

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Louise Waite, Gary Craig, Hannah Lewis and Klara Skrivankova (eds),

Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants: Insecure Work in a Globalised Economy,

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Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants documents exploitative labor conditions for migrants in low-paid precarious work, spanning across world regions and socio-legal statuses; investigating different industries and contract types; engaging norms that produce migrants' exploitability and regulations against neo-slavery conditions;¹ and mobilizing ethnographic methods alongside political economy analyses.

This short overview gives a sense of the ambition grounding this 18-chapter-plus-introduction edited volume. By exploring the nexus of exploitation's *lived experiences*, *structural production*, and (some germinal) *political responses* to tackle neo-slavery conditions at work, this collection enacts an important political epistemology of migrant precarious labor-scapes and results in a *compelling intervention on the "continuum of unfreedom"* that affects migrant labor in globalized neoliberal economies (Lewis et al. 2015; Skrivankova 2010).

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¹ The notion of "slavery" has been recently deployed in the context of regulatory initiatives targeting the forced labor and exploitation nexus (e.g. the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015) and in scholarly debates about the hyper exploitation of vulnerable workers, especially as it refers to gender, immigration status, and/or their intersection.

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So what are the key arguments and approaches that hold this broad-ranging volume together and that inaugurate an ambitious research program on “insecure work in a globalized economy”, as the subtitle puts it?

First, migrant workers’ extreme exploitation is a global standard of neoliberal economies. It is not just a feature of so-called “slavery super centers” (Craig 2009) in places such as India, Pakistan, or Brazil: conditions of neo-slavery characterize migrant labor across the world, and increasingly so in Euro-Atlantic countries also. As we move through the volume’s chapters, we follow migrant workers in the UK, Argentina, East and Central Europe, China, Canada, the US, Italy, Brazil, South India, and France. But it is not just the location of exploitation that went global, the book argues. It is also the process of producing and reproducing the “vulnerability” of migrant workers that globalized, as state restrictions on the legal circulation of migrant labor have been going in hand with two phenomena: first, the “institutionalization of exploitative conditions” for the majority of migrant workers (p.67); and, second, the expansion of global supply chains relying on a socio-legally vulnerable workforce.

Some of the volume’s contributors recently documented migrant hyper-exploitation in the so-called “global North” in other important publications (e.g. Lewis et al. 2014, 2015). Yet, in *Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants*, the argument about the “globalization of vulnerability”—as one of the book’s sections summarizes it—comes across vividly, exactly thanks to the juxtaposition of exploitative labor-scapes in different regions and of migrant workers’ different nationalities, whereabouts, and statuses.

As we read exploitation globally, the idea that informal labor markets are the exception to the rule of regulated ones (and their mapping across a Global South/North divide) falls through. Indeed, this volume importantly contributes to “provincializing”, as

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postcolonial studies scholars would put it, the idea of “informal” labor markets. It is both this idea’s geopolitical predicament and its ordering of the world that this volume illuminates, bringing ethnographic specificity and political-economy “gravity” to what Judith Butler (2009, 2015) describes as the “asymmetrical distribution of precariousness”, which allows for the categorization of bodies and populations as less than human. Such ethnographic granularity and political-economic foundation in analyzing the globalization of exploitation, in fact, are the book’s two other argumentative tenets.

So, *second*, the volume documents the *heterogeneity* of exploitative labor conditions—their situatedness and vernacular instantiations as well as their “lived experiences” (p.1). While the contributors argue that hyper-exploitation is a widespread feature of globalized economies, they do not flatten such a global process onto a homogeneous definition of exploitation, or even of “migrant”. Instead, the volume holds up to the challenge of documenting the variegated landscape of neo-slavery for vulnerable migrant workers.

Thanks to the case study approach that characterizes the volume, readers access the everyday experiences of hyper-exploited migrant workers across the world—e.g. overseas domestic workers in the UK and Canada, Bangladeshi street vendors in Paris, Bolivian migrants in the sweatshops of Buenos Aires, Chinese migrants dealing with the networks that organize their travels to Europe, Tunisian and Romanian agricultural workers in the Sicilian countryside, and young women working in the South Indian garment industry, just to take a few examples from the rich repertoire of the book.

Building on such analysis “on the ground” of global exploitation processes, the book importantly argues for the need to expand labor regulations beyond the binary of free and forced labor. This binary problematically underpins the International Labor

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Organization (ILO), keeping the broad range of unfreedoms migrants experience in the global marketplace outside of the ILO's definition of exploitation. If contemporary unfreedom in the global economy is mainly characterized by the preclusion of exit—as opposed to a coerced point of entry in slavery and indenture—the essays collected in *Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants* offer a rich documentation of the impact of such preclusions on migrants' daily life.

Third, the book stands as a radical intervention against the essentialization of migration statuses. Readers of *Antipode* will appreciate this edited volume's success in enacting—even if not programmatically theorizing—a research program on the migration and labor nexus that breaks through the disciplinary boundaries that often characterize scholarly work on migrant struggles, where the governmental tools of visas and statuses tend to part researchers' analytical focus between so called “economic migrants” and so called “forced migrants”, hence governmentalizing the production of knowledge about migration.

Through the angle of exploitation instead, the book maps the variegated landscape of unfreedom that migrant workers experience across the board of socio-legal statuses. Examining status refugees, economic migrants, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and rejected refugees from the vantage point of labor exploitation, in fact, the book illuminates the “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and “adverse incorporation” (Phillips 2013) of migrant labor in globalized economies. This is one of the avenues along which the book opens a research platform. It would be very interesting to read a future engagement on the notion of “crisis”, building on the analysis carried out in *Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants*: how is migrant labor exploitation impacted as enduring economic and migration crises intersect with the epistemic crisis of the

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normative frameworks aimed at governing them (De Genova and Tazzioli 2016), including the categorization of human mobility into profiles and statuses?

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Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants is organized into five sections in addition to the introduction, within which appear 18 chapters by 37 contributors.

The first section, “The Globalization of Vulnerability”, situates the book’s focus in terms of global political economy. John Smith’s essay demonstrates the economic and political emptiness of the notion of GDP (“the GDP illusion”, as he puts it) in a context where a “firm’s value-added does not represent the value it has produced, but ... the portion of total, economy-wide value it has succeeded capturing in the (global) marketplace” (p.36), building on “the emigration of production to low-wage countries, or immigration of workers from those countries”.

Nicola Phillips engages with private governance initiatives addressing forced labor and trafficking in global supply chains. Looking at the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act, she shows the limits of private governance approaches, which impose “no direct penalty for non-compliance, relying instead on large firms’ concern about protecting their brand” (p.17). She argues for the need to redirect private governance initiatives and to match them with a strong public governance approach, like Brazil has been doing since the early 2000s, where public authority is used “to both regulate and enforce compliance” (p.23).

Lucia Pradella and Rossana Cillo focus on the effects of the 2007/8 economic crisis on migrant labor in Western Europe: while worsening hyper-exploitation of

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migrant workers, the crisis also led to the marginalization of immigration issues in trade union agendas. Focusing on the UK and Italy, the authors argue for the need to overcome the methodological nationalism that characterizes the European political debate about in-work poverty (IWP) (p.45).

The second section, “Migrant Workers, Unfreedom, and Forced Labor”, focuses on the nexus between migrant socio-legal statuses and unfreedom. Kendra Strauss’ contribution looks at migration and care-work and remaps relations of subordination in terms of regimes of social reproduction, focusing on the Canadian Live-in Caregiver Program and the UK Overseas Domestic Worker visa. Deploying a feminist approach to political economy, she illustrates how state building is linked to the institutionalization of precarious migrant statuses and argues that “governments in the UK and Canada aim to deter and punish extreme forms of exploitation perpetrated by traffickers at the same time as they institutionalize ‘routine’ poor pay and conditions for the majority of migrant domestic and temporary workers” (p.67).

Matej Blazek’s chapter focuses on Ukrainian and East Asian migrants in Slovakia, a country seldom studied for the migrants it receives. Blazek deploys the notion of “structural violence” to describe the continuum between hyper-exploitation at work and severe marginalization in other spheres of life—e.g. violence in public spaces and abuses at home—that these migrants endure. The chapter also importantly contributes to highlight the heterogeneity of the category of migrant, reflecting on the different exploitation among the group of non-European migrants in Slovakia.

Alex Balch maps the UK’s regulatory efforts to tackle forced labor, focusing on different policy initiatives from the early 2000s to the Modern Slavery Bill announced in 2013, and showing how the business crime related to forced labor has historically been

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marginalized.

The third section, “The Vulnerability of Asylum Seekers”,² opens with Tom Vickers arguing that UK asylum policies between 1999 and 2010 implemented strategies of dispersal to disempower refugees and break-up diasporic networks of solidarity and collective resistance, hence producing the dependency of refugees on the British state and re-disciplining them as a reserve army.

Maja Sager’s compelling intervention looks at Sweden’s “asylum rights and paradoxes of labor” (p. 115), drawing on three-years of fieldwork, zooming-in on the daily life of a middle-aged woman from Kosovo working in a pizzeria, and arguing that “although the workplace is characterized by exploitation, it also carries a possibility of enhanced security—and it is in the ambiguous meeting between the two that precarity is constructed” (p.120). What intrigued me about Sager’s essay is her capacity to bring ethnographic material to bear on the conversation about “precarity”, while also documenting the situated struggles of asylum seekers in Sweden.

The section then introduces us to the work-scape of Bangladeshi fruit vendors in the streets of Paris, with an essay by Donghyuk Park. Bangladesh, we learn, has become one of the most important sending countries of asylum seekers to France, where the

² A note on “precarity” and “vulnerability” in the context of this book. Despite the title’s focus on “vulnerability” and the use of “precarity” and “vulnerability” interchangeably in most chapters, this volume in fact brings “the analytical advantage of the concept of precarity [versus vulnerability]” into focus, as its chapters cover the “political and institutional contexts in which the production of precarity occurs, rather than focusing solely on individualized experiences” (Waite 2009: 421). While an introductory overview of these terms might have gone beyond the book’s editorial project, a clarification would have helped the section on refugees, since in this case the notion “vulnerability” takes on a further meaning, i.e. the juridical subjectivity whereby refugee status is granted or denied, hence making the distinction important.

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“informal ethnic niche economy of fruit vending” (p.139) has become a “short-term financial cushion” for asylum seekers, as current French regulations don’t allow them access to the formal labor market. As Park illuminates the daily struggles of the Bangladeshi street vendors, he advocates for a regulatory change granting a right to work to asylum seekers.

Louise Waite, Hannah Lewis, Stuart Hodgkinson and Peter Dwyer map how the destitution of asylum seekers is produced and enforced through immigration policies. Building on extensive interview materials with refused asylum seekers in the UK, they document the “state-sanctioned enforced destitution” (p.154) of this group, and also how some workers in these abject conditions actively manage to resist exploitation and the organizing strategies deployed to persuade employers to honor agreed-upon payments.

The fourth section, “Hidden from View: The Most Exploited Workers”, illustrates the heterogeneity of exploitative labor conditions among the paradigmatic figure of the precarious worker—the undocumented migrant.

Jerónimo Montero Bressán and Eliana Ferradás Abalo’s compelling essay focuses on Bolivian migrant workers in the sweatshops of Buenos Aires, where migrants are isolated from society, work six days a week from 8am to midnight, are paid 40-50% less than the mandated baseline, and in some cases are even locked inside their worksite. The essay illustrates the contradiction between Argentinian progressive immigration law—e.g. granting access to health, education, welfare, and housing regardless of immigration status—and state tolerance of this highly exploitative sweatshop system. The rich material in this chapter results from a seven-year research project and from the authors’ anti-sweatshop activism in the grassroots organization La Alameda.

Rebecca Lawthom, Carolyn Kagan, Sue Baines, Sandy Lo, Sylvia Sham, Lisa

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Mok, Mark Greenwood and Scott Gaule document the networks that organize Chinese migrants' travels to the UK, a market-driven practice "requiring money to buy every step of emigration" (p.181). Illuminating the hidden lives of the Chinese workers' community in the UK, the essay shows "the darker side of network participation" (p.185) and documents how these migrants understand exploitation and opportunity and their connection to their families at home.

Alice Bloch, Leena Kumarappan and Sonia McKay focus on how undocumented workers search for jobs in London, drawing from about 80 interviews with migrants and employers from China, Bangladesh, and Turkey and exploring the role of personal and family networks, as well as job agencies. The study shows how migrants' networks are both a necessary entry point in the labor market and a "fix" that binds individuals to low-paid and highly exploitative labor.

Finally, Ismail Idowu Salih maps the hyper-exploitation of domestic migrant workers in the UK who, despite working with documents, lack legal protection and end up in conditions of servitude, based on the hidden nature of domestic workplaces.

The section "Interventions: Tackling Labor Exploitation" closes the book, focusing on attempts to fight the exploitation of migrant workers. Domenica Urzi mobilizes the notion of "dignity in the workplace" as an advocacy tool against migrant exploitation. Focusing on the southern Sicilian agricultural sector, she looks at the exploitation of different groups—i.e. Romanian and Tunisian migrants—highlighting the hierarchy of vulnerability that makes EU and non-EU migrant workers differentially precarious.

Ana Lopes and Tim Hall introduce us to the unforeseen negative impact of the introduction of the living wage for migrant cleaners at a London university. Having

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served as activists in the campaign that led to the introduction of this regulation, the authors accurately diagnose the increased precarity it led to, resulting in a reduction in the length of contracts and a decrease in annual wages.

Annie Delaney and Jane Tate focus on *Sumangali* camp workers in South India, looking at how gender and caste feature in the exploitation of these workers, all young single women, recruited for a fixed period, not paid a full wage on the basis that part of the wage is withheld for future “marriage assistance”, and forced to live in company-controlled hostels. The chapter also documents Indian, international, and ethical trading initiatives that advocate for these workers’ rights.

Finally, Joanna Ewart-James and Neill Wilkins describe the UK Staff Wanted Initiative designed to highlight the compatibility of business ethics with a respect for human rights in the hyper-exploitative hospitality sector, also illuminating how the London 2012 Olympic Games and the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games helped mobilize support for the struggle of workers in hospitality.

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Debates about migration often converge around such notions as “migration crisis” and “economic burden”. This convergence frequently results in the humanitarian articulation of policies of containment and border control, and in the couching of restrictions on refugees’ protection in rationales about receiving states’ economic crises. Louise Waite, Gary Craig, Hannah Lewis and Klara Skrivankova’s edited volume, instead, importantly focuses our attention on the process of *migrant labor exploitation*, illuminating the

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predatory economy whereby receiving states' industries *profit from migrants' and refugees' presence* by employing them in conditions of neo-slavery.

Their book documents the violence that underpins the process of migrant labor exploitation in its global reach, situated heterogeneity, and structural specificity. Arguing that hyper-exploitation is a global phenomenon—though deeply embedded in the economies of the so-called global North—*Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants* shows that the exploitation of migrant labor is at the heart of the production of value in neoliberal economies and that the politics of visas and statuses produces migrants as a precarious, deportable and, hence, highly exploitable labor-force.

As scholarly debates have importantly focused on border-deaths in these past few years, *Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Migrants* persuasively brings attention to the border violence that keeps following migrants as their receiving countries' economies predatorily profit from their labor.

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Glenda Garelli
Queen Mary University of London
glenda.garelli@gmail.com

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