13: 925) 'the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world'. Race and gender also crucially shape the prison labour system. It is hard to think of a prison labour system anywhere in the world, or even in any previous era of capitalism, where the majority of those subjected to prison labour are not racialised populations, immigrants or ethnic minorities.

In some prison labour systems, racial logics and forms of discipline are especially overt. For instance, in the 1990s, in the US states of Alabama, correctional officers publicly attached inmates who refused to work on chain gangs to the hitching post, which Tessa Gorman has accurately described as a 'reminder of racial terrorism' from slavery that 'consists of an iron collar that was closed by a bolt, attached to an upright bar or post' (Gorman 1997). In the US state of Louisiana, an almost entirely African American prison population is required to labour on Angola prison farm, which is a former slave plantation. Prison labour is a highly racialised mode of domination and exploitation and it cannot be understood in isolation from wider dynamics of race and racialised forms of social control present in any given era of capitalist development.

The gendered dynamics of prison labour are also important. For much of the history of global capitalism, prison labour has been pretty male because incarceration rates for men vastly outweigh incarceration rates of women. However, this has begun to

change in the neoliberal era, as women have been incarcerated at higher rates amidst a ‘global lockdown’ of women (Sudbury 2005; Roberts 2016). Beyond the gender of individual prisoners, gendered power relations and dynamics surround prison labour regimes. For instance, in the US state of Texas, male inmates have been made to wear pink prison outfits and underwear and feminised in various ways, as part of a broader strategy to humiliate prison workers. In the same county, all-women chain gangs have been compared to dogs. Gender dynamics are underexplored within studies of prison labour and certainly warrant further exploration.

Marxist understandings of unfreedom are not currently optimised to grasp these dynamics. Indeed, barring some important exceptions (cf. Mezzadri 2017), Marxist work on unfree labour has been surprisingly gender and race blind. I say surprisingly because it is clear – even in official statistics—that women and girls, people of colour, indigenous people and migrants are disproportionately vulnerable to unfree labour in the contemporary global economy. Yet, aside from in feminised industries (eg. sex and care work) where gendered vulnerability is often emphasised and analysed (LeBaron and Gore, 2019), there are major analytical and empirical blind spots with respect to how race, gender, and sexuality shape workers’ vulnerability to unfreedom. There is a need for analysis of unfreedom and unfree labour, within prisons and far beyond, that grasps race and gender as a key part of the story— of how and why workers are vulnerable (or not) to unfreedom, of their conditions and experiences within unfree labour, as part of the overall logics of unfree labour systems, and as forms of power and inequality that are reproduced through unfree labour.

Question 3. In terms of data collection, which are the key challenges in researching prison labour, and which are the most effective methods to study it through a Marxian lens?

The key challenges in researching prison labour are three-fold: practical, ethical, and methodological.

Researchers will confront a number of practical challenges in researching prison labour. Perhaps most critical are the difficulties in accessing prisoners, who are the most reliable source of information on prison labour conditions and dynamics. States and companies are usually hesitant to grant researchers access to their prison populations and workforces. Even where there is access, privacy law combined with highly regimented prison schedules can make it difficult for researchers to get the information they need to construct meaningful samples and recruit research participants. Gaining access to former prisoners is often difficult for similar reasons. The greatest challenge, then, is getting into prison to access workers so as to interview and observe them, or locating those with relevant experience once they've left prison.

Most of the research on prison labour, therefore, relies on other types of data and evidence. Some journalism on prison labour, such as recent exposés of labour conditions within internment camps in Xinjiang, China, relies on satellite imagery. Other research relies on documentary evidence, such as documents obtained through Freedom of Information requests or company websites. However, this information is often patchy and can be time, resource, and labour intensive for researchers to obtain. As well, like all research involving workers who are unfree and vulnerable to retribution by employers, researching prison labour poses ethical challenges

(LeBaron, 2018b). In this case, the stakes are especially high given the multi-faceted retribution that could be unleashed by the entire criminal justice system, from sentence extension to solitary confinement, and ethical considerations are especially pronounced given that it is typically not possible to interview workers privately and off-site without their employer or a prison official listening. To fully understand prisoners' experiences, the conditions under which they are working, and the factors that shape their entry and exit from prison labour, there is a need for in-depth research amongst prison workers themselves.

Yet, this needs to be done in an ethical, respectful, and empowering way, without putting prisoners—who already experience serious constraints on their freedom—at risk, including their risk of losing their prison employment (since they often depend on this to cover fees imposed for their costs of incarceration), or being assigned a less desirable form of prison labour. Overlapping challenges intertwine and further complicate these obvious ethical challenges, including the need to carefully safeguard and anonymise sensitive data and create a protocol for what happens if the researcher uncovers or is told about illegal activity.

Finally, researchers confront a series of methodological challenges in collecting data on prison labour. These include, for instance, ensuring the credibility, representativeness, and high quality of data, in the face of the serious obstacles to these, and balancing the need for anonymity and protection of research participants.

Marx and the Refugee: Three Questions to Paolo Novak

Question 1. The refugee has been theorised either in relation to a core of capitalist relations, or as residually lying at the margins of such relations. In your view, why do Marxist analyses struggle so much to accommodate the refugee institution?

Marx never gave us a definitive method for the study of institutions and the state, and it is thus challenging to apply the concepts he developed to the study of the refugee, a quintessentially state-centred legal institution. Perhaps for this reason, political economy analyses never study the refugee institution in its own terms. Some contributions approach refugee law à la Mieville (2005), i.e. as a subset of international law whose constituent forms are the constituent forms of global capitalism, and therefore of imperialism. Through this lens one obtains crucial insights on some of the forces that structure the refugee institution, but the latter is reduced to a mere by-product of imperialism, leaving little space for political engagement other than hoping for all international law to be abolished (ibid. p. 318). Other contributions approach refugee law as a subset of a broader range of legal instruments and institutions that shape the inclusion of migrants into labour markets a mediating the insertion of migrants into labour markets. Once again, this is insightful, as it brings to the fore the functionality of migration laws in constituting a mode of appropriation of labour power premised on hyper-precarious migrant labour (Ferguson and McNally, 2014), but dilutes the specificity of the refugee institution.

In my research, I try to study the refugee institution as a productive force for social change caught up in, but at the same time in excess of, these relations (Novak, 2015).

So one can say that the main problem lies in the fact that the refugee, for most political economy analyses, is not necessarily studied in its own terms. but always in

its functional role in relation to one or more ‘traditional’ key concerns of political economy – such as, for instance accumulation, imperialism, labour, or class. Often, refugees are conceived as the product of imperialism and its related patterns of dispossession; or in their role and mobilisation as particularly vulnerable labour, subject to particularly intense forms of exploitation. Through these lenses one may still obtain crucial insights, but it is still not the same thing as developing an analysis centred on the refugee as the main ‘protagonist’ of the narrative.

Question 2. If you had to pick one Marxian concept epitomising both the possibilities and limitations in dealing with the institution of the refugee in political economy, which concepts would you choose?

The concept of imperialism is perhaps the stronger contribution of conventional Marxist analyses to the study of refugees - and, at the same time, its weakest spot. Traditionally, these analyses have deployed the concept of imperialism to capture refugee-related dynamics in two ways. First, international refugee law and refugee-related interventions across the globe are seen, through this concept, as a ruse by imperialist states to project their power. And obviously these analyses have a point. Since its inception the international refugee regime has never been (exclusively) driven by humanitarian concerns, with powerful states’ interests always structuring its key analytical units, relations and hierarchies, as well as its contextual operations. This was so during the Cold War, when interventions in support of refugees escaping from Soviet-supported regimes across Africa and Asia were lavishly funded and often constituted an all-pervasive and cross-cutting axis of conflict. This is so today, when the militarised management of refugee migration to countries in the Global North functions as a way to project the latter’s power and influence far away from their

borders. The definition, transformation and interpretation of refugee law, as well as refugee-related interventions by national states or the so-called “international community” have always been deeply implicated with attempts to establish and reproduce imperialist forces, globally and at regional level (Chandler 2006; Bellamy Foster et al. 2008).

Second, studies of the refugee institution informed by the concept of imperialism help us move away from its legal form, as an individual who lacks the protection of the state that s/he belongs to, based on race, religion or political affiliation. Rather, they locate “bourgeois” refugee law and the relation between states and citizens it expresses in the historical and material contexts that explain and justify its development, linking the legal form of the refugee institution to the interests of classes and particular groups within inter/national societies. In this way, refugee displacement is explained by reference to imperialist proxy wars and the violence and destruction that ensue them, to processes of primitive accumulation and/or the pauperisation of countries in the Global South through predatory lending and land grabs. The root causes of displacement stem from the ongoing production of underdevelopment across the world, and from the need to expand and then defend global markets and the consequences. Forced displacement is a by-product of the economic relationships of imperialism (Petras, 2007).

The great contribution of these analyses, thus, lies in their bringing to life (some of) the social relations that shape the content of the refugee institution, exposing the false separation between the political and the economic, and the fallacy of the distinction between ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration that is constitutive of migration law and

migration management institutions. Yet, in conceiving all instances of refugee displacement and of refugee-related interventions as the ultimate expression of the economic relationships of imperialism, these approaches don't offer many practical insights for the purposes of field research. Indeed, through the prism of imperialism, the concrete mechanisms through which the refugee institution is heterogeneously declined in different geographical contexts and historical moments, the socially and subjectively differentiated outcomes and effects that it produces on displaced populations, and the latter's situated contestations, struggles, and avoidance tactics, i.e. the ways in which the refugee institution is rendered concrete and reproduced in context, all appear as parochial analytical interests. Ultimately, a field-based investigation of refugee dynamics that is defined by theories of imperialism can at best offer a confirmation of the significance of these theories rather than novel insights. I find this to be a major limitation.

Question 3. Based on your field experience, are there ways to bring Marxian analysis into the study of refugees - that is, to bring Marx in a refugee camp?

Absolutely. The positions sketched above are but the most conventional Marxist engagements with the field of refugee studies. More recent analyses, while not necessarily challenging the above tenets, have explored refugee dynamics through exciting and empirically driven studies. There is a growing awareness, for example, about the significance of asylum and refugee law for the insertion of migrants into labour markets, with interesting studies offering insights on the "refugeeization" of the European agricultural labour force (Dines and Rigo, 2015). Captivating ethnographic accounts have described the process of 'step-wise' migration from West Africa into Spanish labour markets, disentangling the relation between asylum seekers

and un/free labour (Cross, 2013). The transformation of refugee laws and directives governing asylum in Europe has been ethnographically linked to variegated forms of neoliberalism (Novak, 2019). And so on. These new trajectories of Marxian engagements with the refugee institution import into refugee studies Marxian concerns with exploitation and labour struggles, which are crucial to capture the significance of refugee law in relation to labour markets and to the experiences of refugee-hood; they underline how the migration regime aims at containing, channelling and impeding refugees' right to seek asylum under the rubric of 'irregular migration'; perhaps most importantly, for the purposes of this discussion, they offer theoretical contributions that are driven by field research, rather than using field research to confirm already existing theorisations.

Yet they perhaps, once again, shift our attention away from the refugee institution as such, from the processes that explain its design, emergence and transformation. These processes are central to my research, as I arrive at these debates from the classical tropes of refugee studies and their foundational question-namely, 'who is a refugee?' Yes, the refugee institution is structured by the economic relationships of imperialism, but not only by them. Yes, refugee law and the broader gamut of legal and institutional devices developed for the purposes of migration controls, increases the rate of exploitation for migrants across the world, but its emergence and transformation cannot be reduced to capital's imperatives. Yes, refugees may well escape from the ravages of imperialist wars and the spread of market relations, but their political subjectivities are irreducible to any synthetic representation. I need more tools to answer the above question.

For this reason, my research on refugees is, instead, deeply informed by the Marxian concept of commodity fetishism. This is because, much like a commodity, the refugee “appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing” (Marx K., 1867 Volume 1, Chapter 1, Section 4). The queerness of the refugee institution emerges through field research investigations that are concerned with the processes that explain its contextual (re)production. The latter is of course structured by imperialist states, as much as by employers who prey on the legally subordinated inclusion of refugees into labour markets. But, at national level, it is also carefully crafted and deployed by host governments, the Ministries and agencies dealing with refugees, local administrations, the police, civil servants and the state apparatus at large, in ways that are functional to the interests of the constituencies they represent. It is rendered concrete by humanitarian agencies, their variegated mandates, the experts that drive their practices and the humanitarian workers that contextually adapt and implement them. It is dynamically transformed by refugees themselves, who are subjected to, resist, evade, and reappropriate it. The refugee institution benefits landowners, community leaders, brokers, helpers and all those who manage to use it to reproduce their privileged status. The social relations that define the ever-changing form of the refugee institution and its contextual declinations cannot remain tied to any given content. Rather, the refugee institution is contextually produced by the articulation between these forces and agents, and the queer ways in which they transform, and are in turn transformed by it. They need to be investigated contextually.

The fetishism of the commodity/refugee institution has its origins in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces it. Only an investigation that de-fetishizes

the refugee, i.e. that unveils the relation between the producers of that institution as opposed to presenting it as a relation between each of them and the product of their labour, the secret character of the refugee is unveiled. Such an investigation may require “corrupting” classic political economy methods, infusing them, for example, with post-structuralist gazes that are concerned with the regimes of power-knowledge that inscribe refugee spaces, or with deconstructions that capture the social excesses that characterise refugee law (Novak, 2015).

Indeed, many Marxist will despair at the ways in which I have appropriated the concept of fetishism and at the ways in which I used the words labour and producers.

I think, however, that in order to study a “queer thing”, queer methods are required.

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