



The COVID-19 spring and the expendability of guestworkers

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In the Spring of 2020, attempts by the governments of the USA and Western European countries to control the spread of COVID-19 caused food shortages and higher prices, making palpable for their citizens how the agricultural industry produces and distributes food. In addition to the biopolitics of agricultural production, the policies of pandemic containment are transforming and re-deploying existing labor relations across the globe. In the USA, government officials and growers are seeking to transfer the H-2A visa program for guest farmworkers from the Department of Labor to the Department of Agriculture and to lower migrants' wages. These efforts, if successful, will amount to handing control of the H-2A visa program to growers. Understanding the effects of COVID-19 on guestworker programs and migrant farm labor requires not only an anthropology of dispossession, disasters, or their aftershocks but also an anthropology of labor migration. It is imperative to examine how pandemics shape the paths through which government officials and employers mobilize and allocate labor, shaping how subjects maneuver within fields of power and are constituted as subjects within those fields (Wolf 2001: 385). This article briefly explores the initial impact of the responses to COVID-19 on guestworker programs, farm labor, and the production of food in the USA and some Western European countries.

The contemporary anthropological concern in studying dispossession and people “outside” capitalism, with its great variety of concepts, such as “precariat,” “disposable peoples,” “the bare life,” “surplus populations,” “states of exception,” and “wasted lives,” privileges an optic on power based on membership and its exclusions, creating new alternatives to the concept of class. This trend is partly the result of the popularity of studies on accumulation through dispossession and the intensity of such processes on a global scale. However, the emphasis on disposability obscures the expendability, or exploitation in simpler Marxist terms, of workers and the manifold ways that migration and dispossession are producing and transforming multiple labor relations. The dynamics surrounding guestworker programs during the COVID-19 spring are one central example that reveals the multiple processes constituting and constituted by labor relations (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014: 23). It is also important to examine this moment as a historical juncture in the long history of state interventions in

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guestworker programs (Çağlar and Schiller 2018: 22; Kalb and Tak 2005). This article offers some notes of this history in order to elucidate the current agrarian labor regimes in the USA and Western Europe.

In the twentieth century, dependence on guestworkers emerged mainly in Western Europe, South Africa, and the USA as a result of nativism. Employers' constant search for lower labor costs and disciplined workers led to their reliance on an ever-changing immigrant labor force facilitated by the unevenness of capitalism and segmentation. Between the 1870s and 1920s, restrictions on immigration, such as the Foran Act's banning of contract immigrants in the USA, and the extension and growth of unemployment insurance and welfare benefits for citizens began to impose limits on immigration (Baldoz 2011: 45; Fahrmeir 2007: 89–123; Hahamovitch 2003, 201: 12). Local officials complained about immigrants becoming charges of government relief programs. Labor unions represented a challenge to employers who sought to use new immigrant groups as strike breakers. Guestwork became an alternative that appeased anti-immigrant sectors, as governments began to implement deportation and gate-keeping practices to restrict immigration. Thus, employers could expand their profits by using temporary migrants, while governments ensured the rights and safety net of their citizens. In 1890, the Prussian government created one of the first guestworker programs with Polish migrant farmworkers. In South Africa, employers in the mining sector hired workers from overseas, mostly Chinese migrants, and other African countries. In the USA, the first Bracero program began during World War I with the recruitment of Mexican workers and families (De Genova and Peutz 2010; García Colón 2020: 23–24; Gonzalez 2006; Hahamovitch 2011: 12–19; Jung 2006; Lee 2003; Ngai 2004; Wolf 1982: 366–368).

During the Great Depression, the US federal government's New Deal policies attempted to smooth the unevenness of unemployment throughout the country by regulating the hiring and allocation of workers between regions. The Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933 established a system to regulate employment by creating an interstate employment exchange system that was administered by the US Employment Service. When World War II broke out, the federal government instituted a guestworker program whose main source was Mexico, but which also recruited workers from Canada and the British colonies in the Caribbean. Government officials and growers argued that wartime labor shortages made food production a matter of national security, although, in reality, most of the labor shortages were the result of the reluctance of war-related industries and growers to pay higher wages. After the war, the US government allowed the continuation of the Mexican Bracero Program.

The Immigration and Nationality act of 1952 expanded considerably the use of guestworkers under the H-2 visa program. The statute required employers to justify their requests to hire guestworkers by demonstrating that not enough local workers were available. Employers filed job vacancies with the US Department of Labor, which would distribute them to state and local employment offices. If the supply of local workers available to work under the wage and conditions set forth by growers and government officials was insufficient, the US Department of Labor certified the use of guestworkers. When the Mexican Bracero Program ended in 1964, the H-2 visa program became the sole guestworker program. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) transformed the hiring of guest farmworkers into the H-2A visa program (Cowan 1978: 40–45; García Colón 2020: 231; Griffith 1986: 877; Martin 2014: 42–43). The history of guestworker programs points to the entrenched use of labor-busting and deportation practices to maintain a docile and low-wage labor force. Capital always looks to sustain these conditions no matter how, when, and where they find the workers they need (Wolf 1982: 361).

In the Spring of 2020, the contradictions of using guestworker programs became visible when governments began to enact measures to contain COVID-19. The coming of March coincided with the beginning of the harvest and agricultural activities in the USA and Western Europe. As Germany began to close its borders, the harvest began and the supply of farm labor stopped, risking the rotting of crops in the ground. In the UK, farmers were having difficulty finding workers for raspberry picking and harvesting potatoes. In Italy, workers were needed to harvest more than a quarter of the strawberry, beans, and lettuce crops, but the lockdown excluded 150,000 guest farmworkers from Romania, Poland, India, and elsewhere from entering the country. Growers and small farmers began to complain loudly that labor shortages in agriculture threatened food security. In fact, the US and Western European governments declared food an issue of national security when millions of their citizens began hoarding food supplies in anticipation of shortages during the lockdown (Alderman et al. 2020; Bacon 2020; Eddy 2020; Horowitz 2020). Consequently, governments came to understand the need to keep the borders open for guest farmworkers and to designate agricultural jobs as essential.

Like the USA, Western European countries are also experiencing problems with the hiring and transportation of guestworkers. Germany, France, Italy, and Spain have recruited 3,000,000 migrant workers from Eastern Europe to harvest asparagus, pick strawberries, and plant late-season crops. The German government is allowing farmers to airlift migrant workers from Romania and Bulgaria to ease labor shortages, and German farmers organized flights to transport 28,000 guest workers in April and May. Florian Bogensberger, a farmer in Bavaria, paid approximately \$11,000 to fly in 23 Romanian guestworkers. This measure has not solved the problem, but it has created concerns about the possibility of importing new COVID-19 infections. Friedrich Ostendorff, a member of the German Green party, denounced the importation of guest farmworkers as exploitation of people desperate to make a living during COVID-19 (Eddy 2020). In Italy, unemployment has pushed citizens to find jobs in agriculture, though their numbers are not sufficient for a labor regime characterized by the mobilization of a temporary and mostly immigrant labor force. Competition with other countries has led agricultural employers to rely on lowering labor costs in order to increase profits (Horowitz 2020).

The argument from many government officials, growers, and labor advocates is that the need for guestworkers derives from the fact that only small numbers of local workers have applied for agricultural jobs, as most of the local population is unwilling to work under arduous agricultural labor conditions characterized by long hours and low wages (Thompson 2020). In France, people signed up for agricultural jobs on a website that matches workers with farms, while major supermarket conglomerates pledged to buy from local farms (Alderman et al. 2020; Eddy 2020). Some Italians who had been working in restaurants, bakeries, and cafes are turning to farm labor after losing their jobs, and they find working outdoors safer (Horowitz 2020). However, the number of local workers willing to take agricultural jobs remains very low because of the low wages and paltry working and living conditions offered. Meanwhile, in the USA, the Trump Administration is increasing the rhetoric of nativism and pandemic to implement aggressive immigration bans that affect other industries and arguing that these policies benefit US workers by reducing job competition from immigrants.

Large agribusiness interests and their allied government officials continue to promote policies facilitating labor control and guestworker programs because of their reliance on deportable, low-wage, and immigrant workers. In the USA, guest farmworkers are in a worse situation since their reliance on the H-2A visas had rendered them virtually indentured because

they depend almost totally on the employers who sponsor their visas, and they can lose their jobs anytime for complaining about their working and living conditions or for falling ill. Employers can force guestworkers to leave the USA on a moment's notice, and workers' fear of losing their livelihoods makes them unlikely to confront and protest abuses. The US State Department is also encouraging agricultural employers to bring guest farmworkers by citing growers' concerns about labor shortages and waiving visa interview requirements for H-2A workers, thus making it easier for employers to re-hire current H-2A workers (Coleman 2020).

On April 20, 2020, the US Department of Homeland and Security, and its agency the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, issued a temporary rule, valid until August 18, 2020, extending H-2A workers' stay in the USA beyond the 3-year maximum initially allowed. The reason given for this measure was "to provide agricultural employers with an orderly and timely flow of legal foreign workers, thereby protecting the integrity of the nation's food supply chain and decreasing possible reliance on unauthorized aliens" (Homeland Security 2020). The agency cited the disruptions and uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 public health emergency in the US agriculture sector during the upcoming summer harvest season as the main reason for the revised policy (Homeland Security 2020). Agricultural businesses expect 200,000 seasonal guest farmworkers from Mexico and Central America to enter the USA with H-2A visas (Leslie 2020). In March 2020, the US Department of State registered a 20% increase in the number of H-2A visas issued compared with in March 2019 (from 22,374 to 26,957 visas). This number was surpassed in the month of April, with 31,3030 issued, a record for H-2A visas issued in a single month. These trends demonstrate the dependence of US agriculture on one of the most exploited groups of workers. The H-2A visa program has no caps on the number of visas that the government can issue annually; in 2019, the number increased to nearly 10% (204,801) of the more than 2 million farmworkers in the country. Still, H-2A workers are a minority among US farmworkers, even as half of all farmworkers are undocumented (Bacon 2020; Coleman 2020; Dorning and Skerritt 2020).

When government officials and growers talk of labor shortages, they are signaling their inability to attract domestic workers who would settle for low wages and still earn enough to sustain their families. Even before the increase of COVID-19 infections among the non-guestworkers, US agriculture was experiencing a lack of workers, causing harvesting problems and higher prices. In May, two pounds of strawberries were being sold for 17% more than last year, and a pint of cherry tomatoes was 52% more costly (Dorning and Skerritt 2020).

Labor shortages and the dependence on guestworkers are also a result of the working conditions in agriculture. Workers toil the fields at high temperatures, soaked with sweat for 8 h or more. Most guestworkers experience violation of their legal rights, including substandard wages, unsafe housing, sexual harassment, and coercion. While most farmworkers are undocumented and therefore vulnerable to abuse and deportation, guestworkers tend to be isolated from their communities, subject to the inequities of contracts that are not the outcome of negotiations but rather an official expression of their unequal status. Recruiters in countries like Mexico extort fees from guestworkers who then arrive in the USA with debts. Workers often are not paid the so-called adverse effect wage rate, the minimum wage required by the US Department of Labor for workers with H-2A visas, because employers deduct transportation, housing, and other costs from their pay. Aspiring guestworkers in rural areas of countries with high unemployment continue applying for H-2A jobs because of the opportunity they offer to support their families (Bacon 2020; Coleman 2020).

Agricultural labor has always been "essential work," though most people were unaware of this. Food shortages caused by the COVID-19 crisis, however, have made the public aware

that they need farmworkers, even if they come from other countries (Coleman 2020; Thompson 2020). Nevertheless, designating guest farmworkers as essential workers has not stopped the efforts of Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue to reduce their wages. Many employers have lobbied against the H-2A rules that require them to pay guestworkers the prevailing wage based on state-by-state surveys of prevailing wages. These efforts are led by White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and Secretary Perdue, both friends of big agribusiness interests. A reduction in guestworker wages would be concerning since migrants often struggle to feed their own families, and the pandemic has worsened their financial situation. Farmworkers are paid about half of the wages of comparable workers in other industries (Leslie 2020).

Even as the American Farm Bureau supports these measures, the California Farm Bureau Federation opposes them and prefers an increase in government paycheck protections and assistance in the delivery of crops to food banks as demand from restaurants and wholesale decreases. California growers experience particular difficulty in attracting farmworkers in areas where the high cost of living makes it impossible for them to subsist. Reduction of guestworkers' wages is mostly intended to benefit employers in the Southeast, where tobacco growers in North Carolina could save \$5.42 an hour and Florida growers could save \$3.15 an hour (Leslie 2020). Secretary Perdue has also been pushing for the US Department of Agriculture to administer the H-2A visa program, currently under the US Department of Labor, in order to secure agricultural employers' control over the program. In addition, Perdue has not earmarked any of the money from the CARES Act for farmworkers, instead providing farmers \$16 billion in direct aid and \$3 billion in purchases for food programs (Coleman 2020).

The CDC's social distance recommendations under COVID-19 also represent a problem for food production. Employers need to transport farmworkers to the fields in crowded busses and trucks from housing—barracks with bunk beds—that tends to be crowded. Working conditions in the fields make it difficult for farmworkers to wash their hands, and protective gear, when available, is often uncomfortable for them to wear when working under the high temperatures. In the USA, farmworkers generally lack health insurance and paid sick leave, so skipping a day work because of sickness is not an option for most of them (Dorning and Skerritt 2020; Leslie 2020). Many employers have not made changes to implement social distancing recommendations or provided farmworkers with protective equipment and information about COVID-19. The lack of information in Spanish makes it even more difficult for many workers to protect themselves. A Facebook Live event held by the United Farm Workers attracted more than 18,000 farmworkers, most of who indicated that their employers did not provide information about COVID-19. Some workers even heard from employers that, "There's no such thing as COVID-19. It's an invention of the government" (Campbell 2020; Coleman 2020).

Instead of improving the working and living conditions in US agriculture, the Trump administration insists on a pay cut for guest farmworkers, making their expendability, regardless of their working and living conditions, more evident (Leslie 2020). Many of these working and living conditions under COVID-19 are not new, but the pandemic has made them more visible and increased the probability that they will worsen as time passes. In May and early June, reports pointed out that COVID-19 is spreading among the farmworkers, with 29 guestworkers infected at a farm in North Carolina and 36 farmworkers, including guestworkers, infected in Washington State. In Tennessee, 200 workers at one farm were infected. New Jersey reported 110 farmworkers ill, and 170 cases were confirmed in one

greenhouse in New York (Campbell 2020; Coleman 2020; Dorning and Skerritt 2020). Many undocumented farmworkers also continue working in the fields because of their ineligibility to apply for unemployment and their fear of being deported if they use public services.

The Family First Act requires US employers to provide workers 2 weeks of paid leave, but farms with more than 500 workers are exempt. At the same time, some US employers are telling workers not to get tested for COVID-19 because they will get fired if they test positive, and if they get quarantined, they will not be paid, effectively forcing them to continue working in the fields (Campbell 2020; Dorning and Skerritt 2020; Thompson 2020). A farmworker advocate in Florida stated that, “When there is an economic reality that you need to work to feed your family, then you’re going to be more likely to take a risk and not speak up about unsafe conditions, because you feel like you don’t have a choice” (Campbell 2020). The situation is very similar in Europe, where a guest farmworker at a German farm remarked, “Everybody feels a bit scared, but we also need to work” (Eddy 2020).

This situation could be potentially catastrophic for guestworkers and all farmworkers in the USA since many workers travel between their countries of origin and the USA and across the country as they harvest a variety of crops during the different seasons. When workers finish in Florida, they travel north to Georgia, North Carolina, Indiana, New Jersey, and New York, often making the journey from state to state in crowded school busses. These journeys could result in spreading the virus to other states, regions, and communities, including the workers’ home communities when the harvest is over (Dorning and Skerritt 2020).

Mobilizing workers from far distances to produce food is not impossible, as the ongoing history of guestworker programs and farm labor migration indicates. However, the political ecology of COVID-19 challenges us to rethink contemporary labor relations in agriculture. Securing an available farm labor force requires the immigration policing bureaucracy to maintain open borders, while employers need to sustain and expand their profits by lowering their labor costs. The extension of visas and lowering of guestworkers’ wages and the opening of borders and airlifting of thousands of guestworkers are examples of the gamble that governments and growers take to secure their harvests. These policies not only reveal the contradictions within anti-immigrant and deportation policies, they are also impeding the containment of COVID-19 by allowing travel and crowded living and working conditions. But lowering the standard of living of farmworkers who have been dispossessed and unemployed in their countries of origin seems not to be sufficient for large agribusinesses: Governments continue to acquiesce to growers’ preferences for controlling immigration and labor policies.

Contingencies like COVID-19 affect government relations with capital and how the latter uses them to take advantage of and transform existing labor relations. As Wolf points out, the power to deploy and allocate labor renders some behaviors possible and makes other less possible or impossible (2001, 385). COVID-19 containment is creating artificial labor shortages that cannot be resolved by hiring local workers because states rendered them unnecessary for agriculture a long time ago. The elimination of the local population from the production of food implied the elimination of a particular way of life and set of work skills. Meanwhile, the need for a specific agrarian labor regime for temporary migrants continues, constituting guest farmworkers as racialized subjects who are available to fulfill the demands of capital as low-wage, docile, and disciplined workers because of their deportability status. Undocumented and guestworkers are emerging as “essential” workers because of the pandemic, while their host countries keep cheating them out of decent living and working conditions. It is not by chance that U.S. farm labor is mostly constituted by undocumented workers, permanent authorized

immigrants, colonial subjects, people of color, and guestworkers. During COVID-19 times, guestworkers and other farmworkers have moved from being disposable to essential but expendable.

As governments and capital across the globe keep deforesting large areas for agriculture and polluting, ravaging epidemics and climate change will make the problems of producing an adequate food acute. This moment presents us with another opportunity to reveal the consequences of power for the inequalities of agricultural production and the arbitrariness of its labor regimes. COVID-19 made visible to all the continuous ruptures and unevenness of global capitalism that many people experience on a daily basis outside of the USA and Western Europe.

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