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The "Guestworker" as Metaphor: In clarification of social-economic contradictions and systemic crisis.¹

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". . . denn es ist wahr, dass jeder Arbeiter im Kapitalistischen System ein Gastarbeiter ist."²

In May 1979 the French National Assembly passed legislation giving the government sweeping powers to expel foreign workers. Yet neither the government nor the employers really want to send most of the immigrant workers home, and thereby lose them as a source of cheap labor for both public and private enterprise. It is likely that the employers hope to use the new legislation to keep foreign workers in a state of permanent insecurity, to discourage them from protesting against their low pay, poor working conditions and the racism they encounter daily. Indeed, employers would like to see foreign workers treated as a separate category of second-class citizens, without the rights of French citizens. This attempt to divide the workers is a subtle attempt to confuse French workers into believing that French society is providing charity to support foreign "intruders" and that this in turn is the cause of the current economic crisis.³

This effort contends that the plight of the "guestworker" can be applied toward clarifying the political-economic and social contradictions inherent in crises of "late-capitalism."⁴ The rationale for what follows lies in the argument that the "problems" of foreign workers in Western Europe do not remain solely relevant to or caught within a particular geographical or conceptual frame. A better understanding of the "guestworker" can conceivably shed light on inter-linked policies of the extant system of inequalities within which international labor migrations obtain.

Background

The social history of industrialization is that of mass movements from country to town; international labor migration is a special case within this general pattern. While "migration" is in essence a social

process, international labor migrations are in major part a consequence of unequal economic development.⁵

Labor migration is a form of development aid given by the poor countries to the rich countries. Traditional colonialism took labor (in the form of slaves) as well as natural resources from the countries it dominated. Today, neocolonialism extracts capital from the underdeveloped countries in various ways, the main one being trade on terms fixed by the developed countries. The transfer of human resources in the form of migrant workers is an important part of this transaction. Migration belongs to neocolonialism's system for exploiting the wealth of the Third World.⁶

The conditions faced by the migrant represent a reality that is often harsh: politically he is disenfranchised; socially he is subjected to the most visible and severe forms of xenophobia and economically he often labors without employment or "survival" security. To understand the plight of the individual foreign worker, his family and the sending/receiving nations, is to grasp the migration for employment phenomenon.

International Labor Migrations

Andre Gorz notes: "There is no country in Western Europe where international labor is a negligible force, or even a marginal quantity fluctuating within the economic conjuncture."⁷ One cannot grasp the fact of the growing importance of the immigrant worker in the wage-earning, working population of every country in Western Europe (and beyond) without starting from the position of the immigrant labor force in the structure of social contradictions and the role given to it by the historical development of the dominant element in this structure, namely, capital in its "late phase" of accumulation and internationalization.

Since international labor migrations are essentially a socio-economic phenomenon (i.e., intake of foreign workers into an economy is geared to the economic capacity to absorb them), economists generally explain migrations by the "law" of supply and demand. Within the "free-trade" paradigm--believed by classical writers to be the best of all possible worlds--"international movements of capital and labor were regarded as largely a domestic affair."⁸ Classical writers did not even develop a theory of international labor migrations. "It is widely asserted," observes Nikolinakos, "that there is no need for a special theory to explain migrations."⁹

This (supply-demand) concept is allied to the fundamental ideas of classical and neo-classical economic theory, according to which economic laws

create a harmonious world in which everything functions in the best possible manner.¹⁰

The "best possible manner" is not, however, the net result of supply and demand at the international level. Myrdal has shown that it leads to the polarization of development: a "north," toward which the factors of production move, develops; while a "south," areas out of which the factors of production move, continues to decline.¹¹ In post-WWII experience it is obvious that capital is not attracted by the prospects of low wages and high profits alone. It requires, in Nikolinakos' terms: "security of tenure (political factors) and guaranteed profits (monopoly position)."¹² Supply demand theory alone leaves unexplained the fact that some countries were unable to go through the same development process which characterizes labor importers like West Germany, France and Sweden.

Migration is multi-faceted: (a) it is the movement of a population within or between countries; (b) it is an individual phenomenon affecting the lives of entire families; (c) it is a class phenomenon involving the ranking of masses of human beings; (d) it is a structural phenomenon. The structural importance of alien workers is explained by societal choices concerning the organization of production (i.e., spatial concentration in areas regarded as most profitable).¹³ A political-economic consequence of this type of organization is uneven economic development between sectors and regions. It derives from the clearly stated logic of capital and the division of labor it commands according to the imperatives of profit maximization.¹⁴ Labor concentration at the national and international level is determined by the growth of capital. Neither labor concentration nor uneven development--to the extent there is a different dynamic attached to the terms--derives from the distribution of natural resources in the world. The countries of emigration are not by definition "poor in material riches and rich in human resources." They are so because of relationships of dependence enforced by powerful economic interests.¹⁵

The structural fit of emigration-immigration is not within the manpower needs of the economy alone. Immigrations are not purely conjunctural and not as highly sensitive to economic recession as suspected. One has but to examine the size of the immigrant labor force in the most productive sectors and its position in the working population as a whole. Obviously, the less-developed countries of Southern Europe and Northern Africa represent a superabundant supply of labor--the principal source of the "reserve army" of labor for the "north." The "north" needs the "reserve army" because agricultural populations, for example, in West Germany (7.5%), no longer form an important source of labor. Old people, women and children also lose some of their significance as reserve. School leaving age rises, women remain used for cheap child care and housekeeping and in theory, old people are more certain of recovering some type of pension.¹⁶

Since the process of replacing labor by capital is expensive in the short run, and therefore limited, and since a certain percentage of semiskilled and unskilled workers is also necessary in highly automated firms and other branches of the economy, the import of foreign workers promises to remain a lasting phenomenon. Actually, one may pause to appreciate the "genius" of a process which creates a virtually inexhaustible pool of reserve labor at a physically safe distance from the industrial cities, across national boundaries.

In 1978 the slums of industrial cities were missing in Sweden and West Germany. The housing conditions of the best skilled and educated migrants seemed almost adequate. On the surface, at least, there appeared little crime, little unrest among workers, little unemployment. Antony Ward, however, describes a discovery which, although not surprising, is disenchanting.

To find the slums of West Berlin, Düsseldorf (Gothenberg, Malmö), one must travel south to the impoverished towns and villages of the Algarve, of Andalusia, Calabria and Anatalia. Here is the home of West Germany and Sweden's "reserve army," in conditions of poverty as bad as those in our traditional Harlems. And the people there, while they may receive some income from their direct or indirect involvement in the industries of the north, enjoy almost none of the indirect benefits of industrial capitalism.¹⁷

Well into the 1960's it was taken for granted that the massive outflow of workers from the developing countries was beneficial for everyone. The flexible response of foreign labor to changing demand conditions was regarded as ideal for immigration countries. Emigration was felt to provide unemployment relief and much needed foreign currency.¹⁸ The 1967 recession cast costs against the benefits for labor senders and receivers. Importers like W. Germany and Sweden became aware of the structural significance and implications of immigration, i.e., the infrastructural and cultural costs to be met. Doubts were raised with regard to the relief of unemployment and the purely beneficial nature of remittances. The policy problem for countries like France became centered around (a) how to fill extant labor market gaps so that both micro and macro-economic profitability remained assured without (b) detriment to a strained social situation; and, (c) without infringing basic human rights (the "guestworker" issue was beginning to draw notice in the international press).

Mobility and "Dirt"

Ulrich Freiherr von Ginanth, chairman of the Committee on Foreign Labor of the Employers Association (FRG), observes: "The great value of the employment of foreigners lies in the fact that we have at our disposal a mobile labor potential. It would be dangerous to limit this mobility through a large scale assimilation policy."¹⁹

There can be little doubt that the "guests" of industrial society are afraid to organize. In a sense, the migrant knows he won't be employed long enough to enjoy long-range victories, pension and health plans. "If every German in the Federal Republic believes that the migrant worker can be expelled whenever it suits the German convenience, so too does every migrant."²⁰ National labor laws provide for anything but the feeling of security. While paragraph 120 of the West German Labor Code gives the migrant the right to social benefits enjoyed by Germans, paragraph 10 of the same code provides that the worker may be expelled for lack of self-support (and therefore ineligible for benefits).²¹

An effect of this mass of unskilled migratory labor has been the acceleration of the seemingly universal tendency of capitalism to divide labor into every simpler and mind-separate operations.²² "Skilled jobs are divided into simple components which can readily be taught to workers who have never before stood at the production line. Thus, the pattern of demand changes towards the skills available or their lack."²³ This economic division tends to be reflected in social divisions between the migrant workers and the native working class.

Castles and Kosack describe the split of the "working class" into two, highly differentiated segments: the nationals who speak the language and enjoy whatever measure of civil rights and social welfare the society provides. They are well organized into unions which enjoy a degree of political power and they work in jobs which require some minimum skill or training, or which are comparatively clean and involve little physical strain. In contrast, the migrants do the jobs which are dirty, dangerous and which require physical strength and less skill and training.²⁴

It is relatively simple to dwell on migrant workers and dirty jobs. A great amount of heart-wrenching writing has been published about it; yet, for the most part, it fails to explain why migrants accept what the indigenous working class will not. Are migrants naturally submissive? Is it because of their extreme need?

Castells finds the key to answering these basic questions in the fact that it is possible to treat the migrant workers as individual wage-earners whereas the relationship if the indigenous working class with capital (in labor importers like Sweden and W. Germany) is established collectively through the labor movement.²⁵

. . . the utility of immigrant labor to capital derives primarily from the fact that it can act toward it as though the labor movement did not exist, . . .²⁶

One has but to turn to the legal-political status of the foreigners and their consequent political-ideological isolation to understand the inferiority of their position vis a vis capital i.e., their limited

capacity for organization and very great vulnerability to repression.²⁷ As well, dirty jobs are not surrendered by the working classes in Sweden or FRG because they are "dirty" but because they are less well paid and less well attached to benefit packages. When dirty work is well paid, nationals do it. "Immigrant workers do not exist because there are arduous and badly paid jobs to be done, but rather, arduous and badly paid jobs exist because immigrant workers are present or can be sent for to do them."²⁸

Capital can't do without "arduous jobs" or the migrant to do them and that is why the migratory mechanism is "designed" to achieve not just the balance between the supply and demand of labor but the perpetuation of the dependency relationship between capital and labor--the center and the periphery. As Nikolinakos observes, it is the internationalization of labor through the expansion of migration which reflects the inherent thrust of capital towards securing this relationship.²⁹ The ingenious part of this--from the point of view of capital--is that the migrant worker is pitted not against capital in the struggle to get social security, for example, but against the national and international state apparatus of capital in order to meet its demands. Of consequence, the problem is seen as a welfare state policy issue and not as systemic in nature.

The poverty of the "south" and the insecurity of the worker must be seen not as a geographic accident or historical artifact, but as the continuing effect of an international "system" which simply defines national borders as anachronistic. The economic forces which now produce comforts in Stockholm and Stuttgart are simultaneously sustaining the historical poverty of Cordoba and Messina. Always in motion, the migration mechanism draws more and more underdeveloping countries into the system. Antony Ward describes the system as three tiers deep. Black Africans migrate to the Mediterranean countries so that Mediterranean workers can be set free for exploitation in the "north."³⁰

One can conclude that international labor migrations are a major force towards the perpetuation of international imbalance--and they appear part of a self-feeding system. Second, international labor migrations are supported by an international, institutionalized system of discrimination anchored in legislation regarding foreigners and in interstate agreements. The psychosocial and survival problems of the aging migrant, for example, can only be understood within the framework of political economic analysis and this system of institutionally "necessary" discrimination.

The fate of individuals is determined by the laws of accumulation. (Those "laws" obviously obtain for internal as well as international migrations). To the extent the migratory mechanism is to be humanized it is only in so far as it will enable capital to ward off political-social unrest that would appear to endanger the system. "Progress then, may seem to be made in one or another detail: shorter waiting time for

unemployment benefits; easier access to family aid. Such small steps may encourage the careless observer to believe that there is definite movement toward the ultimate goal of equality for migrants. But the situation is fundamentally bound by powerful interests (priorities and values) which will prevent the realization of either extreme--full assimilation or full exclusion."³¹

Note on the "Equality" Solution

Equality is the overt policy response of nations to the systemic and systematic discriminations practiced upon migrant workers.

"The language in which it is applauded by the powers of this world sometimes leave it uncertain which would horrify them most, the denial of the principle or the attempt to apply it."³²

Equality of opportunity is, of course, a classic capitalist concept. The essential inquiry revolves around what is being equalized. Equal opportunity can be toward equal oppression; equal treatment can be toward equal manipulation and regulation; equal rewards can be toward equal material hardship; equal social participation can be toward equal powerlessness. International labor migrations demonstrate clearly that capitalism requires international inequalities as a precondition for its existence.

The intent of equality objectives of migrant worker legislation is simply a more random distribution of inequalities for nationals and non-nationals. The message is consistent: if you start from a position of inequality--among nations and between "foreign" and indigenous labor--you end up with continued inequality. Equality retains its throne on the condition that it refrains from meddling with the profitable business of the factory and the market place.³³

Crisis and Guestworkers

In a certain sense, the "equality" solution to the "problems" of international labor migrations is symptomatic of the crisis which foreign workers illuminate. According to Habermas, "crises arise when the structure of a social system allows for fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of the system."³⁴

We are experiencing a structural crisis in the allocation of raw materials and labor power within a world market. This is the source of international labor migrations and it is the migrant worker--who experiences the immigration dilemma as critical for his continued existence, and simultaneously threatens his own social identity--in a title role of crisis. Unequal allocation of raw materials and labor power--socially structured and sanctioned inequalities--have evolved as a key balance mechanism of the historical conditions, social hierarchy, scale of values, of first world nations. The "equality solution" merely controls any imbalance threat from the third and fourth worlds.

Most "developed" countries have concerned themselves with justifying and explaining national and international inequalities in such a way that the majority of the population (those who by definition are not privileged) accept it as morally right. They have busied themselves with legitimating inequalities. The ideology of equality of treatment (whether for migrants or not) attempts to cope with an extant social condition (internationalization of capital and the need for cheap labor) with justifications derived from the status quo and it shields extant society against its own alternatives in the sense it denies the historical limitedness of any given social condition.³⁵

The argument is that international labor migrations are not a conjunctural phenomenon linked to supply-demand manpower needs of expanding economies but a structural tendency of "late capitalism." This structural tendency is explained, in part, by uneven development but primarily by the internal dynamic of late capitalism. Uneven development explains only why people emigrate; it does not explain why nations like France and West Germany provide jobs for migrant workers even in conditions of unemployment. Neither does it explain why the dominant classes of labor importing nations introduce a social and political element (migrants) whose presence contradicts their ideology and necessitates more complex mechanisms of social control. ". . . the extent of immigration and the strategic role of immigration in the European economy has to be explained, not in terms of the technical demands of production, but by the specific interests of capital in a particular phase of its development."³⁶

The central role of the migrant worker is to regulate economic crises--crises endemic to late capitalism. Capital needs the regularization of immigration but sees to it that the meeting of real needs is totally inadequate and fragmented. "It is a policy of control (manipulative compassion) and minor modifications concerning immigration, sometimes paternalistic in the economic sphere, always repressive (dissuasive) in the political sphere."³⁷ Immigrants cannot succeed in imposing a demand of equal rights for that would mean they could no longer play the role they are assigned by the needs of late capital's low-wage, work-intensive, "reserve army." Migrant workers confront foreign systems with claims and intentions that are, in the long run, incompatible with the extant system's goals. This is a fundamental contradiction.

The essence of this fundamental contradiction is consistent with Habermas' "crisis:" international labor migrations pose more problems than the national systems can solve without surrendering elements that up to that point belonged to their "structural continuity." Solving the migrant worker problem requires at least momentary and partial surrender of state nationalism in the granting of rights toward social and economic security. Nations like France and West Germany have agreed to at least a portion of these external demands--in the short run--in order to cope with system maintenance problems. "Equality" is offered to the migrant as a mechanism to prevent an interruption of the process of accumulation--an interruption which would take the form of capital destruction.

Historically, the state assumed and remains the compensator for the dysfunctional consequences of the accumulation process--especially for those consequences which elicited politically effective reactions. Thus the state evolved through various stages of compensatory intervention: granting trade union rights, marginal improvements in wages, working conditions, health, education and social security. The state replaces the market to relieve the social and material costs which result from private production.

For the migrant within this system, the progressive satisfaction of his needs by the technological mechanism of production and enormous possibilities of consumption increase his consent to incorporation in this way of life. "Everyday life" experiences of the migrant reinforce and internalize the seemingly immutable nature of late capitalist social order. What confronts the guestworker is not simply a deception but a specific and socially determined reflection of a mystified reality. The "reality" says all the fundamental relations between men in the production process of their material life can be no different.³⁸

Yet, the continuous growth of per capita income which has heretofore legitimated persisting material (and international) inequalities and has bought the migrant, albeit at low, work-intensive wages, appears no longer possible because the limits to growth have become visible. The multiple economic crises of the seventies are intensifying middle-class resistance to both the presence and equitable treatment of "guest workers." The system of international labor migrations faces a "legitimation vacuum"--providing symbols of participation and an illusory equality are not enough.

If the foreign worker is forced to define his situation in terms of his power to shape the conditions in which he lives and to change those conditions according to his needs for "self-actualization," he is bound to recognize that power is absent. And if migrants define their situation in terms of their power as social individuals over their collective social existence they see that capitalist democracy--which offers equality of treatment--is devoid of content.³⁹

The establishment of a "social policy" which attempts to legitimate inequalities or to make-up quantitatively what is lost qualitatively moves toward counter-effectiveness. "It is not that the pressures of want have been eliminated--far from it--but rather that these have been supplemented by a discontent which cannot be touched by providing more prosperity and jobs because these are the very things that produced this discontent in the first place."⁴⁰ Essentially, the international state--in concert with the national state--cannot provide stronger legitimations for the foreign worker's lack of autonomy and security as long as it leaves intact the capital infrastructure and its priorities: the "generators of inequalities."

The market system breaks down. Its collapse is in its inability to put together human beings, capital and land in order to produce a factory level of output for the world. At the international

real issue may be how long the "international state" and the national state can remain compatible with the needs and purposes of capital.

That question is buried deep beneath the celebration of Western democracy, the free world, the welfare state, the affluent society, the end of ideology and pluralistic equilibrium. To have posed it even a few years ago would have appeared ludicrous or perverse.⁴¹

The response is demographic, social, political and psychological. The response to crisis is a "multiplicity of cooperating remedies." Nothing short of everything is really enough.⁴² Implied is the move beyond the social system which no longer offers possibilities of problem solving. New choices based on different values must be confronted.

We can make different social choices concerning the allocation of natural resources, the social division of labor and the distribution of rights for a world commonwealth.⁴³ The crises tell us it is time to choose again, that we are not caught in the immutable downflow of events over which we have no control. The basis for our new choices requires, however, the right political motivation.

And the basis for that political motivation should be that not only do we share a common origin, but, inescapably, we share the same destiny. It is a destiny that the human race is now capable of choosing.⁴⁴

Footnotes

1. This work stems, in part, from the thesis of the author. "Equality of Treatment and Migrant Workers: An Analysis of the Social Policy Cluster and Context Surrounding Treatment of "Guestworkers" in Western Europe," Diss. Brandeis University, 1979.
2. Marios Nikolinakos, Politische Ökonomie der Gastarbeiterfrage: Migration und Kapitalismus, (Hamburg, West Germany: Rowohlt, 1973), p. 152.
3. See Richard E. Ward, "France Shows Foreign Workers the Door," Guardian, June 27, 1979, p. 17.
4. ". . . to use the expression 'late capitalism' is to put forward the hypothesis that, even in state-regulated capitalism, social developments involve contradictions or crises." Jürgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, (Boston, Beacon, 1975), p: 1.
5. See W. R. Boehning, Migration of Workers as an Element of Employment Policy, (Geneva, ILO, 1973), p. 81; and, Siegmur Geiselberger, Schwarzbuch: Ausländische Arbeiter, (Frankfurt, a/M, West Germany: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1972), pp. 18-20.

6. Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack, Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe, (New York: Oxford, 1973), p. 428.
7. Andre Gorz, "Immigrant Labor," New Left Review, 61, May-June, 1970, p. 28.
8. "The exportation of laborers from old to new countries, from a place where their productive power is less, to a place where it is greater increases by so much the aggregate produce of the labor and capital of the world. It adds to the joint wealth of the old and new country." Brinley Thomas, Migration and Economic Growth, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 11.
9. Marios Nikolinakos, "Towards a General Theory of Migration in Late Capitalism," Race and Class, XVII, No. 1, (Summer, 1975), p. 5.
10. Nikolinakos, "Towards," p. 5.
11. See Gunnar Myrdal, Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions, (London: Duckworths, 1957).
12. Nikolinakos, "Towards," p. 6.
13. Antony Ward, "European Capitalism's Reserve Army," Monthly Review, 27, No. 6, (November, 1975), pp. 17-32.
14. Manuel Castells, "Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advanced Capitalism: The Western European Experience," Politics and Society, 5, No. 1, (1975), p. 34.
15. Nikolinakos, "Towards," p. 9.
16. Ward, "European," p. 18.
17. Ward, "European," p. 19.
18. See Günter Schiller, "Channeling Migration: A Review of Policy," International Labor Review, 111, No. 4, (April 1975), p. 335; and, W. R. Boehning, "Some Thoughts on Emigration from the Mediterranean Basin," International Labor Review, 111, No. 3, (1975), p. 251.
19. Ernst Klee, (ed.), Gastarbeiter: Analysen und Berichte, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 26.
20. Antony Ward, "European Migratory Labor: A Myth of Development," Monthly Review, (December 1975), p. 26.
21. Ward, p. 26.
22. See Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

23. W. R. Boehning, The Migration of Workers in the UK and the European Community, Institute of Race Relations, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 59.
24. Ward, p. 30; See Michael J. Piore, "Notes for a Theory of Labor Market Stratification," Labor Market Segmentation, R. Edwards, M. Reich and D. Gordon, (eds.), (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1975).
25. Castells, p. 51.
26. Castells, p. 51.
27. Gorz, "Immigrant Labor."
28. Castells, p. 54.
29. Nikolinakos, "Towards," p. 10.
30. Ward, "European Migratory," p. 25.
31. Ibid., pp. 37-38.
32. R. H. Tawney, Equality, (London: Unwin, 1971), p. 103.
33. Ibid., p. 103.
34. Habermas, p. 2.
35. See Claus Offe, Industry and Inequality: The Achievement Principle in Work and Social Status, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).
36. Castells, p. 44.
37. Ibid., p. 56.
38. Ernest Mandel, Late Capitalism, (London: NLB, 1975), pp. 501-502.
39. Andre Gorz, Socialism and Revolution, (New York: Anchor, 1973), p. 101.
40. Braverman, p. 14.
41. Ralph, Miliband, Marxism and Politics, (New York: Oxford, 1978) p. 267.
42. Aldous Huxley, Brave New World Revisited, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 108.
43. See David G. Gil, "Resolving Issues of Social Provision," The Challenge of Social Equality: Essays on Social Policy, Social Development and Political Practice, (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1976), pp. 43-76.
44. Richard E. Leakey and Roger Lewin, People of the Lake: Mankind and Its Beginnings, (New York: Anchor, 1978), p. 282.