

Migratory Capitalism and its Historical Roots: For a Marxist Interpretation of the Bracero Program (1942-1964)

El capitalismo migratorio y sus raíces históricas: por una lectura marxista del Programa Bracero (1942-1964)

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the article is to elaborate the historicity of migratory capitalism that constitutes one of the current facets of capitalism (surveillance, green, finance, health, etc.). To this end, the second objective is a critical reading of the Bracero Program (1942-1964) inspired by the Marxist theoretical-conceptual framework, through the concepts of real abstraction and metabolic rift. Thus, the dialectical method is used, which consists of highlighting tensions and contradictions constituting the implementation of this program (such as the gradual transformation of the metabolism of the peasant subject into an exploitable agricultural laborer and its progressive separation from the terroir) and pointing out the emergence of migrations as a new expression of abstract work (number of employable arms). This is the greatest result of this article that defines the Bracero Program as an important historical milestone in the emergence of migratory capitalism.

Keywords: 1. Bracero Program, 2. migratory capitalism, 3. real abstractions, 4. metabolic rift, 5. Mexico- United States.

RESUMEN

El principal objetivo del artículo es elaborar la historicidad del capitalismo migratorio, que constituye una de las facetas actuales del capital (capitalismo de la vigilancia, verde, financiero, sanitario, etc.). Para ello, se plantea como segundo objetivo una lectura crítica del Programa Bracero (1942-1964), inspirada en el aparato teórico-conceptual marxista, a través de los conceptos de abstracción real y ruptura metabólica. Así, se recurre al método dialéctico para subrayar las tensiones y contradicciones constitutivas de la implementación de dicho programa (como la transformación paulatina del metabolismo del sujeto campesino en jornalero agrícola explotable y su separación progresiva del terruño) y señalar el surgimiento de las migraciones como nueva expresión del trabajo abstracto (cantidad de brazos empleables). El mayor resultado de este artículo radica en que define el Programa Bracero como un hito histórico importante del surgimiento del capitalismo migratorio.

Palabras clave: 1. Programa Bracero, 2. capitalismo migratorio, 3. abstracciones reales 4. ruptura metabólica, 5. México-Estado Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

Migratory capitalism is one of the many facets² of the hegemony of capital, through the transition from capitalist world to world-capitalism (Moore, 2020). It is a far-reaching and profound problem that Schaffhauser (2020, 2022) has begun to document in pioneering papers and articles. In this sense, the Bracero Program appears as a diachrony, essential to understand the early constitution of current migratory capitalism. However, the official narrative posits the existence of said program as a direct contribution from Mexico—that is, from its political authorities and the peasantry—to the United States war effort against the forces of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis beginning in 1942. Through it, the braceros supplemented the war participation of the *boys*,³ both in North Africa and Europe and on the South Pacific front.⁴ As history has it, once the armed conflict ceased, the program would be extended through the signing of several agreements⁵ until it ended officially in 1964 and unofficially in 1967.⁶ Throughout that period, 4 646 199 labor contracts were signed, equivalent to employing around of 3.2 million agricultural workers coming mainly from the states of Michoacán, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, and Jalisco (Schaffhauser, 2009, 2019).

The increasing mechanization of agricultural production, the pressure from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and the trauma caused to public opinion by the road tragedies⁷ in which braceros died (Galarza, 1977), ended up ruling out the extension of those agreements.

In the academic environment (Durand, 2007), the Bracero Program is often deemed an important milestone in the history of international migrations, since it was a massive labor event organized bilaterally based on political, legal, economic, and social criteria. This program was created with the purpose of serving the agro-industrial interests of the United States through the legal hiring of Mexican labor, as well as devising and implementing an institutional scheme of social rights for the protection of the bracero, through employer obligations and the creation of a peasant savings fund (Astorga Morales, 2015). However, the unenthusiastic management of said fund by the corresponding Mexican banking and political authorities is the reason that currently

² Migratory capitalism, like other capitalisms (financial, philanthropic, green, or numerical, among others), is a manifestation of capital and its hegemony. Said capitalism does not consist of one type of mobility among others, but rather constitutes a specific and international organization of the mobility of the labor force through capital. Its most recent concretions can be observed through the labor migration of workers from Nepal, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India to the countries of the Persian Gulf. In this sense, migratory capital seeks to extend the borders of migratory production.

³ A colloquial term used to refer to the infantrymen of the United States Army.

⁴ Also later during the Korean War, between 1950 and 1953.

⁵ Three periods constitute these agreements: 1942-1949, 1951-1954, and 1954-1964-1967. The reader will have noticed the legal and political gap between 1949 and 1951, in which the program was officially suspended, without this suspension canceling hiring activities.

⁶ Between 1965 and 1967, more than 36 000 contracts were still signed.

⁷ On September 17, 1963, near the town of Chualar (California), an accident occurred in which 32 braceros died and 25 were injured.

fuels a broad protest movement of ex-braceros, which began in Michoacán in 1998 and spread to the rest of the country and towards United States (Schaffhauser, 2019).

In reality, the Bracero Program of 1942 constitutes the continuity of a first experience of bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States for the hiring of peasant labor in the last year of the First World War (Alanís Enciso, 1999). This official narrative is shared, to a large extent, by the academic environment, and developed a certain view to analyze the Bracero Program. This position considers that, although the Bracero Program had some inconsistencies in its application and produced both labor conflicts and grievances towards the braceros, it still set an example, although one that be certainly perfected (Durand, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that there are currently political and economic interests to bring it back into action.⁸ However, other positions and academic opinions have been expressed on the matter. Stephen Pitti (2005) considers that the current conflict of ex-braceros in Mexico and the United States derives from the injustices and grievances that the program produced, and that crystallized in what this American researcher calls the Bracero Justice Movement.

The above reveals a crucial element for the present analysis: the Bracero Program constituted a determining sign of the emergence of migratory capitalism, which consists of an ambiguous duality between legal and illegal migration, that is, between desirable migrants and other, undesirable ones, knowing that one form of migration is always the shadow of the other. Between both migratory definitions a cursor (or pointer) moves and defines the prevailing employability needs of the necessary migrant workforce, in accordance with the current economic situation. Legal and illegal migrations are an arbitrary construction, and the expression of an apparent legitimate immigration order.⁹

Oftentimes, the oral memory of numerous braceros highlights episodes of humiliation and outrage experienced firsthand throughout the Program. This collection of testimonies was built under the exercise of often violent, brutal, and abstract institutional and economic forces. In this sense, the Empalme, Sonora, recruitment site (1955-1964), is sadly famous for its mass graves, and is currently the only Mexican town that has a statue dedicated to the memory and suffering of the braceros (Schaffhauser, 2019). The “legitimate force-violence” (Weber, 1979, p. 83), of which generations of braceros were victims repeatedly, having been considered as cattle and useful bodies for work in the field, constitutes an objective economic agent for the production of value through human labor and its exploitation. In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to say that migratory capitalism, through the prism of the Bracero Program, consists of a social coercion that exercises violence to achieve its ends, that is, the lowering of the cost of labor and the social docility of it.

⁸ Within the framework of a summit meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Hamburg, Germany, between July 7 and 8, 2017, Presidents Donald Trump of the United States and Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico addressed the issue with some depth.

⁹ Here is a critical allusion to decipher the political and economic reality behind the Marrakesh compact (Resolution 73/195 of 2018) on orderly, safe, and regular migrations.

It is violence of an impersonal, invisible, and abstract kind, which can be analyzed through the conceptual distinction established by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2009) between objective and subjective violence. The first can be described as immediate, direct, interpersonal, circumstantial, and physical; the second, on the contrary, is invisible, omnipresent, structural and, finally, abstract, although its effects are suffered for a long time at both the physical and mental levels. The problem of the first adduces to the work of the interactionist Randall Collins (2009), who documented and analyzed everyday and urban forms of violence as a cardinal expression of emotions; the second refers to the work of Marx (1818-1883), and specifically to the capitalist mode of production, characterized, among other things, by creating moral inversions between the desirable and the despicable, as well as abstractions that disembodied lived situations and realities (Marx, 1971/2009, 2010). This distinction alludes to the concept of real abstraction, coined by the Marxist sociologist Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899-1990), whose intellectual career is associated with the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, particularly with the work of Theodor Adorno. Žižek himself (2003), in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, refers to the pioneering work of Sohn-Rethel (2001).

In this sense, the *braceros* experienced two types of violence: subjective and objective; circumstantial and structural. Of the first, there are precise testimonies and stories about the infamous treatment they received when DDT (a pesticide known as dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) was applied to their naked bodies, as if they were heads of cattle. Regarding the second, there are imprecise comments and dissimilar views, since to understand why the capitalist exploitation of the *bracero* labor consisted of the exercise of abstract violence requires an appropriate reflection, one that can only be achieved with intellectual and/or militant preparation.¹⁰ Although the first type of violence can begin to be remedied through making labor relations more *humane*, solving the second is much more complicated, since it would be first necessary to define the type of violence it is and what its effects have been on the existence of cohorts and groups of agricultural workers, as was the case of the *braceros*.

This article attempts to problematize this last point through the concept of real abstractions set forth by Sohn-Rethel (2001)—and therefore relies on its heuristic force—by examining, once again, the *Bracero* Program. Its objective is to unravel some constitutive mechanisms of early migratory capitalism through the analysis of two capitalist categories: work and money. Both concepts greatly exemplify what real abstractions are, and structure the process that this program became, that is, the transformation of the Mexican peasant into an agricultural worker and of his wages into remittances at the service of the banking and speculative machinery. In this sense, this program was the first open-air laboratory of migratory capitalism.

This paper contains three sections, and closing thoughts. In the first section, the analysis briefly focuses on the concept of migratory capitalism (Schaffhauser, 2022) and establishes the theoretical framework to understand, once again, the path that the *Bracero* Program took beyond the official

¹⁰ Which means that social awareness of economic exploitation is not a purely intellectual matter, but rather one of cognitive training and formation based on lived experiences.

diplomatic narratives, and its echo in the academic environment. In the second section, an attempt is made to define what real abstractions are and, in particular, to define the two facets that construct work and money as institutions of capital. The last section briefly describes the primary milestones of the Bracero Program so as to detect, through them, the turning points for the emergence of migratory capitalism in the United States, which has created the conditions conducive to the repetition and subsequent implementation of labor migration programs, not only the United States¹¹ and Canada,¹² but also in the rest of the world.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRATORY CAPITALISM

This section opens with a truism, to then raise a contradiction: human circulation is such, while human migration is capitalist. The above constitutes a theoretical premise to rethink migrations; broadly speaking, there are three modalities for this:

1) To naturalize migrations by confusing them with other types of displacement. In this sense, migration, circulation, mobility, and displacement are human activities from an anthropological and universal point of view. According to this approach, humanity has always migrated, from its dawn to date.

2) This modality takes a more complex approach to the previous understanding, by considering that migrations are a type of mobility like nomadism, tourist travel, or commercial circulation.¹³ In this sense, the concept of mobility takes on the function of being the common denominator of a multitude of mobilities, which can even account for mobilities without movement, such as social, religious, sexual, or identity mobilities.¹⁴ This second conception converts migration into an expression of this taxonomy.

3) This position conceives migrations as a historical and dialectical phenomenon that highlights the agency of capital. In this sense, migrations are a historical product and necessary for its reproduction. Migrations, therefore, cannot be confused with a taxonomy of mobility that ignores the organizing and structuring factor of human flows through capital. In a conference given in France, sociologist Alain Bihr (*Les Films de l'An 2*, 2010) mentioned the importance of relating capital to the ideas of flow and mobility; these are some of its characteristics. Money, work, and

¹¹ The federal government of this country established labor visa programs: H-2A visas concern temporary agricultural workers, while H-2B ones correspond to labor immigrants, generally employed in services (temporary non-agricultural workers). Both provisions were implemented in 1986, and correspond chronologically to the entry into force of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) (Public Law 99-603 of 1986), known as the Simpson-Rodino Act, which amends and replaces the 1952 law.

¹² Through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program that the Canadian central government started in 1974.

¹³ In this sense, thinking of migrations as the youthful expression of an initiatory journey full of adventures and experiences—as Stevenson (2009) puts it in his brief story *The Amateur Immigrant*, 1895—refers to a romantic reading of migration that shows its phenomenological face and leaves in the shadow that which organizes human mobility through capital.

¹⁴ This is an allusion to the work of the sociologist John Urry (2007).

life have to flow, move from one space to another, circulate permanently. Under this spectrum, human circulation in the world of capital is called *migration*.

In other words, the dilemma is between rethinking migrations with Marx or without him. Of the three modalities presented above, only the third and last explicitly summons the work of the author of *Capital*. Under a historicist and Marxist conception of migrations as a direct product of capital, the previous statement suffices to rethink current migrations and be clear about the constitution of the Bracero Program (and its agreements) for the case addressed hereby. However, this hypothesis, like any other conjecture, is only a starting point to once again further research contemporary migrations.

In this sense, to affirm that capitalism is a production system that encourages and requires the constant circulation of goods and people¹⁵ is to keep in mind that capital is the objective organizing agent of human geography; it means that the capitalist world is increasingly becoming a world-capitalism that does not leave nature or societies and cultures outside of its reach and imprint. Although natural resources and their ecosystems limit the expansion of capitalism, capitalism in turn limits their growth possibilities and ends up determining the configuration of their “natural spaces.” This thesis proposed by Jason Moore (2020) constitutes one of the premises of migratory capitalism, through which it is intended to observe and analyze the Bracero Program once again. In this sense, the program is also understood as an extension of the productivist geography of the United States into Mexican borders, such as the rural communities of Michoacan, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, among others.¹⁶ Capturing¹⁷ the agricultural labor of the central-western Mexican peasantry consisted of a geographical appropriation of the human resource that, at that time, work in the field was. Thus, the backdrop of the agro-industrial production of the United States during the Bracero Program was the geography of the peasant communities from which the agricultural laborers came.

By then, two axes allowed the deployment of the imprint of American agro-industrial capital on the Mexican rural world: work and money; that is, the wage-earner and the hiring for a certain period of time for the harvests and the picking, on the one hand, and on the other the first remittances, salary discounts, and the payroll inscription in banking through the issuance of checks. It is also necessary to detail to what extent these axes can be considered as real abstractions, and enable, once again, the understanding of the beginning of the proletarianization of the peasantry. To do this, it is essential to consult Sohn-Rethel’s seminal work and recover from it his most stimulating theoretical reflections on the matter. The following section is aimed at meeting this objective.

¹⁵ In this sense, national and international tourism can be understood as a kind of consumer migration.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that a program was implemented between 1943 and 1947, to recruit Caribbean day laborers (from Barbados, Bahamas, and Saint Lucia, among others) aimed at the agricultural areas of the east coast of the United States; it is estimated that nearly 100 000 contracts were signed through this program (Schaffhauser, 2019).

¹⁷ In the double sense of the word, that is, a mandatory seduction.

MONEY AND WORK AS REAL ABSTRACTIONS

The concept of real abstraction articulates a terminological contradiction, and is what linguists call an oxymoron: the combination of two terms whose respective meanings are opposite. The idea of *real abstraction* appears subtly in Marx's work since the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx, 2010) and, according to Sohn-Rethel (2001), results in a major epistemological problem, which consists of determining the foundations of knowledge—and, therefore, of consciousness—. Traditionally and to simplify this exposition, there is the controversy between two philosophical theses: empiricism—through George Berkeley and David Hume—and rationalism—through Kant and Hegel—; the former derive knowledge from the perception of the sensible world by the senses, which equip the human being and allow him to interact with the world and to build experiences from it; for their part, the latter advocate anthropological properties—of all time and in each space—of the human intellect, endowed with mental categories to order the heterogeneity of reality, through a priori forms of sensitivity, such as space, time or causality. Sohn-Rethel breaks with this duality by proposing that the origin of knowledge must be sought in action, that is, historical (and culturally situated) action.

In other words, the origin of consciousness would not be empirical nor ontological, but rather historical. As far as this research is concerned, knowledge would not be the consequence of an experience nor the a priori construction of reality, but rather it is the fruit of a historical (and culturally situated) action that consisted of the exchange of goods. This operation corresponded to a need to solve a pressing problem, that is, to equate two dissimilar products, such as a sword on the one hand and a clay pot on the other. For this, it was essential to resort to a third element that would allow the articulation between the use value and the exchange value; and said vector was money, that is, the material representation of a convention, resulting from the action of exchange.

Thus, Sohn-Rethel (2001) suggests that in history¹⁸ there must have been a subsumption—or bracketing—of use value under exchange value, which is measured through the circulation of money. In any case, this operation created a separation between use and exchange, and from there the abstraction that currently defines the capacity and potential of the human intellect would have emerged. Markets would also have emerged from this original separation, which convert objects (goods and services) into merchandise, and money, in-between them. In other words, abstraction is the historical result of these commercial operations and the need for exchange, as well as the consequence of a system of historically-situated actions. This process also dictated another epistemic separation between manual and intellectual activities, which constitutes the problem studied by Sohn-Rethel.

In this sense, sciences—such as mathematics or physics—were not born as the result of a rational projection to order the world, its beings and objects; nor as the result of a sum of experiences carried out in nature, but as direct consequence of a relationship between men and merchandise and money. This type of action, exchange and its facilitation through money, constitutes a *reaction*, that is, the

¹⁸ To support his argument, Sohn-Rethel refers to the societies of Mesopotamia.

culturally situated production of an innovation, through the form of a system of interactions between men and their products (Schaffhauser, 2016). Here, perhaps, is the pragmatic dimension of real abstraction: a historical action with rational, universal, and irreversible effects, since money or work seem to have always existed, at all times and in each place, and are, apparently, unsurpassable social forms.

Although money currently seems to be an abstraction located within the spirit, its historical origin—in Mesopotamia, or ancient Greece in particular—is, however, found outside of it. The above corresponds to what Sohn-Rethel suggests, following Marx: “It is not the subjects who produce these abstractions but their actions: ‘They don’t know it, but they do it’” (Acosta Iglesias, 2021, p. 421). Therefore, like any other abstraction, money¹⁹ would today be a human production out of the control of the subjects who use it, derived from the need of their ancestors to act for the exchange of goods they produced centuries ago.

To propose today that money (remittances) is the structuring element of migrations, thus determining their configurations and impacts, is to allude to Sohn-Rethel’s thesis on real abstractions. At first glance, this approach seems to err on the side of the obviousness of the argument; that is, that the braceros migrated to the United States obviously with the purpose of achieving a better future for themselves and their families, and that the materiality of it translates into obtaining monetary income. In this sense, this work nor the multiple investigations related to the topic would not be necessary to be clear on this idea. The lay citizen already possesses this practical knowledge. However, what is not entirely clear are the social and practical consequences of this configuration, and what migrant labor actually means, according to the capitalist logic of production and consumption. In other words, what does it mean to go earn a living somewhere else to support a family here?

The abstractions produced by the capitalist mode of production are often a source of violence. These correspond to what Pierre Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence* and which he analyzes in the fields of education, pedagogy and didactics (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2003). The forms acquired by such violence are impersonal and, therefore, invisible as such, and yet they have tangible effects, generally through school selection and elimination mechanisms. Although they are forms violence suffered personally, they lack signatures and authorship, and crude sociologisms—such as *the system*, *society* or *others*—are often made use of to try to identify them. While, as real abstractions, money and work are sources of subjective and structural violence.

Money and Work from the Perspective of the Bracero Program

It is very difficult—therefore futile—to define what work is in general, and often the difficulty lies in determining where productive activity begins and where it ends. There are many anthropological and sociological meanings in this regard, according to the corresponding cultures or times. To

¹⁹ The production cost of money, by the way, does not generally exceed a few cents for each bill manufactured or coin minted and, therefore, is far from the speculative value assigned to these instruments of exchange.

overcome this difficulty, it is necessary to adopt a Marxist point of view here, one that approaches work as a historical category of capital (Jappe, 2005), and consequently as an iniquitous social relationship between those who produce value through their intellectual and physical activity, and those who hold the capital to start production and create the material conditions for it. It is important here to establish a clear conceptual distinction between work—and employment—and human activities such as those that the peasantry carries out in the countryside, both productive ones (harvesting or packing) and those that do not have economic value (cleaning the plots or observing the growth of crops).

In this sense, the main division that produces real and symbolic violence is that of work. This division operates between men and women, intellectuals and artisans, young people and older adults, and between local workers and those coming from international immigration. Furthermore, it produces two major consequences: the lowering of the cost of labor and competition between local and foreign workers, thereby reproducing the scheme of capitalist exploitation through the pauperization of the proletariat. Therefore, the exploitation of labor in general implies a culturally situated valuation and disqualification of work performed here and now, as Sohn-Rethel well noted. Likewise, the division of labor affects the human condition of those who carry it out, as well as their social identity due to the triple separation they experience in the productive process with respect to the means of production, the fruit of their labor, and their dehumanization as separation from themselves. When working with machines, the worker ends up becoming just another machine (Marx, 2010).

According to the Marxist conceptual apparatus, there is another level of separation in labor, provided by the capitalist mode of production. It is equivalent to the distinction between abstract (non-intellectual) and concrete (non-manual) work. The real—that is, the activity carried out here and now by human beings of flesh and blood—is subsumed into its construction as a medium activity necessary²⁰ for the creation of value. In turn, work carried out under its abstract modality becomes a circulating commodity in a corresponding market (the migratory labor market) and is precisely that which characterizes migratory work as an abstraction compared to situated work.

Through their participation in the Bracero Program, the social condition of the Mexican peasant suffered irreversible transformations. It first created a temporary surplus of labor hands available for the productive needs of American agriculture and agribusiness, and over the years became a veritable international reserve army. The implementation of the bracero agreements, instead of limiting undocumented migration, encouraged it and even fueled its dynamics. Along with the spectacular Operation Wetback, which culminated in the summer of 1954 with the expulsion of more than a million undocumented Mexican workers, other operations were launched consisting of “drying the wet,” that is, return undocumented immigrants to Mexico, for them to be able to re-enter the United States with signed contracts, in accordance with the needs dictated by the American countryside and its crops.

²⁰ Average time of exercise of the labor force to produce a good.

Thus, the Bracero Program illustrated how the border between legal and illegal migration corresponded, as the case may be, to a porosity or a convenient moral and economic hermeticism. The construction of a separation between both obstacles creates an analogy with work as a social institution and economic production, that is, between formal and informal migration, between regular workers and other substitutes. Restricting or expanding the immigrant labor market corresponds, since then, to capital's strategies meant to calculate the value produced. Table 1 shows the annual variations in hiring, within the framework of the bracero agreements between 1942 and 1964. It means that, unofficially and in parallel to said hiring, each year the number of undocumented workers also increased.

Table 1. The Bracero Program and its Hiring, 1942-1964

Year	Number of contracts
1942	4 203
1943	52 098
1944	62 170
1945	49 454
1946	32 043
1947	19 632
1948	35 345
1949	107 000
1950	67 500
1951	192 000
1952	197 100
1953	201 380
1954	309 033
1955	398 650
1956	445 197
1957	436 049
1958	432 857
1959	437 643
1960	315 846
1961	291 420
1962	194 978
1963	186 865
1964	177 736
Total	4 646 199

Source: Own elaboration based on figures from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) (cited in Schaffhauser, 2019).

The proletarianization of the Mexican peasantry began with the Bracero Program, although it was a gradual process, given that the vast majority of the now ex-braceros were only hired once, a contract generally lasting only three months (Schaffhauser, 2019). This is a historical fact of relevance, since it allows for us to identify one of the multiple forms of investment caused by the

capitalist way of producing—and consuming—, that is, when the means becomes a purpose, when labor migration becomes a way of existence, instead of being a strategy to remedy the material conditions of its reproduction. Little by little peasants left their land, their cornfields, their family, their community, to join the ranks of the agricultural proletariat and become workers in the countryside—and a worker for the countryside—. This way, the work carried out on the lands of the community of origin was participating in a system of jobs in agricultural production spaces in another country, that is, in another land. This disrupted the metabolism between the Mexican farmer and the ecosystem in which he had first learned to interact.

Thus, Karl Marx defines metabolism as the balanced relationship of exchanges between man and nature, where human extraction of resources from nature corresponds to the self-reproduction capacity of ecosystems. The concept of metabolism was devised by the German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803-1873), whose work focused on agriculture and its production processes. The expansionist and cumulative logic of capital that is carried out at the expense of nature, its resources and its self-reproductive capacity, inevitably causes a breaking point in this relationship that corresponds to what John Bellamy Foster (2000) calls *metabolic rift*, and Jason Moore (2020), *metabolic transformation*. The first causes a kind of alienation of the peasant who is distant from his environment and the work he did there, while the second brings about an ontological transformation of nature by means of capital, which turns it into the nature of capital and its naturalization.

The dialectic relationship between the activity of transformation of nature by man and the transformation of nature by man was broken. A geographical and economic distance was created between the social expression of local needs and the natural environment to satisfy them. This way, the community's metabolism became increasingly dependent in general—and acutely in some regional cases (such as in certain regions of Michoacan or Zacatecas)—on another metabolism typical of American agro-industrial capitalism. The above explicitly refers to the concept of metabolic gap coined by Foster (2000) based on Marx's *Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. Migratory capitalism caused the braceros to distance themselves from the interaction with their land, as well as the interruption of a continuous nature-peasantry construction of a rural, mestizo, and indigenous world. This articulation between peasantry, migration, and capital constitutes an analytical axis to reflect on current environmental problems in general, and on the relationship between international migrations and ecology.

The case of the Di Giorgio Fruit Company is emblematic of the above. It is a Californian company based in Arvin, Salinas Valley, founded in 1920 by Giuseppe Di Giorgio, a Sicilian immigrant (Schaffhauser, 2019). This is the case of an agribusiness in whose activities the implementation of new eating habits and new relationships between capital and nature could be glimpsed. Bracero workers unleashed a huge strike against this multinational between 1947 and 1950, as a result of the terrible working conditions prevailing in crops and scabs, illegally used by business management to dismantle the social movement and thus reduce the weight of variable capital. In this way, the braceros also fought, at that time, against the alienating economic trend that turned them into another aspect of international peonage. The Mexican-American journalist

and activist Eduardo Galarza recounted this labor conflict in which he also took part (Galarza, 1972).

Another episode of the Bracero Program deserves special attention and has to do with the hiring system, which first began in Mexican recruitment centers such as the one already mentioned in Empalme, in addition to others in Monterrey, Irapuato, or La Ciudadela, in Mexico City (Córdoba Ramírez, 2017). The selection process for the *bracereada*, although involving episodes of humiliation, corresponded above all to the creation of the migrant worker as molded by the capitalist system of agricultural employment. Moral docility, physical availability, and social integrity were the three characteristics that would shape the personality of said workers at that time. By participating in the *bracereada*, the Mexican peasant became a day laborer, an agricultural worker;²¹ that is to say, their work in the field—which was made up of a collection of knowledge deployed in an infinite number of activities focused on production cycles—was reduced to agricultural employment, with patterns and cadences, focused on picking tomato, lettuce, or cucumber. It often crystallized in piecework in the field, and their main tool was the hoe, which symbolized physical exploitation and the reason for the struggle of thousands of braceros to improve their working conditions in the crops. Posthumously, in 2002 in Stockton,²² California—where the first contingent of braceros arrived by train in August 1942—a statue dedicated to the bracero, whose representation is a crouching body holding a hoe, was inaugurated in McLeod Park (Schaffhauser, 2019).

From the logic of capital, the relationship between work and money is a matter of exploitation. Table 2 can be interpreted in two ways; it can be understood as an interpretive dialectic: what is shown and what is hidden. In other words, this table affirms one aspect of the economic and political reality that constitutes the Bracero Program and denies another, relegating it to a state of social non-consciousness. Firstly based on the numbers and quantities that appear in the table, and secondly by referring to data that, although not visible, constitutes another reality of the relationship between work, money, and braceros, and has to do with the differential between the salaries they received and the profits generated from them being employed. Therein lies the issue of absolute surplus value (increase in hours worked) or relative surplus value (increase in productivity through increased cadences or mechanization of production).

²¹ On farms in the south of France, the expression *ouvrier agricole* is used to characterize the labor force from Spain or North Africa (Morocco and Algeria).

²² Another statue of a bracero, but this time on the Mexican side, was inaugurated in 2016 in Empalme, Sonora.

Table 2. Management of the Peasant Savings Fund* of the Bracero Program, 1943-1945

Year	National Savings Bank and Agricultural Credit Bank		Number of Bracero Program contracts	Average amounts received and delivered for each contract		Amount delivered over amount received (%)
	Amount received	Amount delivered		Amount received	Amount delivered	
1943	15 904 011	3 715 581	52 098	305	71	23
1944	56 935 906	28 448 365	62 170	930	457	49.1
1945	87 914 669	54 857 733	49 454	1 777	1 109	62.4
Total	144 850 575 [sic] ²³	87 021 679	163 722	3 012	1 637	60

* USD.

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare (2007), the statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) cited in Bustamante (1976), and Schaffhauser (2019).

Table 2 highlights the main aspect of the current bracero conflict, which revolves around the restitution of a peasant savings fund established between 1942 and 1946,²⁴ during the first phase of the Bracero Program (Vélez Storey, 2002). It is an issue of litigation that has unleashed passions, bitterness, and multiple mobilizations in both Mexico and the United States (Schaffhauser, 2009, 2018, 2019). The table shows a differential between the amounts collected by Mexican banks, and other amounts that correspond to the payment to the beneficiaries of the savings fund. An average of 60% of the fund's money was returned to the braceros. Therefore, it is worth asking what happened to the remaining 40%, that is, USD 57 828 896 collected and not delivered to their beneficiaries. As the years went by—to date it has been 58 years—this monetary differential generated profits and interest for the banking institutions that hold this financial asset. From the position of the braceros, a problem of compound interest arises, that is, the capitalization of the interests accumulated and not earned by them.

Thus, the braceros and their families are, in theory, creditors of a historical debt contracted by several Mexican banking institutions and guaranteed by the State and the federal treasury. This debt is equivalent to paying 1 095 000 Mexican pesos to each of the more than 3 200 000 braceros who participated in the program. The Mexican public treasury does not, of course, have such an astronomical amount (Schaffhauser, 2019). In relation to the previous point, there is a controversy that has come to undermine the protest movement of the ex-braceros, and consists of stating that the peasant savings fund operated throughout the Bracero Program, or affirming that it only existed between 1943 and 1946, which invalidates the central argument of the social mobilization of the ex-braceros. This reading corresponds dialectically to what the table states and to the social consequences that arise from the interpretation of its data.

²³ The correct amount is 160 754 586.

²⁴ Although what is shown in Table 2 refers to the work of the Secretariat of Labor between 1943 and 1945, the validity of the fund ran from 1942 to 1946.

Yet, there is another reading that refers to what the table denies and corresponds to the capitalist exploitation system of the *bracereada*, and focuses on the extraction of a mainly absolute surplus value. There are many testimonies from braceros who say, for example, they did overtime on weekends including Sundays without extra pay to compensate for a day off. This capital gain does not appear in Table 2. It is worth asking, for example, how much profit did the Di Giorgio company accumulate at the expense of the work of former braceros? Likewise, it is worth investigating how much money was amassed by the banks, both American and Mexican, that managed the assets of the peasant savings fund. Thus, no one currently knows what amount said fund would be equivalent to, if the interest generated and accumulated (compound interest) since the end of the program were to be taken into account.

At this point, it is worth opening a parenthesis to compare the hypothetical profit that the Bracero Program could have generated over 22 years of official existence. The amount dictated by the Amparo Ruling 1558/2015 (Tribunal Superior de Justicia de la Ciudad de México, 2016), which implies the payment, mentioned above, of 1 095 000 Mexican pesos to each bracero, and finally the social support program for Mexican migrant workers corresponding to trust 2106 (later 10230 and now extinct). The first corresponds to the x of an equation with two unknowns (the role of the banks, on the one hand, and that of the governments of both countries, on the other); the second amounts to 3 540 961 725 000 Mexican pesos, and the last corresponds to the delivery of social support between 2005 and 2015, that is, 38 000 Mexican pesos granted to 245 539 braceros and their relatives (widows or sons and daughters), which shows a total of 9 330 482 000 Mexican pesos. The above means that the amount of social support, which was delivered to only 7% of the total braceros, represents 0.26% of the amount to be paid to each bracero in accordance with the amparo ruling; not to mention what would be a comparison between the social support and what was dictated by said ruling, and the profits generated by the Bracero Program throughout its existence. Here is an early representation of what today constitutes the greatest conflict in many societies around the world, that is, the struggle between capital and labor through social rights, which often come from social movements and protests (Schaffhauser, 2019). Once again this dialectic of capital that produces separations is manifest, as is the case cited here between officially reported money and hidden amounts; between social support, a court ruling to compensate for the dispossession suffered by the braceros through the dubious management of the peasant savings fund, and multimillion-dollar profits from American agribusiness; the amount of the latter, although real, is unknown to this day.

Like capital, money is not merely a simple material object represented by bills or coins that ensure the transaction for the purchase or sale of a good or service, but also establishes, above all, a social (and hierarchical) relationship among individuals socially positioned by what they produce, consume, and accumulate. Its relational facets change according to the type of interaction: consumption, donation, saving, investment, and even waste. The greatest separation that characterizes money is a split between use value and exchange value, that is, between functional and speculative value. From the above, a series of consequences can be suggested that, although having transformed life in the countryside from the time of the Bracero Program to date,

characterize to this day migrations as a product of the capitalist mode of production. The main effect has to do with the circulation of braceros' money, which became the first remittances in the history of migration between Mexico and the United States. It means that due to its simple circulation between banking institutions²⁵—as was the case of the peasant savings fund—the form of the braceros' money went from use value (for family, domestic, and community income) to exchange value (financialization and speculation).

Likewise, the closing in 2021 of trust 10 230 for the Social Support of Mexican Migrant Workers left more than 41 000 braceros and beneficiaries eligible as of 2012, at the end of the six-year term of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, unable to benefit from its implementation (Schaffhauser, 2019). To this sector should be added other braceros who are still alive and beneficiaries, corresponding to the more than 3.2 million workers who participated in the program. Now, it is worth asking what happened to the law on social support: has it been repealed by the Chamber of Deputies and this decision ratified by the Senate of the Republic? And what happened to the remaining economic resources pertaining the management of the trust?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The Bracero Program as a Laboratory and Fetish of Migratory Capitalism

Money and work are two real abstractions of capitalism that constitute its social institutions. The Bracero Program configured the first great migratory laboratory of capitalism, through American agribusiness. In this sense, talking about money and work implies addressing the issue of the history of the separations between capital and the exploitation of surplus value. The economic boom of said productive activity was generated through the importation of labor, and implied the expansion of the geography of capital exploitation into Mexico, mainly towards the central-western macroregion. The living—that is, real—work of the braceros in exchange for remuneration concretized the migratory integration of Mexico in the U.S. economy and society, and the emergence of a dead form of work as abstraction and accumulation of capital. This process, in turn, led to another that consisted of the movement towards the abstractification of said labor and its remuneration, just like any other commodity. The occupation of braceros in the crop fields ceased to be an activity located with coordinates of time and space, to become the measurement of medium social work, to which a value is assigned that enables its exchange with other medium social work of a local nature. The braceros' money suffered the same fate, becoming another exchangeable commodity between banks, through the supremacy of exchange value over use value, that is, of capital over family income, and of speculation over the functionality of money.

However, the migratory laboratory that constituted the Bracero Program was implemented in parallel to another that was the famous Green Revolution, started in Mexico in 1943, through the

²⁵ Like Wells Fargo and the National Savings and Rural Credit Banks.

Rockefeller Foundation and the United States Department of Agriculture (with agronomist Norman Borlaug in the Yaqui Valley, in Sonora). After World War II, and at the height of the Bracero Program, the Mexican countryside—without its smallholders busy harvesting crops in the United States—began to become a large-scale laboratory for agricultural experiments, through the mechanization of production (by means of the reuse of military tanks as tractors), the use of inorganic fertilizers (through the reorientation of chemical weapons production), and the first experiments with genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Feeding humanity has become, to date, the business and motto of American agri-food companies (Ceccon, 2008), with results that currently cause fair concern and the raising of ecological awareness.

It is interesting now to question both experiments of migratory and agricultural capitalism, from the Marxist concept of metabolism and metabolic gap (Foster, 2000). In fact, while farmers were temporarily away from their homeland, a high-yield agriculture program began in Mexico based on mechanization and chemical inputs that, over the years, ended up displacing the manual labor of peasant work, not only in Mexico but in other Latin American countries and the rest of the world. Here it is found another double component of the alienation of the workers, through the distancing from their community of origin to give rise to their replacement by machines and inorganic fertilizers. This closeness of the Bracero Program and the beginning of the Green Revolution would merit a significant investigation, so as to identify and highlight the contradictions in capitalism, which inverts the relationship between the technological mode of production and the level of development of the country in which it is implemented: in a schematic way, the Bracero Program in the United States corresponded to a traditional form of agricultural production based on the exploitation of a cheap and docile labor force, while, starting with the Green Revolution, the future of American agribusiness was designed through the mechanization of its production and the increasing use of artificial fertilizers. It is interesting to note the quasi-synchrony between the decline of the Bracero Program on the one hand, and the world onset of the Green Revolution²⁶ on the other, in the 1960s.

Several themes for analysis can be derived from the above. In fact, this metabolic rift is not only of a productive nature, but above all of a nutritional nature. With the current rise of American agribusiness in rural areas, many of the descendants of former braceros live on canned goods and junk food, a situation that has much to do with the industrial consequences of the Bracero Program and the Green Revolution. This means that said program, due to its social and economic consequences, is part of the agenda and problems of current political ecology. In other words, there is an analytical bridge between the issue of cheap nature (Moore, 2020) and cheap migrant labor, since from the point of view of capital, peasant labor is a natural resource.

The current social protest of the braceros for the recovery of the social savings fund exemplifies another aspect of the alienation suffered by these northern veterans and their families. The money

²⁶ The Green Revolution, largely devised by Norman Borlaug (1914-2009), and whose objective was to achieve food sovereignty for the former Third World bloc countries, was implemented in several countries and peaked in the 1960s and 1970s.

they claim is conceived and visualized through its use value and not exchange value, its functional value and not through the speculation caused by the financial operations that the savings fund suffered. Indeed, in the United States, and until the financial crash of 2008 and the implementation of new financial and stock market regulations, there were no regulations that forced banks to separate their deposit activities from other financial and speculative activities. It was about maintaining a cunning confusion between real capital and fictitious capital, between assets and bets. As such, the braceros suffered a double extortion: 1) on the farms through the differential between the remuneration they received and the surplus work that was taken from them, through the surplus value; and 2) in the constitution of the savings fund, which became capital for investments and playing the stock market, to whose profits they have never had access.

Currently, this extortion constitutes, perhaps, the greatest real abstraction that bracero families suffer to obtain justice, because behind it there is no one to complain to, but only the ever-mutating ethereal and omnipotent presence of capital. This is the greatest fetish of the program and the bracero problem: the enormous reduction of a capitalist abstraction to the historiography of the program and the public manifestation of a social conflict between senior citizens and the Mexican State.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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