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The Strategy of Flight:
Problematizing the Figure of Trafficking

Trafficking as a Total Narrative

In Buenos Aires during 2015, after a tragic fire in a textile workshop in which two children—the children of Bolivian textile workers—died, the issue of migrant labor garnered a large amount of media attention and was quickly labeled as another case of “slave labor.” I point to one scene to show how it worked: When the father of the dead children was interviewed on television, he said that he had come to Argentina by his own means. At the same moment he was saying that, the news ticker read: “They tricked him into coming.”

That mismatch was not accidental or strange. Rather, it reveals the constant impossibility of hearing what Bolivian workers say, even when they say it simply and clearly. This problematization does not deny that there are extreme situations. The question is why only some of these cases are turned into the truth of the phenomenon and are proposed in the media as the indisputable totalization of a reality that is much more varied and complex and that would require bringing other elements of analysis and comprehension into play.¹

Such notions of deception are what allows the media to classify these workers as “slaves,” a

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name that is repeated, in the media and by many advocacy organizations, to generically account for the conditions of exploitation that sustain the lowest level of the textile industry, one of the strongest sectors in Argentina over the past decade. Considering them slaves is a quick formula: it confirms that they do not act on their own or that they lack rationality or do not consider the risks of migration. The discursive recourse to the term *slaves* quickly shifts to another: they are perceived almost as *savages*. Thus it is argued that they do what they do because of “lack of education” or “ancestral customs”: these are two aspects of the paternalistic and culturalist argument that circulates widely in the media and in everyday conversations.

The effect of the media’s “discovery” of migrant workers conforms with the idea of deception and trafficking: it emphasizes that they are almost *invisible*, that they live and work in the city in “black holes” called clandestine workshops, and that they only come to light through tragedies. The media also say that the state lacks “inspection intelligence.” However, means of rendering the situation visible ignore the production of concrete, material, and immaterial space, where these migrant trajectories unfold under the open sky, where they are interconnected with the city’s everyday functioning and are a central part of its social and productive dynamism. To address this counterpoint, I propose two lines of analysis: (1) the problem of the production of spaces as a privileged perspective on migration in Latin America and (2) the role of popular economies in that production of space.

This analysis prompts a series of questions: How does the production of spaces connect to movements and struggles of migration work? Can such spaces be said to express diverse points of synthesis between the “mobility and restriction” of the labor force? How do the logistics and infrastructure of migration imply, require, or go hand in hand with a reconceptualization of popular economies? Is it from this point of view that the notion of a popular infrastructure could function as a perspective that would be opposed to the conceptual framework of trafficking?

Methodological Approach and Political Context

In Latin America, I have worked with different comrades to promote a discussion about the autonomy of migration as a perspective. We discussed it, for example, in the international seminar “Migration and Living Labor in Global Capitalism,” coordinated by Amarela Varela, Blanca Cordero, and Sandro Mezzadra at the University of Puebla, Mexico, at the end of 2015. We are interested in testing the hypothesis, rather than composing a strict line

of interpretation. Precisely because the very notion of autonomy intersects with migration as labor power and vital potency, it allows for combining all complexities, wrinkles, and nuances of the term. More specifically, autonomy is put to the test here, productively taken to its limits, and, above all, it is removed from any idyllic or liberal perspective.

In a similar sense, the arguments developed here need to go beyond the borders of migration studies, to discuss, more broadly, what is understood by *production of subjectivity*. With this goal, I organize the text as follows: First I seek to counter the figure of trafficking with that of the autonomy of migration, understanding autonomy from a point of view that brings together the desire to travel and expectations of popular progress with contemporary dynamics of exploitation. In this way, I attempt to show how the perspective of trafficking, which constructs the figure of the migrant as the perfect victim, moralizes migrants' action, while legitimizing the inexorably paternalistic work of *savior*-type organizations, funding streams, and rhetoric. To critique such a focus, I make a second counterpoint: I account for the infrastructure and logistics that organize mobility beyond the idea of the figures of "traffickers" and "slaves," generalized by the all-encompassing narrative of human trafficking. To the contrary, I inscribe these logistics within spatial dynamics that are connected to the popular economies of Latin American metropolises, which migration fundamentally energizes, constituting a singular terrain of encounter and misencounter between labor power and capital.²

Thinking about popular economies as sustained by the infrastructure that makes up the materiality of subaltern networks—which simultaneously reveals autonomous forms and brutal modes of exploitation—also allows for recognizing some of their main features: the role of the border, indebtedness and financialization in general, intermediaries, and the political management of clandestinity and invisibility. Additionally, I highlight several features that stand out in the legal perspective rooted in the notion of trafficking. In the attempt to legislate that figure, two interesting problems are revealed: the difficulty of *measuring* exploitation in order to be able to characterize it as "criminal" and the risk of *criminalizing* all behaviors that do not fit the pattern of victimization. Although this may seem like a detour, it is not; therefore, I also dwell on the argument that seeks to "ethnicize" or "culturalize" affinities between neoliberalism and migration from the Andean region. Precisely because a certain legal classification of exploitation is insufficient outside the figure of trafficking, this other form of displacement and mystification of the category of labor power seems to remain relevant. This line of

argument also raises a debate about neoliberalism's origins in the region, meaning a dispute over the subjectivity of popular sectors and its expression in informal and nonwage economies. Finally, based on a reading of subaltern desires for prosperity I synthesize a series of questions about the relationships between a specific type of migrant calculation that is not fully subsumed into neoliberal rationality (in any case, we would have to think about how it defies traditional categories, such as class interest!) and its articulation with the way that the frontiers of value production extract dynamism and pursue their expansion.

I also want to clarify that some of the discussions in this text were developed in the heat of assemblies called in 2015 in the self-managed space La Cazona de Flores, where we launched a campaign to *take the popular and migrant economy out of the ghetto* as a response to its criminalization and victimization (these two phases are not contradictory, as I show below) that took place in the wake of a deadly fire in a textile workshop. A few months later, our space was closed by the Buenos Aires city government, which argued that the space was operating as a "clandestine hotel," a complaint filed by some neighbors who had thus translated the quantity of migrants that circulated through the Cazona. This episode must be seen to anticipate the racist politics promoted by the government of Mauricio Macri, who was elected president in 2015, after serving two consecutive terms as mayor of Buenos Aires. Macri, credited with establishing the region's first migrant detention center in 2016 (even if it is not functioning), issued a reactionary modification of the immigration law by presidential decree.

In response to this policy, the first migrant strike in Argentina was carried out on March 30, 2017. It was not a random date but the anniversary of a fire in a workshop that eleven years earlier had claimed various lives and initiated a public debate about the migrant question, and now it has been transformed into a day of memory and struggle. The protest built on a degree of resonance with the International Women's Strike on March 8, in which participating migrant collectives made visible common elements between female and migrant labor and denounced state violence. Women and migrants have traditionally been displaced from the *formal* map of labor, and by appropriating this practice of the strike from the organized labor movement, they demonstrate that they are capable of making a concrete heterogeneity visible and doing so in a way that confronts (and not only diagnoses) current forms of exploitation. A nonlinear precedent to this moment can be found in the movement of the unemployed that emerged around 2001 (here

there is a specific reference to the notion of *crisis*). That movement arose through the insurrection in the streets of another invisible economy, one with a radical capacity for questioning work itself, challenging the work ethic as well as the very centrality of work with respect to life, and appropriating another traditional tool—the picket (no longer of the factory but of the highway). That experience was then articulated with others (from barter clubs to recuperated factories and neighborhood assemblies), forming a new type of popular protagonism (see *Colectivo Situaciones* 2012).

However, it is noteworthy that in that previous cycle of struggles women's protagonism was not understood in a feminist register, nor did the reality of migrants appear as a possible vector for political radicalization. Today the struggle of women's movements expresses a transversal capacity for connecting different planes, from neighborhood life to precarious work, from male violence to nonrecognized care work, from community organization to struggles against dispossession. Women's movements connect that broader conflict with the question of mobility, with the multifarious attempts to govern it, but also with its insurgent and disobedient power.

While at the beginning of the century neither migrants nor women emerged as paradigmatic figures in the narrative of struggles and resistance, today that has changed. It is important to understand to what extent that has to do with their political experiences of having questioned the subjective figures that reduce them to entrepreneurs of themselves (whether failed or successful) or mere victims (either enslaved or saved).

Trafficking as Symptom

The legal figure of “human trafficking” recurs as a schema for understanding migration as always being forced. However, not only is it effective in proposing a regulatory framework, but it is also progressively gaining strength in the media discourse and public imagination.

In the case of Bolivian migrants to Argentina, who usually arrive with the plan of working in the textile or agricultural sectors, this figure has been revealed as a term with multiple uses. However, it seems to negate the possibility of an analysis in two other ways, in terms of, first, the autonomy of migration and, second, the intertwining between autonomy and the complex web of labor exploitation, in which a series of (communitarian, territorial, political) elements are combined that—hypothetically—make it impossible to “measure” in labor terms what is at stake in these migrant trajectories.

However, the notion of trafficking—and this is my second hypothesis—leads to underestimating or to misunderstanding the roles of a figure that becomes increasingly central as it proliferates. I am referring to the intermediaries who organize a true logistics of transportation, recruitment, and contact with transnational segments of productive chains, shaping a fundamental mediation of the processes of “encounter” between labor and capital.

This point of view does not ignore the moments of coercion, violence, and exploitation in analyzing migration. However, if we consider the “migration infrastructure” identified by Xiang Biao and Johan Lindquist (2014), we can see the negotiation and assemblage implied by taking into account its multiple dimensions (commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian, and social) and, particularly, “the explanatory power of migrant networks” (S130) as part of such social infrastructure.³ From this perspective, migration stands out as a “multitude of activities, practices, and technologies that must be considered in specific contexts” (S143), which, without downplaying the fundamental role of violence, does not position it as a totalizing narrative and also allows for critically seeing why it does function in such a way in the discourse about “trafficking.”

Opening up the map of this process, with special emphasis on the subjective dynamics at play with *each* dimension, enables a view of migration as a complex social process, capable of taking into account the materiality of “infrastructure,” of its uses and appropriations, and, at the same time, how a submerged and subordinated form of work is consolidated.

In emphasizing the subjective dimension, I concentrate on two issues: one is a critique of the reduction of migrants to mere victims and the other, which seems to be the symmetrical opposite of the victim, is the figure of the migrant as the perfect entrepreneur of the self. Both are connected to a “neoliberal” reading of migration but also to a certain conception of neoliberalism that I seek to challenge since it erases any possibility of problematizing the ways that neoliberalism is also appropriated, combated, and reorganized “from below” (Gago 2017).

Starting with these assumptions, I aim to think about what Sandro Mezzadra (2015b) has pointed to as the “peculiar forms” that the historical tension in capitalism “between the mobility and restriction” of the labor force takes today. Particularly, I want to pose a counterpoint that conceptualizes the logistics and infrastructure of migration under a perspective that would be opposed to the conceptual framework of trafficking. It seems that logistics becomes a fundamental problem, which allows for thinking about the complexity of transit, the organization of labor, and other aspects that are crucial

to the workforce (from housing to health care), without avoiding an analysis of exploitation (and its brutal forms) but also without abstracting or negating desires for progress, including calculations of well-being and sacrifice. On this point, I seek to account for how migration is shown as a “powerful force of the heterogenization of the composition of living labor” (Mezzadra 2015b).

Along this line, I argue that it is necessary to inscribe these problematizations in the dynamic of popular economies that are sustained, to a large extent, by these migrant trajectories and that articulate concrete spaces for thinking about their tensions in respect to the social appropriation of wealth. Additionally, based on these, we can analyze the reconfigurations of the materiality of space and connect these mutations to the financial dynamic.

Autonomy and Exploitation

The support networks for deserters during the Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia (1932–35) produced, in practice, an entire *infrastructure to legitimate desertion* and made use of the networks of illegal commerce and contraband, combining historically commercial and political channels (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015). In fact, the first Bolivian organization in Argentina was formed in 1933 and was created by “militants in exile and deserters of the Chaco War” (Santillo 2001: 5). Women’s unions, marked by high levels of anarchism and political experimentation, also flourished in Bolivia during this period (Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui 2014).

This image, in which war, resistance, and death intersect with the need for a network of escape that uses varied resources and flows, perhaps functions to relieve a certain “nomadic pressure,” as Félix Guattari (2015) refers to it (in his case denoting migration from the Third World to rich countries), or, better, to constantly remake the “right to escape,” as Mezzadra (2004) has constructed it. In any case, they are movements that make a political dimension of liberty into a material “tension toward autonomy” (as Laurent Bove [2014: 248] writes, paraphrasing Spinoza).

Since that border war, migration routes from Bolivia to Argentina are now inseparable from an originary conflict—the neoliberal exiles, as Mujeres Creando (2004) refers to them—and a mixture of commercial, labor, and also political circuits that put a specific *infrastructure* in place for initiating those movements, making them possible, attempting to minimize the risks, and holding on to a vital wager.

I am interested in highlighting how these movements from below allow us to see not only the formation of labor power as a commodity but also the

conflicting nature of that process. Rather than seeing it as only a conceptual paradox, we are able to *simultaneously* rethink the autonomy of migration *and* how it intersects with a complex web of labor exploitation in which a series of (communitarian, territorial, and political) elements are combined in this changing and problematic reality. I propose that we consider these as key elements of the impossibility of “measuring” in labor terms what is at stake in these migrant trajectories.

This dual dynamic is erased under the perspective of trafficking (which is replicated beyond the legal sphere in the media and the public imagination), but it is also negated when the migrant impulse is only analyzed as an adaptation to the requirements of the mobility of capital and merely bourgeois aspirations to *progress*.

From a perspective that goes beyond the binary opposition between deceived victims and natural-born micro-entrepreneurs with ancestral predispositions toward neoliberalism, the definitions of these migrant trajectories that are connected with a fundamental political problem are also at stake. Mezzadra, in his reading of Marx, proposes following the thread of the “production of subjectivity.” This question leads to a genealogy of the concept of the subject, situated within a sort of double pincer: he refers at the same time to the moment of *subjectivation* and to the moment of *subjection* and simultaneously to the *individual* and the *social* dimensions (Mezzadra 2015: 27). He elaborates:

And it is based on this “ontological” innovation that Marx acquires a new perspective on politics, now embodied in the analysis of the productive power [*potencia*] of men—and women!—of the conflicts that traverse them, and the limits that materially oppress them—to the point of separating them from the “Thing itself,” from the “cause” or the “common issue.” Here a call is made for renewing materialism to the extent that it takes seriously the “anti-idealist function” of praxis. (40)

This anti-idealist orientation is what I am interested in highlighting in counterpoint to what we could call a moral perspective, which also underlies the discourse on human trafficking and its projection onto the global agenda. But, at the same time, it is a type of materialism that can take up the calculation of expectations and desire in a radical way, in the sense of its capacity to energize and endure a series of sacrifices, risks, and situations of extremely intense exploitation, without flattening that calculation in purely neoliberal terms.

Popular Economies as Infrastructure

The infrastructure of migration, if we take into account the five dimensions (commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian, and social) that Xiang and Lindquist (2014) propose as “logics of operation,” refers less to an issue of increasingly specific mediation than to a “combined and uneven development,” to refer ironically to the Third Worldist formula, of increasingly *mottled* spaces, where the limits between dimensions are blurred time and time again.

A series of internal features of the web connect migration and the experience of dealing with the mobility of popular economies. Projected onto a sequence of political dynamics of struggle, they serve as a genealogy of popular economies, in which “a web of subjectivity, of modes of life, and of material infrastructure has been formed that escapes both from the imaginaries and the languages of traditional ‘social movements,’ as well as from the ‘development’ and ‘social inclusion’ policies that are widespread in the region” (Gago and Mezzadra 2015). Here I point to some of these features, primarily in terms of a research plan:

1. *Borders and the dynamic of expulsion.* Saskia Sassen (2014) refers to both the global South and the global North as being in a phase of contemporary capitalism that began in the 1980s. It is characterized by a restructuring of capitalism based on the violent contraction of formal economies and a new “geography of extraction,” which combines technological innovations, the use of natural resources, and the fundamental role of finance (“predatory formation”). Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2015) emphasize the extractive operations of finance as a key part of the displacement and continuous reworking of the very border between incorporation and expulsion. Taking these points into account, it is necessary to move forward in the analysis of the new extractive mechanisms that take advantage of migrant dynamism and that are articulated with popular economies.
2. *The role of debt as the driving force and projection of financial exploitation.* Debt funds the migrant’s journey and their insertion into the labor circuit that at first uses and exploits this indebtedness as part of the *informal contract*. Currently, this system of debt connects and expands, but it also changes form, through formal and informal financial circuits that play a key role in articulating popular economies with a new dynamic of “financial exploitation” (Gago 2015). In this sense, debt functions as an apparatus of submission and *at the same time* as a tactic of expansion and social

projection of expectations. Along this line, it is necessary to explore this financial dimension of migratory infrastructure as a contested field of the reconfiguration of exploitation

3. *The incorporation, as knowledge that is internal to these economies, of the figures of informal intermediaries.* As a duplication of the structures that make the organization of migration possible, the figures of informal mediation become key players in the web of popular economies that work around the borders of the legal/illegal, formal/informal, and so forth.

For example, the figure of the “contractor” is a key intermediary in both the textile and the agriculture sectors. In fact, contractors are the ones who connect the low and submerged part of these economies with multinational corporations and brands. In the horticultural belt south of the province of Buenos Aires, the contractors are Bolivian transporters, who set the price of bags of agricultural products in a sort of informal and fast tender. Later, exportation is the responsibility of Brazilian transporters, often truck owners, who must contact buyers on the other side of the border on their own accord.

In the case of the textile sector, increasing government inspections (due to the tragedies that have occurred and their political and media repercussions) have had the effect of encouraging workshops to flee to a specific sector of the city: the so-called villas (slums).

The sewing and clothing manufacture workshops are increasingly submerged in the villas for a variety of reasons: labor is abundant; there is an infrastructure of nearly free or very cheap services (primarily electricity) but also community resources (food, care, and security); and, above all, inspections are not conducted in the villas, nor do official entities have the power to enter and take action there.

4. *Production and use of subterranean logistics.* It is clear that the large clothing companies are going to seek this *immersion*, and they decidedly exploit it, since it is a way of ensuring that there will not be inspections and raids and thus guaranteeing that they will not lose merchandise (through seizure or confiscation), which could lead to losses of value not so much for the merchandise itself but for the delay in seasonal production. This growing immersion of production in the villas, however, complicates the issue of logistics: Who are the intermediaries who are willing to go there, who can negotiate with local authorities, and particularly with drug dealers, to ensure the passage of textile merchandise through those narrow corridors? This situation creates a new class of intermediaries, who, unlike those who were valued for having contacts with producers, are now valued for being able to move safely within the villas. To carry out that operation,

they need not only a vehicle but something more important: to be known in the villas and able to contact the territorial powers. It would appear to be *a type of logistics that increasingly operates on a subterranean level*, in the sense that it ensures a clandestinity for the brand, which is increasingly difficult to achieve outside those special areas that the villas have become. However, it is a hypervisible and connected clandestinity, if looked at from the perspective of the functioning of popular economies.

I return to the question of thinking about, from the point of view of the production of Latin American spaces, that heterogeneity in which the villa coexists as a highly productive space for major brands (in Argentina) in connection with the informal real estate market driven by popular savings as a guarantee of retirement incomes that the state won't provide (Colombia [Gago, Polanco, and Giraldo 2016]) and the promotion of "special economic zones" (Venezuela [MIPPCOEXIN 2016]). For their part, investigators of the popular economy in Bolivia speak of the "country dimension" (Tassi et al. 2013: 125) that is articulated in popular economies and that "generate[s] chains of activities and markets that have managed to expand into the neighborhoods, regions, and territories neglected by the official enclave economy and to protect themselves from the hindering effects of both official institutions and transnational capital."

From this point of view, however, there is no distance from the state, but rather the institutions of government resort to those networks to strengthen themselves on the border and to reach Chinese business (Tassi, Hinojosa, and Canaviri 2015). It is the relation with small Chinese businesses that allows for the generation of importation networks that include travel and the possibility of specific orders in the manufacturing of certain products according to local uses and tastes. In any case, they refer to different spatialities than those implied by forced displacement and trafficking, which have a common element: they are movements in which the nonvoluntary character is constitutive of the figure, both juridically and subjectively.

The Juridical Limits

This rapid *mapping* of a series of spaces allows a first critical approach to the issue of migrant subjectivity in popular economies, which shifts the one-dimensional view of migration away from that of trafficking and forced migration.

The terminology of slavery—which is the extreme end of that involuntary condition—in speaking about migrant workers, is organized by and

circulated in the media and in public discourse. However, this structuring of perception is backed by more complex legal frameworks that refer to a classification of “human trafficking” when dealing with litigation. A trafficking law was passed in Argentina in 2008, reflecting the strong influence of the global agenda.⁴ The pressure from the US State Department, the international specialists invited to elegant conferences, and the well-oiled connection between the leaders of social organizations, US officials, and the Vatican are unavoidable points in the analysis. And, above all, this marks a dimension onto which the very terminology of “human trafficking” is projected as a key link in the type of moralization and victimization of subjects that always considers them “victims” to be saved or rescued.

What are the repercussions of this impulse in legal terms? From a report published by the Argentinean Attorney General’s Office as a “guide of procedures and criteria for detecting and investigating trafficking with the objective of labor exploitation,” I highlight some interesting points (UFASE [Unidad de Asistencia para la Investigación Secuestros Extorsivos y Trata de Personas] 2011):

1. The process of trafficking is defined by the following actions: “recruitment, transportation, and reception of the victim” (5). It’s about procedures that involve clear logistical dimensions, but that status changes if the subjects are understood only as “victims” of those actions.
2. There are permanent blurred zones, which are accentuated when they are made visible as apparatuses of *debt*. A frequently cited report by the International Labour Office (2005: 21) titled “A Global Alliance against Forced Labour” highlights the *methodological* problem: “A methodology to this effect has not yet been clearly established and agreed upon by the various stakeholders concerned. It remains crucial to determine whether workers are somehow forced to work by virtue of the bond or debt to their employer, or are merely poorly paid or otherwise exploited but nevertheless free to leave their employment. Bonded labour was expansively interpreted by the Indian Supreme Court in 1982 as non-payment of the minimum wage.” Debt, bad payment, or anomalous forms of exploitation attempt, without success, to delimit a criminal situation.
3. The mismatch between the provision of services and the “lack of proportion in the remuneration” makes it so that the “exact parameters of the crime remain unquantified,” the Argentine report indicates (2011: 8). It is very difficult, in regulations, to find elements that allow for determining “criminal exploitation”: “The greatest difficulty, as we have seen, is that the boundary between the informal segment and that of criminal abuse unfor-

tunately has a margin of consideration that is sometimes too broad" (9). It is clearly about the impossibility of establishing clear boundaries between spaces that are dynamic, mobile, and difficult to contain, such as those populated by informality and so-called abuse.

4. There are three variables of analysis: how much time a worker must labor (workday length); what is the remuneration for that work (wage); and how the worker is treated (context). These are presented as criteria for establishing parameters according to the activity and corresponding regulations (taking into account the legal minimum wage and labor agreements in each sector). The difficulty indicated lies in the "objective parameters of valorization" (10), in addition to the fact that within the illegal sector there is no precise border between forced labor and working under the table. In the official report, an attempt is made to objectively compute those two first points to find a "coefficient of abuse" (12).
5. For judges to "apply" these regulations, a table was drawn up that recognizes a *system of calculation (coefficient of exploitation)*, always clarifying its relative character: "Of course, it is always a reference, an indicator, that must be complemented with data about the context. The coefficient could be less and even so there could still be criminal exploitation" (13). The legal officers will be responsible for interpreting the "context indicators" since "they are not quantifiable" (13). And they depend on the victim's declarations (induced indebtedness, withholding and nonpayment of wages, tricks or false promises about the type and conditions of work, withholding identity documents or personal effects, physical confinement or restrictions on leaving the workplace, lack of communication with the imposed or induced surroundings, lack of hygiene facilities, and inadequate food or overcrowded housing, psychological coercion [threats], and physical violence). The elements of the rubric are (a) table for calculating the c.a. coefficient of abuse over the monthly salary and (b) table for calculating the coefficient of abuse over the payment per piece.

The sectors for which the exercises are carried out are the emblematic ones that bring together migrant labor and high levels of exploitation: textile workshops, agriculture, mining, construction, bakeries, steel manufacturing, wine making, yerba mate, cotton, olives, potatoes, grains, onions, garlic, and strawberries.⁵ The report states: "Depending on item rubric, the table can be designed to calculate the coefficient of abuse in relation to the monthly salary or the piecework payment (only the cotton pickers or olive harvesters are done this way)" (27).

6. The ambiguity of “freedom of movement” in opposition to confinement is also clear. Therefore, “migrant vulnerability” in these productive sectors requires the involvement of the penal dimension beyond the intervention of other branches of the law (labor, administrative) or of public administration (municipal, immigration).

I remark on these points to *problematize* the following:

1. The difficulty of legally classifying labor situations where the migrant dimension complicates the schema due to the intrinsic difficulty of the measurement criteria and the objectification of criminal exploitation faced with economies that make that lack of definition their constitutive feature
2. The language and categorization of trafficking as an effect of the global agenda that, however, in many cases, criminalizes the migrant subjective practices and fails to problematize the framework of international agencies that (as happens with sex work) have a strong political imprint on this way of apparently “neutralizing” the issue
3. The force of the media that reinforces the legal vocabulary (in an act of “abolitionist morality”) and that, in this way, allows for always speaking of *others* and producing contact zones between a whole typology of workers, especially manual laborers and sex workers
4. The possibility of recognizing *other modes of calculation* that complicate the unilateral view of the “coefficient of abuse” while also recognizing contemporary forms of exploitation
5. The impossibility of understanding violence in terms of a genealogy in which domestic space is a key site

What is the meaning of the concept of exploitation in the juridical production of and discourse on trafficking? On the one hand, it attempts to be descriptive based on a question of a measurement that is shown to be almost unattainable and uncountable, primarily because it clashes with a restrictive analysis of those same conditions of how these modes of work are involved in popular economies. On the other hand, it basically becomes a legal concept, which leaves out the double dynamic of which I spoke at the beginning between the autonomy of migration and the concrete conditions of exploitation.

Archaic Neoliberalism

A second critical approach to the issue of migrant subjectivity in popular economies has to do with how these economies are conceptualized, with an imprint that creates a link between ethnic criteria and liberal affinities.

According to my hypothesis, this debate is connected to how the genealogy of neoliberalism in the region is traced and to the centrality of mobility as a key resource for a type of informality that would intrinsically and necessarily produce capitalist subject figures.

This perspective arises, for example, with the presumption of an “Aymara liberalism of the Andean highlands” (Golte and León Gabriel 2014), in which migrants would only be motivated by “ideals of social ascent via the accumulation of material goods through its insertion in the market” (14). This “highlands cosmivision” developed in an investigation about Peru (even if it also extended to Bolivian zones) would favor “primitive accumulation” and would demonstrate a similarity “with what Weber called the Protestant ethic” (31). This argument is mobilized against the Left’s “political fantasies” that, for Jürgen Golte and Doris León Gabriel, is projected onto migrant subjects and the popular sectors. The ideal of social ascent and “distance” in respect to the state confirms “imaginaries related to liberalism” (13) in populations of indigenous origin that today have become popular and migrant sectors.

Is this a *remake* of Hernando de Soto’s celebrated thesis? It is not by accident that this discussion takes on this particular characteristic in Peru. Just as Michel Foucault (2008) concentrated on tracing the origins of neoliberalism in Germany and the United States, it is important to recognize Peru as another privileged scene: in 1979 Friedrich von Hayek attended a colloquium there; a few years later Milton Friedman was the invited speaker. Both global theorists and leaders of neoliberalism were invited by De Soto. The original title of what would become a regional best seller is *El otro sendero: La revolución informal (The Other Path: The Informal Revolution)* (De Soto 1986). There is a double reference in the title: to the informal economy and to the antagonism with the armed group the Shining Path.⁶ One of De Soto’s fundamental theses builds on these references: the informal economy sustained by migration is a path to development for Latin American countries due to its antistatist streak, which is capable of evading a type of “mercantilist” regulation of political power, and because of its industrious and pacific (antiguerrilla) character.

Development, informality, and migration are amalgamated in a compatible way early on in liberal reasoning, in opposition to the Cepalian argument according to which development would eliminate informality (CEPAL is the Spanish version of the acronym ECLAC, which stands for the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean). The history of Peru is a singular case that illustrates a problematic relation in the region from the 1970s to the present: neoliberalism, development, state intervention, and

forms of proletarianization that escape the canons of industrialization. De Soto's book perhaps demonstrates an exercise in the "normalization" of informality, to use Michael Denning's (2010) phrase: an attempt to stop considering it as a *problem*, as it would be in the diagram of the developmentalist project of that time—where informality was, undoubtedly, the dark side of an incomplete modernization. The shift toward a neoliberal perspective would then consist in aiming against the state and positioning the informal economy and its agents as the victims of state regulationism or political arbitrariness.

Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian intellectual who wrote the prologue to De Soto's book and reviewed it for the *New York Times Magazine*—and launched his campaign for president four years after that—summarized De Soto's thesis as follows: "In countries such as Peru, the problem is not the informal economy but the state" (Vargas Llosa 1986: xviii). Vargas Llosa lost the elections in which he wagered on developing some of the arguments opened up by the investigations carried out by De Soto's Institute for Liberty and Democracy.⁷ He was defeated by the person who later radicalized neoliberalism in Peru and for whom De Soto himself wrote several speeches: Alberto Fujimori. Fujimori became the representative of informality and of the success of migrant effort. And he proposed constructing a new state based on the market—what De Soto was looking for—as a way of constructing a new society founded on the legitimacy of the market (as Foucault [2008] recounts in what occurred in Germany).

De Soto's question about the potential of informal economies, as Romeo Grompone (1990) pointed out at the time, coincided with the dissolution of the subject of the worker that the Marxist Left was grappling with. During that time, a song by Los Shapis was popular, and its lyrics were part of the landscape: "I am a street vendor, I am a proletarian."⁸ It was an attempt to enact a transition capable of including and also redefining the subject of the worker (Adrianzén 2010). De Soto, however, was already betting on the microentrepreneurial logic he perceived as an empirical resistance to state corruption, and, at the same time, he sought to show that the popular classes could be understood on the basis of one desire: the desire for private property. This was the key concept that would allow for reading the drive to commerce, transportation, and housing as starting from the new needs determined by the migrant contingents to the city. And that would drive an infrastructure of the poor and for the poor that was capable of providing homes, mobility, and work beyond the state and beyond legal work. The informal workers are an "army of victims," Vargas Llosa (1986: xxvi) says, those who refute the

socialist and statist imaginary of the Left: they only want “genuine democracy and authentic freedom.”

Production of Space by Popular Economies

Hence a controversy emerges: What is the role of the logistics and infrastructure of mobility within popular economies? I am interested in outlining a point of view that also allows for moving toward a reconceptualization of popular economies, especially from the perspective of the production of spaces, and of migration understood at the intersection between autonomy and exploitation. The strength of that intersection enables us to explore a notion of exploitation that goes beyond what trafficking legislation attempts to classify and measure.

Theorizing the reconfiguration of African cities, AbdouMaliq Simone (2015: 133) projects “possibilities of becoming urban” linked to “highly mobile social formations,” which “emphasize the construction of *multiple spaces of operation* that embody a wide range of tactical skills oriented toward maximizing economic opportunities through transversal articulations throughout unequal territories and power arrangements” (emphasis added). This perspective is also used to question notions of growth and development and to emphasize “the ways in which said economies and activities can act as a platform for the creation of a very distinct type of sustainable urban configuration that is yet unknown” (140).

I find it interesting that in this way of understanding forms of urban production from the perspective of informal economies, the popular economy is shown as (1) a way of making life in the city possible and affordable, (2) developing its own know-how, and (3) capable of creating articulations with the global economy. This is *simultaneously* produced by mechanisms of hyper-exploitation and also by the elimination of formal intermediaries in favor of a new type of infrastructure of mediation. The effect is a type of subterranean logistics, which is “officially” clandestine yet highly visible (glossing over Simone’s characterization of economic agreements in these circuits).

The production of space thus results from heterogeneous combinations from which work, in its multiple forms and guided by the “subaltern ingenuity” (as Arturo Escobar [2016] calls it), is reinvented under strategies ranging from self-management to counterfeiting, from reselling to family microenterprises, which are traversed by velocities and routes of migration. Together these economies are translated into forms of power capable of negotiating with institutions for resources and recognition, while at the

same time consolidating a submerged and subordinated form of work. They are clearly realistic, recognizing that the wage is no longer what guarantees rights and that use of the city depends on constantly taking advantage of real estate, economic, labor, and social opportunities that dynamize the forms of exploitation, even with novel articulations “from below.”

Problems of Duration and Stabilization

The spatial configuration becomes relevant as it materializes a dimension that allows for seeing dynamics of transformation and stabilization at the same time. The conquest of time/space becomes fundamental for what we can call, paraphrasing Bove (2014), the *strategic conatus*: collective dynamisms that assemble all types of resources to persevere in their being and, in that impulse, also cling on to a mode of habitus, that is, of customs that are even translated into fidelity to certain institutions. This relationship between conatus and habitus—no longer as opposites but as ways of relating to time and duration—provides a schema of perseverance that is not teleological. Additionally, I think that it is what allows for simultaneously thinking about *freedom* in a Spinozist sense as the “tendency toward innovation” and as the “tension toward autonomy” of the social body (as I said at the beginning) while also raising the issue of obedience (beyond the legal figure of “reduction to servitude” with which trafficking is usually associated).

How can the conatus as perseverance be closely related to the notion of habitus? It cannot be related to the habitus in the Bourdieuan sense of the stabilization of customs rooted in a predetermined sociability but only in the sense of “the power of the set of associative dynamisms by which the very aptitude of the collective body is constituted, corresponding to its singular essence that is the power of the multitude” (2014: 249). Habitus understood in this way highlights precisely the point that I am interested in: social dynamism.

That dynamism, however, does not per se imply a tendentially revolutionary force as a counterpoint to the conservative function that is often emphasized with the notion of habitus. Rather, it illuminates a fundamental political ambivalence because it belongs to the nucleus of freedom: the tension between instability and fidelity. Habitus, connected to the conatus in this way, has to do with a substantial idea of movement and rest that underpins this collective dynamism. Two key issues mark that *rhythm*: the relation between time (the source of inertia and conservatism, of ruptures and discontinuities [2014: 244]) and customs, or *consuetudines* (“the point of view of a people’s customs”), that are neither fixed nor closed (237).

In their production of space-time, migrant conflicts and struggles precisely contract that pair of *conatus-habitus*, projecting what Bove calls a *schematizing imagination*. According to this detailed interpretation of Spinoza, a schematizing imagination is capable not only of a political constitution in general but also of a “certain juridical-political organization” (245).⁹

How to Calculate the Right to Escape

Here I propose some elements for critiquing the one-dimensionality of trafficking discourse as a rationality that constructs migrants as both passive and victimized, under a global policy bias that needs to be problematized. A fundamental element of this project lies in recognizing the circuits of the popular economy as productive spaces in which migration plays a central role. Based on these economies, I propose, it is possible to think about violence, exploitation, and *also* the autonomy that fuels the drive to migrate. They also articulate, due to their complex transnational organization, a series of logistical and infrastructural dimensions that make mobility possible, at the same time as they reveal a nonlinear dynamic of “encounter” between capital and labor.

A decomposition of those logistical dimensions allows us to recognize concrete procedures and, above all, to single out how tactics and negotiations around the “right to escape” are being reconfigured. In this way, the perspective of the production of subjectivity that emerges from the intersection of migration and popular economies enables going beyond the strictly neoliberal figures with which migrant calculation is projected.

Calculation, however, is a fundamental issue and allows for a critique of its merely juridical meaning (e.g., the coefficient of abuse) and for the inclusion of other rationalities that take a nonmoralizing approach to migrant subjectivities. Problematizing “neoliberalism from below” (Gago 2017) from the perspective of practices of mobility allows for recognizing a type of vitalist pragmatics that deploys a calculation in which a rationality grounded on the desire for personal and family progress is superimposed onto a repertoire of collective and even community practices. Additionally, this impulse is projected as an urban calculation, organizing a series of variegated spaces that today turn Latin American metropolises into places where laboring classes are recomposed, varied, and disputed. A force capable of constructing poststatist urban infrastructure and capable of making popular life more affordable and expansive is initiated in these metropolises.

How does rethinking the concept of exploitation in the way proposed above enable us to take seriously the materialism of “neoliberalism from below” at the same time as it opens up a theoretical and political space for its critique?

Border and Valorization

Gilles Deleuze (2005: 99), when speaking of the axiomatic of capital, writes: I always return to Marx’s celebrated text on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The basis of those texts consists in saying that, in capitalism, as automation progresses—linked to its own machinic development—human labor becomes increasingly more adjacent to the machine. Then, how can one maintain that capitalism relies on human surplus value extracted from the flow of human labor, when it seems that in the machinic development of at least certain zones of capitalism—where human labor is increasingly adjacent to the machine, which is increasingly productive—human surplus value tends to increasingly decline? Deleuze thus makes his relationship with the Marx of the *Grundrisse* explicit.

This *machinic surplus value* is a product of the relationship between the “market flow” and the “flow of innovation,” and it operates alongside *human surplus value* (capital flow / labor flow) and *financial surplus value* (financing flow / profit flow) (101). The language of flows (as an effect of decodifying deterritorializations) is not metaphorical, Deleuze warns. He refers to “physical-economic” processes that turn the “unproductive sterile body” of money into something *more* (103). The “topography of migrant capital” (103) that moves in the short term and at a rapid speed has its parallel and its limit, the philosopher assures, in the schizophrenic migrations of characters such as those of Samuel Beckett.

Migration becomes the attempt to conjure the limit. On the part of capital, this is done through the expansion of scales and by crossing the borders of valorization. For this reason, capital must first internalize the limit—which is a dimension of the immanence operating in the differential relationship between flows, containing them, codifying them, recuperating them in their escape toward the outside. The role of the axiomatic, Deleuze says, is “to compensate for the limit, return things to their place” (105), but in that operation, capital is forced each time into a new expansion.

The “border as method” perspective, as developed by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), precisely exalts the reverse of that plot: also drawing on the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, they identify contemporary processes of *intensifica-*

tion, diversification, and heterogenization of labor (88) as vectors of a geography of struggle in which the material moment of the intensive and extensive expansion of the machine of exploitation is once and again destabilized, confronted, and carried precisely to its limit. The “sovereign machine of governmentality” that Mezzadra and Neilson propose for thinking about the process of the governmentalization of the border and the management of migration combines the Foucauldian lexicon with Marx’s call to critique exploitation, at the level of production and circulation, as well as that of legal entities. The point of view is the production of subjectivity based on the premise of its power of radicalization in terms of *overflowing* and the *ability to escape*.

It seems, in conclusion, that this dispute over the border is what I wanted to raise by questioning the narrative of trafficking. But this is only the first step. Displacing that narrative implies opening up the field of migrant subjectivity that combines the impulse for social innovation with calculations that mix obedience and contempt, temporal submission, and wagering on escape.

That movement generates a concrete space-time that is redefining Latin American spatiality to the extent that—and this is the hypothesis underlying this text—we wonder what it means that plebeian popular vitality is incorporated into the categories of political economy at the same time as it sustains new forms of exploitation and defies its norm. The question of the border then becomes central as an unprejudiced perspective for understanding the constant relaunching of the limit of valorization, driven by popular innovation and the capture of capital in an axiomatic always responding to a web of conflicts. In that conflict a concrete dispute arises over the appropriation of social wealth against the “normalization of overexploitation,” which, as Balibar (2016) points out, characterizes capitalism. Its flip sides are the conflicts: the struggles that demonstrate that attempt of normalization as a relationship between unstable forces. In this text, I proposed another way of raising a question that Balibar also poses in respect to Marx’s philosophy: Where, when, and for whom should rationality, productivity, and prosperity be sought? In that multipart question (another way of returning to the modes of exploitation) the Spinozist conatus and the Marxian differential of movement also come together, weaving a new materialism: a “materialism of immanence,” where contradiction functions as an “operator” that includes praxis.

—Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

Notes

- 1 This same debate occurs in the case of the trafficking of women, although with different nuances. I am grateful for the debate with Coordinated Actions Against Human Trafficking (ACCT) in the seminar “Counter-Hegemonic Discourses about Human Trafficking,” Buenos Aires, April–May 2016.
- 2 I develop this argument more fully in my book *Neoliberalism from Below* (Gago 2017).
- 3 Xiang and Lindquist (2014: 5124) develop the concept of “migration infrastructure” based on ethnographic work with “unskilled” migrants to unravel the “process of mediation” that, more than ever, affects migration, and they come to the conclusion that migration is “intensely mediated” today. The five dimensions that they stipulate refer to *commercial* (intermediaries for recruitment); *regulatory* (state apparatuses and processes of documentation and training); *technological* (communication and transportation); *humanitarian* (international agencies and nongovernmental organizations); and *social* (migrant networks). According to Xiang and Lindquist, each dimension indicates “distinct logics of operation rather than discrete domains” (124), but in them the actors leading the process, the forces of orientation, and the strategies and rationalities vary. They do so in such a way that they collide and enter into contradiction, but it is that imbrication that explains the infrastructure. For further development on this debate, I refer to Mezzadra 2015b.
- 4 The republic of Argentina committed itself to combating the crime of human trafficking, enacting Law 26364, Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Its Victims, on April 29, 2008; it, in turn, was modified by Law 26842, enacted on December 27, 2012. The Palermo Protocol, ratified in 2002, had provided the basis for enacting Law 26364 (enabling the incorporation of the crime of human trafficking into the nation’s penal code).
- 5 According to official information, “90% of the cases of trafficking with the purpose of labor exploitation that were detected were identified in agricultural activities or in the manufacturing of textile products” (UFASE 2011: 27).
- 6 The published English translation is titled *The Other Path: The Economic Answer to Terrorism*, making this connection even more explicit.—Trans.
- 7 The relationship between Vargas Llosa and De Soto is punctiliously narrated by Vargas Llosa (1994) himself in his autobiography *El pez en el agua*.
- 8 Musical reference from Hernán Maldonado.
- 9 A reactionary counterpoint of a legal argument of the *habitus-conatus* as submission and obedience can be seen in the recent sentencing in the case of the 2015 textile workshop fire in Buenos Aires. See Gago 2016.

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