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Commentary: Agricultural racial capitalism and rural migrant workers

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ABSTRACT

This short commentary on the Special Issue ‘Agricultural Regimes and Migrant Labour’ emphasises the colonial roots of employment conditions and labour relations in the contemporary capitalist food supply chain; the continued reliance of agriculture on racialisation and unfree labour; and some of the individual and collective ways in which these have been resisted.

Like Medland (2021) the research I did for my doctorate focused on the movement of people seeking temporary work in agriculture away from home within the borders of a nation state. It was driven by questions about the agrarian reforms of the communist-led Left Front government in West Bengal. How much and to what extent had the reforms led to structural change favouring those rural dwellers who relied on working for a wage or renting land from others (Rogaly et al., 1999)? For nine months I divided my time between villages in two areas about one day’s bus journey apart.

Notwithstanding the inequalities between the areas I lived in, the richest of the farmers were at most small-scale capitalists. When they sold their harvest they faced more powerful economic actors, in particular the owners of rice mills and others involved in financing, processing or marketing crops (Harriss-White, 2008; Banaji, 2020). People who moved away for wage work also relied at other times on being employed by one of the farmers back home in the rainfed area and, in some cases, on farming their own micro-plots. In order to survive the year there were therefore elements of what Hedberg (2021) calls ‘simultaneity’, always embedded in intersecting inequalities of class, caste and gender (Rogaly, 1997). In an insightful piece of research about seasonal migration in various parts of India Gidwani and Sivar-amanakrishnan (2003) show that alongside the often harsh living conditions, difficult journeys and health risks of such moves, the earnings that working away from home entailed could also mean being able to wear newer, smarter clothes, and eat more and better quality food. People returning could even shift the social relations with rainfed farmers back home, demonstrating that they could no longer take their local workers for granted. They would have to speak to them with greater respect, and perhaps even pay them more (see also Rogaly et al., 2001).

This Special Issue on ‘Agricultural Regimes and Migrant Labour’ is focused on contemporary moves for agricultural work within and into Europe and Morocco. Most of the articles engage with the work required to maintain the supply of fresh fruit (and canned tomatoes – see Melossi, 2021) demanded by large sections of consumers in the global north, and the capitalist food supply regime through which that is organised. Since the 1990s the power of corporate retailers in this regime has grown, along with the specificity of retailers’ demands for ‘quality’ (eg the size, shape, uniformity and smoothness of fresh fruit) and for agility in terms of the ability of growers, packers and processors to increase or decrease supply at short notice. In the specific case of horticultural production in the UK in the 2000s, this has meant an increased demand for international migrant workers hired through commercial temporary employment agencies (Rogaly, 2008). Alongside the variations in forms of agrarian capitalism and its requirements for (and of) people who do wage work within it, it is important to note commonalities across space. Understanding the history of the contemporary capitalist food supply regime in Europe and north America involves confronting its roots in colonialism and slavery, including the regime’s continued reliance on...
The Special Issue is being published during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns around the world. Terms such as ‘key’ or ‘essential’ workers have been coined by states for people required to continue working in lockdown conditions, including people employed in the food supply chain. The pandemic not only revealed the disproportionate employment of racialised people in this sector (to those who did not already know), it also amplified the effects of structural racism, through insisting people work in unsafe environments without adequate ventilation, spacing or personal protective equipment (PPE), combined with lack of funding for people to isolate at home, leading to high levels of morbidity and mortality among food production and processing workers (Samaniego and Mantz, 2020; Rogaly and Schling, 2021). Even prior to the pandemic, global analysis during the first two decades of the twenty-first century showed that ‘intense labour exploitation’ is ‘central to the reproduction of global agriculture’ … ‘It is doubtful whether contemporary capitalist agro-industry could exist without vast pools of impoverished workers’ (Selwyn, 2021, p.783; see also O’Reilly and Rye, 2021, pp. 229–230). Just as Medland’s (2021) work in 2000 Morocco identifies the low-pay, ill-health and exhaustion associated with agricultural wage work, Selwyn’s summary of contemporary global conditions emphasises that ‘labour across myriad agricultural sectors is characterised by … disproportionately high rates of poverty compared to other economic sectors’ and that ‘agriculture is one of the three most dangerous occupational areas’. Moreover, ‘many national agricultural sectors have often been excluded from progressive extension of workers’ rights (such as minimum wages, collective bargaining or access to social services)’ (Selwyn, 2021, p. 794; see also Martin, 2021, p. 211). ‘One of the corporate food system’s principal foundations’ is ‘cheap and expendable labour’ (Selwyn, 2021, p. 795; King et al., 2021). I agree with Selwyn here, and Melossi (2021), that it is important to understand the conditions of agricultural and other food supply chain workers as a whole rather than focusing on ‘migrant’ workers alone, even while, especially for people who migrate internationally and other racialised people, ‘border imperialism’ (Walia, 2013) creates additional vulnerability to exploitation and deportation.

Contemporary racial capitalism, such as that revealed so starkly by the pandemic, is defined by geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in terms of its historical connection to agriculture and to slavery. Racial capitalism, writes Gilmore, is ‘a mode of production developed in agriculture, improved by enclosure in the Old World, and captive land and labor in the Americas, perfected in slavery’s time motion field-factory choreography’ (2017, pp. 225–226). As King et al. (2021) acknowledge in the Introduction to this Special Issue, transatlantic slavery was a form of forced migration for agricultural work, a key part of European colonial histories, and of the making of contemporary global inequalities. The connection between historical slavery and the contemporary conditions of agricultural work in California is also made by Martin (2021). ‘When farm workers are found in poor housing, indebted to recruiters, or working under exploitative conditions, it may seem that agriculture has not broken links with a past that included slavery, serfdom, and other institutions that exploited farm workers’ (Martin, 2021, p. 214; for an analysis of such connections in Florida, see Sellers and Ashed, 2011). Such arguments are taken further in Kris Manjapara’s research on the roots of ‘agricultural racial capitalism’ and the ‘global racial agrarian regime’ (2018, p. 361 and p. 366, emphasis added). For Manjapara the roots lie in the continuities that the plantation system represented following the abolition of the slave trade. Key here is how enforced migration and coerced work in the plantation regimes followed so swiftly on the heels of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Among Manjapara’s sources are manuals explaining how to control labour, circulation of which accelerated from the mid-1830s. Some sections of the manuals are critically brutal. Manjapara narrates how by the turn of the twentieth century multi-national corporations had gained power and control of the production and distribution of agricultural produce. Building on Du Bois (1998, pp. 15–16), Manjapara’s thesis is that the coercion of labour, transnational movements of people and racialisation that were all associated with agricultural work were intrinsic to the uneven accumulation of industrial capital across the world:

[Capitalism relies on racialized and gendered designations about the kinds of communities and peoples whose dispossession, exploitation and oblation is justifiable for the sake of “progress” and industrial growth … Forced labor and dispossessed life were the conditions of possibility for the discourse of progress and industrial development in the Global North (Manjapara, 2018, p. 365 & p. 382)]

It is important to note that Manjapara brings ‘gendered’ and ‘racialized’ ‘designations’ together here (see Prebish and Encalada Grez, 2010, for a Canadian case study). As Lisa Lowe explains, “[t]he term racial capitalism captures the sense that actually existing capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region, and nationality, and is lived through these” (Lowe, 2015, p. 149, emphasis in original). The connection between racialised and gendered designations is explored in detail in Gargi Bhattacharyya’s (2018, p. 50) important chapter on how the relation between production and social reproduction is crucial to understanding racial capitalism (see also Shah and Lerche, 2020; Medland, 2021).

The discussion of racial capitalism in this volume centres on the manner in which people are constituted as different kinds of participants in capitalist formations, both of production and consumption. In relation to questions of production, the interplay between reproductive and productive spheres constructs different kinds of creatures – from fully serviced ready-for-workers to hybrid beings who survive through a combination of ‘productive’ work and other forms of economic activity to those who exist at the edges or in the crevices of capitalist life-worlds.

The concept ‘modern slavery’ is often ‘posed as transcending politics’, militating against a ‘politics of solidarity’ (McGrath and Mieres, 2014). It also hinders effective critique of the range of ways in which capitalism itself creates, perpetuates and relies on forms of unfree labour, including in agriculture (Rogaly, 2015). Yet, it is important to note how reference is sometimes made to ‘slavery’ by agricultural workers themselves to convey racialised hierarchies, and the harshness of working and living conditions, including the ways in which workers are spoken about - and spoken to - by employers and labour contractors. Summing up the agricultural workplace regimes recalled by her Latvian research participants employed in Norwegian agriculture, Lulle (2021) described ‘discipline’ as being ‘established, both in the fields and in the dormitories, by systems of close supervision involving infantilising practices such as shouting, restrictions on social contact, time management to concentrate solely on work and maintain tempo, and hostel curfews, resulting in a perception that this was little better than gendered “slave work”’. Lulle quotes Daiga, a Latvian woman who worked in strawberry-producing greenhouses in the early 2000s. Daiga described what she had to do as ‘total slave work’. She refers directly to racialised hierarchies manifest in health and safety practices in the greenhouses, noting how, when a Norwegian on the farm had to handle pesticides, ‘he was fully dressed in protective clothing’, whereas ‘we Latvians, Estonians and Poles did it with our bare hands.’ Behind such practices lie processes of racialisation of certain people as expendable according to their nationality or their status as foreigners or migrants, not only, or necessarily, on the basis of skin colour alone. In his Foreword to the revised edition of Cedric Robinson’s classic book Black Marxism, historian Robin Kelley summarises Robinson’s argument regarding racial capitalism that ‘the racialization of the proletariat … began within Europe itself … the “lower orders” usually were comprised of immigrant workers from territories outside the nations in which they worked. These immigrant workers were placed at the bottom of a racial hierarchy’ (Robinson, 2000: xii).
Fast forward to the tomato fields of Puglia, Italy in the 2010s and a manifestation of agricultural racial capitalism in which racialisation was part of a multi-pronged system of exploitation and oppression of African migrant workers (Melossi, 2021). Melossi worked for a local radio station (Radio Ghetto) run by workers living in shanty town settlements near the town of Foggia, before conducting her research. She locates the conditions of workers as produced by the intensive processor/distributor/retailer-dominated tomato capitalism, which she terms the ‘tomato industry hierarchy chain’. This chain rests on a combination of structural forces produced and operated by the state, large companies (including the media) and wider society. Melossi shows how the role of the state included i) police harassment of, and violence against, racialised migrant workers and ii) immigration law, creating insecure immigration statuses that made workers particularly vulnerable to deportation.

The lack of pathways to regularisation and citizenship was cited as a frustration by Nepali workers in Portugal interviewed as part of Pereira et al.’s (2021). Similar constraints imposed by another kind of state-defined immigration status were described by activist-researcher Amy Cohen (2019) in her analysis of Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). In this case it was the specific temporary immigration status bestowed by the state-regulated scheme that meant workers were tied to their employers throughout their time in Canada and subject to deportation if they broke the rules. The state in Italy, Portugal and Canada is thus a crucial actor in producing the precariousness of workers’ legal status, a condition which Cohen argues contributes to ‘border imperialism’ (Cohen, 2019, p. 131; Walla, 2013).

Alongside such macro structures, the Canadian SAWP also provides vivid illustrations of more micro, day-to-day-to-day practices of agricultural racial capitalism, including ways in which slavery was directly evoked by racialised workers describing their living and working conditions and the use of slavery-like discourses by employers to oppress and try to humiliate workers and keep them in their place. For example, Moises, a grandfather whom Cohen interviewed in Mexico City, spoke to her about his experience of working in Canada through SAWP:

> The housing is undignified, but when we complain about the conditions to the boss, he says ‘why are you complaining, in Mexico you live in huts and sleep on the floor?’ The boss yells at us, harasses us to work harder. I am not allowed to leave the farm without asking permission. I am not allowed to go find another job no matter how badly I’m treated. Slavery hasn’t ended, it has just become modernized (Cohen, 2019, p. 138).

Scott and Rye (2021) use the term ‘informed stereotypes’ to describe how strawberry growers in the UK, Norway and the US think and talk about workers of particular nationalities. It is not quite clear what they mean by ‘informed’ here. Self-described labourer-teacher, Edward Dunsworth, who focused on the employment of Caribbean workers in SAWP, found that employers ‘strongly evoked racist tropes about black subservience that can be traced to the era of African slavery in the Americas’ Dunsworth (2021, p.77). As well as working as a farm labourer and teaching after work classes in literacy and computing, Dunsworth (2021) conducted oral history and archival research. The latter produced the following example of racialised discourse used about potential Caribbean workers by an Ontario tobacco farmer interviewed in 1985:

> Well, with the West Indians, they’re a subservient type of people you see. They’ve always been hard up, and if they ever got fired off a job up here for any reason at all, their government would never let them come back up here. So they had a disadvantage right-off the bat in working conditions. They would [do just] about anything you ask, and no questions. (2021, p. 77)

In describing the way in which state and capital have continued to combine to produce the oppression and exploitation of agricultural workers, it is also important to be attentive to the ways in which this continues to be resisted. O’Reilly and Rye argue that the agency of migrant workers in contemporary European agriculture does not effectively push back against the structures that produce exploitation because ‘their own agency, as with all agents involved in rural labour migration, is shaped by what has gone before through the constraints of external and internalised (and learned) structures.’ (2021, p. 241). This does not do justice to the potential for agricultural workers (whether or not they are migrants) to be part of a wider coalition-based struggle for greater worker control within agrarian racial capitalism and against capitalism all together (Selwyn, 2021). The revolution against slavery in Haiti in the early nineteenth century demonstrates the power and potential of world-making transformation from below (James, 1989 [1963]).

As we have argued elsewhere in relation both to the UK and the Indian contexts, such a position also downplays the importance to workers’ subjective well-being of small, even fleeting victories, including when resistance does not lead to wider structural change (Rogaly, 2009). Interviewed by Dunsworth in 2017, retired Barbadian worker Winston Bovell took satisfaction from recalling his push back against the harsh working conditions he experienced in his second year as a migrant agricultural worker in Canada under SAWP and his refusal of racialising essentialism. Bovell led a work stoppage protesting at the delays caused by faulty harvest machinery that were especially costly to workers because they were being paid piece rates rather than hourly rates. When he was told to ‘get back on that fucking machine you son of a bitch’, Bovell replied:

> Me a free man. I tell you these words, listen to me, listen to me very carefully. I’m from Barbados. My passport come from Barbados, I’m not Canadian. And I could go back to Barbados any time I want. Because I’m not going to go home and sleep on the streets. I have a house like you, I have the same flushing toilet, I have the same bath … I have the same stove, fridge, everything like you. I don’t live in a mud hut. I live in a proper home. (Dunsworth, 2021, p. 78, p. 78)

The attempt to keep the actual nature of working life from family back home can be seen as another form of agency with a potentially important effect on the subjective experience of working in exploitative, dangerous or low-paid occupations. In the novel Inheritance of Loss, Biju hides the realities of his life as an undocumented migrant in New York city from his family in Kalimpong, India (Desai, 2006; more generally, see Niewand, 2011). Similarly, Pereira et al. (2021) quote Devendra, a Nepali man in his early 30s interviewed in 2017–18. Devendra was one of thousands of foreign national workers employed in the intensive production of raspberries in the greenhouses of Odemira, Portugal. ‘I hide my current job position from my family’, he told the interviewer, ‘and only my wife knows that I work on a farm. I never imagined a life like this. It is a matter of shame and I don’t tell my family that I am working in agriculture’. Devendra is using agency to lie about his occupation to avoid bringing shame or disappointment to his family in Nepal. Admittedly, while I am suggesting this is an agentic act and one that may contribute to Devendra’s subjective well-being, there is an alternative interpretation: that this is effectively capitulation to the association of agricultural wage work with low status and that truth-telling about it could itself be an act of resistance. Indeed Lulle (2021)’s fine-grained analysis of interviews with Latvian nationals working in tomato greenhouses in Guernsey and in strawberry fields in Norway shows that ‘just going abroad itself had a value: work in a “Western” country had more prestige than the chaotic social and employment situation in post-socialist Latvia’. Further, some people emphasised agricultural wage work as ‘worthy labour’ and international migration for such employment as combining ‘youthful adventure, travel outside one’s comfort zone and extra money’.

In another context – that of late nineteenth century Russia - the combination of exploitation and oppression of seasonal migrant workers, on the one hand, and its simultaneous potential for changed
social relations, on the other, was explored by Lenin (1964 [1899]). The annual movement south of two million people entailed great deprivation. Boats capsized; employers were able to wait until people’s meagre supplies were exhausted and then negotiate lower wages; working days lasted twelve to fifteen hours often in insanitary conditions. Yet Lenin argued that the migration of people for agricultural wage work could also be seen as progressive because workers earned higher wages than in the source areas, bonded labour and labour service were destroyed and people developed ‘from an independent acquaintance with the different relations and orders of things in the South and in the North, in agriculture and in industry, in the capital and in the backwoods’ (Lenin, 1964 [1899], pp. 240–254).

Mesic and Wikstrom (2021) discuss collective action by blueberry pickers in Sweden more than a century later. Workers here were protesting against the highly exploitative transnational subcontracting chains that determined the terms and conditions of their recruitment and work, and the Swedish state’s failure to regulate these. Because the berries grow wild, this work is not industrialised in the same way as the cases written about by others in the Special Issue (with the exception of Hedberg (2021), who also focuses on migrant berry pickers in Sweden but with a different analytical perspective), Mesic and Wikstrom (2021) provide important detail on collective actions involving coalitions of berry-pickers, and long-term residents of areas where the pickers lived and worked. They show that, over the course of the 2010s, purposive ‘acts of citizenship’ took place to make visible the employment and living conditions of workers and their lack of political voice. The series of acts narrated in the paper begin with a 1000 km march to Stockholm by Chinese berry pickers, a separate but simultaneous town hall protest by Vietnamese pickers four hundred kilometres away, and a later walk out by Bulgarian Roma pickers. Such collective action met a mixed response from long-term residents, including hostility, charity, and more solidaristic support. Gains made by workers were, argue Mesic and Wikstrom, temporary and context-specific, and often depended on media coverage to force change. Structural exploitation continued at the end of the decade, for example in the insistence on piece-rate wages ‘that mean great insecurities in a poor berry season’ and a lack of effective regulation of labour contractors charging for journeys to work and for other costs incurred at picking sites.

Returning to the small-scale labour intensive capitalist agriculture in West Bengal with which I began, employment of wage workers in this context entailed complex relations between long-term residents, people moving for seasonal work and agricultural employers. Relations were mediated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and its associated ‘peasant union’ or Krishak Sabha. The very idea of a peasant union (the CPI(M) did not have a separate associated union for wage workers) was based on the notion that workers and small-scale capitalist employers could and did have common interests in the face of the economic and political power of former landlords, finance capital, and large scale food processors and distributors. In effectively keeping a lid on class conflict between farmers and wage workers, this stance enabled exploitative labour relations, derogatory treatment of workers, and squallid and crowded living and travel conditions to continue. However, it also meant that a minimum wage could be enforced that was paid to migrants as well as to long-term resident wage workers as part of a bargain that prevented the latter from objecting to the former’s presence (Rogaly, 1998). The Indian farmer protests of 2021 provide another example of collective action, in this case against the power of much more powerful corporations (Dubal and Gill, 2020). Here, the federal state has sought to enable large private corporations to take much more state-regularised agricultural marketing and distribution (Singh, 2020). Though unevenly and imperfectly, the protests have entailed political coalitions from below across class and caste difference, and challenged patriarchy. At the time of writing, in the context of the catastrophic wave of COVID-19 in India in 2021, their outcome remains uncertain.

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