

Contents

Special Issue: COVID Capitalism: Contested Migrant Labour Logistics in the Double Crisis

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Special Issue Articles

- COVID capitalism: The contested logistics of migrant labour supply chains in the double crisis 175
Stephan Scheel, Soledad Álvarez Velasco and Nicholas De Genova
- The capitalist virus 188
Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson
- The ‘Long Spring’ of migration management: Labour supply in the pandemic-induced EU border regime 203
Cecilia Vergnano
- Seasonal workers wanted! Germany’s seasonal labour migration regime and the COVID-19 pandemic 219
Dorothea Biaback Anong
- Governed bodies, discarded bodies: Notes for an analysis of contemporary migrations during Covid-19 235
Yerko Castro Neira
- Venezuelan migrants in delivery platform work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Buenos Aires, Argentina: Between exploitability, precariousness, and daily resistance 252
Héctor Fabio Bermúdez Lenis
- Economic and mobility repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Chile–Bolivia border 268
Nanette Liberona and Carlos Piñones-Rivera

A corona-carnival? A carnivalesque interpretation of (im)mobilities under COVID-19 lockdowns	284
<i>Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobarrubias</i>	
Immobility beyond borders: Differential inclusion and the impact of the COVID-19 border closures	302
<i>Hannah Pool</i>	

COVID capitalism: The contested logistics of migrant labour supply chains in the double crisis

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Abstract

The introduction to the special issue (SI) lays out the agenda and key concepts of the SI 'COVID Capitalism: The Contested Logistics of Migrant Labour Supply Chains in the Double Crisis'. The contributions to the SI focus on the reconfiguration of the means and methods of the exploitation of migrant labour during the COVID-19 pandemic and the related reorganisation of contemporary border and migration regimes. They all focus, more or less explicitly, on the adaptation and reorganisation of migrant labour supply chains which were disrupted through the 'double crisis' of public health and existing border and mobility regimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the SI seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of COVID-capitalism, understood as a form of disaster capitalism, in which fractions of capital try to turn the multiple crises implicated by the pandemic into a source of profit. If and how they succeed with these endeavours is, however, not guaranteed from the outset but an empirical question. The study of migrant labour supply chains does thus not only help to develop a more nuanced understanding of disaster capitalism but also contributes to debates on the logistification of migration management.

Keywords

borders, capitalism, COVID-19 pandemic, labour-power, migration

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A few years since the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it is frankly astounding how little serious thought and dialogue has been devoted to contemplating its implications for fundamental questions about contemporary social and political life. Instead, we have witnessed and participated in a desperate and frenzied rush to ‘return to normal’ that has overpowered our collective capacity to truly confront the monumentality of the mass death, illness, and social and economic disruption of the double crisis of public health and the world capitalist economy. Indeed, the hegemonic discourse that treated a ‘return to work’ as a dire necessity for bolstering ‘the economy’ predictably evaded deeper questions about a potentially epochal transformation in the very nature of labour, and more radically, served to suppress still more fundamental questions concerning our entire way of life (De Genova, 2021, 2022). This Special Issue (SI) contributes to the overdue effort to reflect on some of the profound and enduring lessons of the pandemic. Specifically, the contributions to this SI foreground how the logistics of migrant labour – or more precisely, an understanding of cross-border human mobilities as supply chains of migrant labour-power – provide a critical lens through which to apprehend crucial dynamics of contemporary capitalism. The truly exceptional and unprecedented character of the COVID-19 emergency supplied an extraordinary and extreme set of circumstances through which to expose and critically examine some of the defining features of how migrant labour is central to satisfying the requirements of the world economy. Simultaneously, especially when conjoined with the coronavirus’ menace to life and social reproduction, these processes reveal how capital’s dependency on the mobility of living labour, particularly as embodied in the persons (and health) of migrants, remains a site of permanent volatility, unresolved antagonism, and the potential for insubordination.

This special issue investigates the reconfiguration of the means and methods of the exploitation of migrant labour during the COVID-19 pandemic and the related reorganisation of contemporary border and migration regimes. The contributions to this SI follow an approach of ‘re-bordering as method’, to paraphrase Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013). That is, they use the study of particular instances of re-bordering during the pandemic and related social and political struggles as an analytical prism in order to shed light on larger transformations in the composition of capital and the exploitation of migrant labour. Policy making in the field of so-called ‘migration management’ is a highly contested arena of politics, not least by migrants themselves, who commonly develop creative tactics to negotiate and subvert even the most sophisticated tactics and techniques of border and mobility control. The contested politics of (labour) migration played a significant role in the COVID-19 crisis, which was a double crisis also in the sense that it was, first and foremost, a crisis of existing neoliberal regimes of capital accumulation, while simultaneously presenting a more specific political crisis of control for migration and labour regimes.

The initial, predominant response of governments around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of border closures and various forms of mobility restrictions – even though the alleged capacity of these measures to curb the spread of the virus was always highly dubious (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; De Genova, 2022; Kenwick and Simmons, 2020). Moreover, there were noteworthy exceptions. After 3 months of border closures and mass quarantine (so-called ‘lockdowns’), the German government resorted to lifting entry restrictions for 80,000 harvest workers from Bulgaria and Romania in July 2020. Already in April and May, the government had agreed to the entry of 40,000 harvest workers per month to satisfy the labour demand of German farmers, who were alarmed at

the prospect of looming financial losses. According to lobby groups of the agricultural industry, more than 280,000 labour migrants are needed annually to facilitate the cultivation and harvesting of fruits and vegetables on German farms. To limit the risk of spreading the virus, migrant workers were supposed to travel through plane, live, and work under completely isolated conditions for the first 14 days after arrival and were not allowed to leave the farms during their stay (Maurin, 2020).

During the same period, more than 300,000 seafarers – many of them labour migrants from the Philippines – were stuck on their vessels, unable to return home due to travel restrictions, or prohibited by port authorities to leave their ships, or not able to travel because of the unwillingness of their employers to pay for their journeys. Seafarers working on cruise ships reported that they had to continue working and serve guests after first infections had been detected while the ship was put under quarantine. Some of those allowed to leave reported odyssey-like journeys that lasted several months during which seafarers were kept – without any pay – under prison-like conditions in closed quarantine facilities (Cruz, 2020). What these examples illustrate is that the modes of bordering, which were put into place as an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, caused an interruption of migrant labour supply chains, exacerbating the double crisis (De Genova, 2022).

However, precisely because of this sudden interruption – and this, indeed, is the analytical starting point of this SI – these otherwise mostly smoothly functioning and thus invisibilised migrant labour supply chains were put into view of the wider public, becoming the subject of heated political debate. On one hand, the global pandemic operated like a prism that highlighted the vital importance of migrant labour for the functioning of entire industries and economic sectors in countries in both the Global North and South. Suddenly people working in jobs characterised by low pay, precarious working conditions and low social prestige – for the most part done by migrants for precisely these reasons – were recast as ‘essential workers’ and thus granted preferential access to mobility (see Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2024: 284–301). However, the workers concerned were not necessarily gratified by this newfound public recognition of their labour in the context of a global health crisis in which mobility and human interactions were considered a risk of contracting a potentially lethal, largely unknown virus. Rather, they were well aware that – due to what Marx (1976 [1867]: 899) calls ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’ – they were forced to continue selling their labour-power to reproduce the material basis of their own lives, thus ‘potentially work(ing) themselves, literally, to death’ (De Genova, 2021: 241).

However, the global health crisis thus brought into view the severe working conditions in the jobs that were suddenly recast as ‘essential work’ as well as the often violent and degrading mechanisms operating within the global migrant labour supply chains meant to facilitate the circulation, availability, and subordination of migrant labour. Debates about these mechanisms of labour control, and the bad working and living conditions implicated by them, ensued precisely because under the conditions of the global health crisis: these mechanisms were no longer working and had to be adjusted and refined. The interruption of migrant labour supply chains was often accompanied by labour struggles initiated by migrant workers. The early period of the pandemic saw a wave of wildcat strikes, walkouts, and work stoppages worldwide by workers whose conditions of labour put them at heightened risk of infection, notably including those employed in food production, meat and poultry processing, childcare, healthcare and nursing homes, grocery stores and delivery – all industries in which labour is commonly not unionised and all frequently dominated by migrant workforces.

What these struggles illustrate is that migrant labour supply chains cannot simply be conflated with the logistics of other supply chains precisely because labour-power is a commodity unlike any other. Its peculiarity resides in the fact that it is tied to the body of a living human subject whose mental, emotional, and physical capabilities to work have to be put into action in order to be exploited, but who may resist, refuse, or subvert these endeavours (Marx, 1976 [1867]: Chapter 6; see also Mezzadra, 2018: Chapter 7). For what is being commodified and bought and sold on so-called labour-markets ‘is not “a force in action” but rather a “potentiality” to be used for what it “is not yet”, as Sandro Mezzadra (2018: 62) aptly puts it, citing the work of Pierre Macherey (2015). The crisis of migrant labour supply chains in the COVID pandemic thus comprised both the interruption of established logistical routes and corridors facilitating the circulation and ‘delivery’ of migrant labour *and* a breakdown of the mechanisms and methods of discipline, control, and surveillance previously used to translate migrants’ labour-power from potential into actual value-generating activities. Thus, these struggles over the logistics of the labour market are eminently *political*: they concern the politics of labour subordination. Indeed, the breakdown of these mechanisms – and the resulting need to refine, adjust, and reinvent them – underscores the continued relevance of Foucault’s work on disciplinary power and biopolitics as modes of power that are essential for the functioning of capital accumulation and the exploitation of human labour. Indeed, it is the very crisis of these methods and mechanisms of discipline and control which highlights the continued need to study how

the adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, [are] made possible in part by the exercise of biopower in its many forms and modes of application. (Foucault, 1978: 141)

These tensions and struggles revolving around migrant labour supply chains form the core of this SI project on what we call the contested logistics of migrant labour supply chains in the double crisis.

Infrastructural inversion in the double crisis: Tracing migrant labour supply chains

The contribution of this SI is twofold: First, it seeks to contribute – with its analytical focus on migrant labour supply chains – to the growing body of research on the logistics of migrant labour (Grappi, 2020; Kanngiesser, 2013; Krifors, 2021; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Scheel, 2023; Stenmanns, 2019), or what has been called ‘the logistification of border and migration management’ (Altenried et al., 2018). Many contributions to this SI build on the insights of this literature, such as the observation that the logistical dream of ‘just-in-time’ and ‘to-the-point’ migration remains, more often than not, a pipe-dream (Altenried et al., 2018), not least due to the recalcitrance and wilfulness of the subjects concerned (Scheel, 2019), or that establishing migrants’ traceability through digital identification technologies and databases is key to the logistification of migration management (Scheel, 2023), or the more general insight, that ‘logistical practices and rationalities exacerbate growing and often contradictory tensions between the mobility of capital and the containment of people and infrastructure that facilitate global circulation’ (Chua, 2018: viii).

What this SI contributes to this body of literature is a set of situated analyses of particular migrant labour supply chains which – following the research strategy of infrastructural inversion (Bowker and Star, 1999) – use moments of crisis, failure, and the breakdown of these often invisibilised logistical networks and infrastructures as an analytical lens to expose the composition, operational logics, and inner workings of migrant labour supply chains, as well as the practices, justifications, networks, legal mechanisms, minute technical details, and infrastructural investments that are needed to establish, operate, and maintain them. Infrastructural inversion directs scholarly attention to moments of disruption, failure, friction, struggle, and breakdown because it is in these instances where technological work and investments in infrastructures, as well as their fragility and often-contested nature, become visible (Simonsen et al., 2020). In this way, infrastructural inversion allows us to study and expose the socio-technical, cultural-economic, and legal-institutional ‘arrangements that, by design or habit, tend to fade into the woodwork’ (Bowker and Star, 1999: 34), and tend to go unnoticed and invisibilised – precisely because they ordinarily function. Needless to say, the COVID pandemic, and the double crisis prompted by it, offered – from this angle – an exceptional opportunity to study and expose the inner workings, often violent mechanisms and logics of migrant labour supply chains.

We believe however that the study of migrant labour supply chains offers scholars interested in the logistics of migration a worthwhile research strategy beyond moments of exceptional crisis, first because it allows for nuanced analyses that pay attention to seemingly minor details that are crucial for understanding these processes under un-exceptional circumstances, and second because the commodity that is circulated, exchanged, and valorised through these chains is always political, bound as it is to the bodies and minds of subjects who have a will of their own and more often than not may turn out to be recalcitrant. Like other logistical devices, migrant labour supply chains follow a rationale of efficiency and combine mechanisms and strategies which facilitate the circulation or the containment of migrant labour to make labour-power available at the right place at the right time and to render it productive. In contrast to other supply chains, however, migrant labour supply chains are transnational. Moreover – and this is where we see a crucial analytical and political advantage of this concept – their study allows critical scholars to highlight how entire economic sectors and related industries and labour markets rely – for their very functioning – on a continuous influx of migrant labour precisely because this labour has to be considered to be relatively ‘unfree’ in the sense that there are other pressures and constraints than the need to sell one’s labour-power which shape these labour relations. These pressures and constraints are mostly implicated by migrants’ precarious (contingent or illegalised) residency status, which is often tied to their labour contract or authorisation (or lack thereof) to work.

In his landmark book, *De l’esclavage Au Salarial. Économie Historique Du Salarial Bridé*, Yann Moulier Boutang (1998: 13) shows that the existence of ‘free’ labour markets hinges on the parallel existence of unfree labour relations and a permanent influx of migrant labour for their unhindered operation. Accordingly, the segmentation of the labour market along ‘ethnic’ lines has been decisive historically for the preservation of the class compromise of the Keynesian welfare state. Under these conditions, the ‘national’ working class does not customarily have to fear a relative social decline insofar as the hierarchy that structures the labour market along ‘ethnic’ lines endures and remains intact even in times of economic crisis. Hence, even in times of economic downturn, the badly paid, precarious jobs at the lower ranks of the labour market hierarchy continue to

be performed by migrants who are systematically targeted and disadvantaged by immigration laws. Consequently, Moulier Boutang (1998: 11) apprehends migration policy as *de facto* labour market policy.¹ In a more recent intervention, Moulier Boutang (2018) specifies that ‘the complementary coexistence of free and unfree’ does not only constitute a central feature of the history of capitalism but also of contemporary modes of neoliberal capital accumulation, characterised by widespread increasing precarisation for all labour and the dismantling of welfare states. Moulier Boutang asks, ‘But does not the segmentation of the contemporary [labour] market display an equal complexity in the regulation of international migrants through different regimes of work cards, travel visas and employment access?’ Following the research strategy of ‘border as method’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), we thus propose to use the reorganisation of migrant labour supply chains and related processes of re-bordering as an analytical entry point to study larger transformations of the composition of capital and the exploitation of migrant labour.

In this context, processes of racialisation play a central role in the subordination and exploitation of migrant labour (Bauder, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; De Genova, 2005, 2018; Fraser, 2016; Neergaard, 2015). This could also be observed during the pandemic, when migrant communities were often framed as a ‘public health risk’ through racialising discourses. A study by the OECD (2020) confirmed, in fact, that members of migrant communities often showed a higher risk of a COVID-infection during the first year of the pandemic. Scholars emphasised, however, that explanations for this higher prevalence of COVID-infections trying to link certain behaviours deemed as risky and irresponsible to particular ‘cultures’ or ‘ethnicities’ were actually occluding the real reasons for the increased risk for migrants to contract the virus, namely, that migrants often work in jobs which cannot be done remotely but require frequent interactions with other humans (such as childcare, nursing, delivery, or the food industry), that migrants have a proportionally lower income and often have to live in cramped conditions and finally, that migrants’ access to medical services is often comparably poor (Lewicki, 2021). What racialising discourses on migrants’ irresponsible ‘family visits’ to their countries of origin or ‘Turkish weddings’ thus illustrate is that ‘for those whose labour-power is a commodity of choice for capital, exceedingly selected for hyper-exploitation, the coronavirus pandemic is a toxic matter of both class and race’ (De Genova, 2021). Hence, the study of the reorganisation of migrant labour supply chains and the subordination of migrant labour more generally should always pay particular attention to shifting conjunctures of racism.

Rethinking COVID-capitalism: Reorganising labour under the double crisis

Naomi Klein (2007) argues that in times of crisis, such as natural disasters, economic recessions, political upheaval, or health breakdowns such as the COVID-19 pandemic, governing elites, and multinational corporations take advantage of the ‘chaos’ and disorientation, to adopt policies and operational changes that might not be possible under normal circumstances. ‘Disaster capitalism’, as she designates it, operates in this way: the economic and political ruling powers leverage the crisis to implement their preferred policies and agendas, push forward their economic profits while provoking an escalation of direct effects on the exploitation and the lives of workers. In crisis scenarios, a ‘shock doctrine’, she proposes, has therefore allowed for the privatisation of public assets and services, deregulation of markets, austerity measures, and state repression, always at the expense of the general population and the common good.

The first pandemic of the 21st century is a clear case in point of how ‘disaster capitalism’ operates. The second contribution of this SI is consequently to advance – precisely through the study of the reorganisation of specific migrant labour supply chains – a more nuanced understanding of how ‘disaster capitalism’ reorganised during COVID-19. Along this line, Thomas Nail (2022) and others have depicted the current crisis as ‘COVID-capitalism’. For Nail, COVID-capitalism refers to a mode of capitalism in which pandemics feature ‘not merely a nasty by-product of capitalism anymore [but] have become methods in themselves of accelerating and amplifying inequality and profit’ (Nail, 2022: 2). While we certainly agree that some segments of capital have learned quickly of how to turn the double crisis caused by COVID-19 into a source of profit, we would nonetheless argue for more careful analyses rather than sweeping, generalising claims. In fact, we believe that the picture is much more complex than suggested by the hypothesis of a new mode of capital accumulation in which ‘[p]andemics could become untapped financial resources even if capitalists may feign ignorance about their role in unleashing them’ (Nail, 2022: 3).

While we are aware that some industries – and at times even particular companies – have profited immensely from the COVID-19 pandemic – and here we are thinking in particular about online delivery services like *Amazon*, digital platforms like *Zoom* or parts of the pharma industry – we would like to emphasise that there were at least as many industries and economic sectors that had to fear for their profits or that actually incurred heavy financial losses up to the point of bankruptcy. Examples include the travel and tourism industry, the construction and hospitality sector, or the rental market for office buildings due to the ongoing popularity of ‘working from home’, and even some segments of the pharmaceutical industry as the demand for many drugs declined significantly during the period of lockdowns and contact restrictions. What these examples illustrate is that if and how a particular sector may be able to turn a pandemic and related crises into a source of profit is neither a given nor a smooth process. It is a highly contested endeavour that may fail and whose outcome is far from assured. We therefore propose an approach in which the multiple crises prompted by the virulence of new viruses or other disasters are not a priori understood as a source of amplified profit, inequality, and capitalist development. Rather, they should primarily be apprehended as a source of intense political and economic conflicts and antagonisms – not only between workers and capital but also between different fractions and segments of capital. The crucial point is that the outcome of struggles and antagonisms cannot be determined in advance but has to be engaged as an empirical question. Hence, the contributions to this SI analyse how the means and methods of (labour) mobility control have reactively adapted and have been recomposed in response to a crisis of the mechanisms of labour subordination, which was often instigated and intensified by migrants’ practices of appropriation, refusal, and subversion (Scheel, 2018).

Such analyses are offered by the contributions to this SI which all, more or less explicitly, trace the reorganisation of migrant labour supply chains and related border struggles. All contributions to this SI focus on two regions of world that have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and in which dependency on migrant labour is high: Europe and the Americas. In their contribution ‘The Capitalist Virus’, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2024: 188–202) start from the observation that, if anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that contemporary capitalism is not reducible to financial capitalism and the increase of profits through speculation on stocks and derivatives. Rather, contemporary capitalism still relies on the mobility and exploitation of labour.

This became very visible during ‘the pandemic crisis [which] resulted from a labour supply shock due to lockdowns’ (4). Hence, the global health crisis translated into an economic crisis precisely because ‘the pandemic [. . .] was] a crisis of mobility with effects on the politics of migration’ (4). In line with this SI’s agenda of tracing migrant labour supply chains, they argue that jobs that were reclassified as ‘essential work’ can be used as analytical lenses to discern the political and economic priorities of contemporary capitalism (5). In regard to the logistics of migrant labour and wider debates on COVID-capitalism, they diagnose an ‘increasing intertwining of epidemiology and logistics that foreshadows a kind of “virologistics”’ (7).

In her contribution on ‘The Long Spring of Migration Management’, Cecilia Vergnano (2024: 203–218) uses the research strategy of ‘infrastructural inversion’ – as already outlined earlier – to study the reorganisation of migrant labour supply chains to Dutch vegetable farms and Italian meat processing plants during the pandemic. Through a detailed analysis, Vergnano shows how the ‘ethical minimalism’ that is characteristic for the logistical approach of migration management due to its imperative of efficiency allowed for a decoupling of migrants’ right to mobility from basic social and economic rights, resulting in an increased enforcement of discipline and exploitation in the workplace, to which migrant workers reacted with more or less visible forms of resistance. In sum, Vergnano argues that the response to the disruption of existing migrant labour supply chains in 2020 ‘relied on a pre-existing logistical approach in migration management’ whose mechanisms were further adapted and refined during the pandemic.

In a similar vein, in ‘Seasonal Workers Wanted! Germany’s Seasonal Labour Migration Regime and the Covid-19 Pandemic’, Dorothea Biaback Anong (2024: 219–234) traces the transformation of migrant labour supply chains during the pandemic to diagnose the existence of a ‘seasonal labour migration regime’ that is essential for the very functioning of Germany’s agricultural industry. She also regards the pandemic-induced disruption of migrant labour supply chains as a ‘contrast agent’ (2) that made visible the essential role of seasonal labour migration in agriculture. A key insight of Biaback Anong’s careful analysis is that the attempts to restore, fix, and fine-tune the importation and exploitation of migrant seasonal labour during the pandemic in Germany highlights the existence of an emerging political consensus across the Global North: labour migration is accepted if it is temporally limited and really reduced to the extraction and exploitation of migrant’s labour-power. Such a logistical approach towards labour migration is even acceptable to much of the far right. It is, however, precisely the impossibility to reduce human beings to labour-power, which continually heralds intense political struggles within the seasonal labour migration regime and other migrant labour supply chains.

Drawing on ethnographic research along the established migrant labour supply chain between Latin America, Mexico, and the United States, in ‘Governed Bodies, Discarded Bodies: Notes for an Analysis of Contemporary Migrations During Covid-19’, Yerko Castro Neira (2024: 235–251) elaborates on the crucial role that migrants’ bodies play in the exploitation and subordination of migrant labour and the so-called ‘management’ of borders and migration more generally. Castro Neira proposes to use migrant bodies as an analytical starting point to investigate the practices of government, disciplinary techniques, and biopolitical strategies that use migrants’ bodies as a target for their interventions. He emphasises, however, that migrant bodies are both sites of governmental intervention, discipline and control and vehicles for practices of resistance and subversion. Based on a careful analysis of three situations near the border town of Tijuana, Castro Neira shows that the disciplinary and biopolitical techniques that are used to

facilitate the circulation, containment, subordination and exploitation of migrant labour also feature practices and strategies of government that contribute to the debilitation (Puar, 2017) of migrants, or even their necropolitical annihilation (Mbembe, 2019).

This perspective is further confirmed by Héctor Fabio Bermúdez Lenis' (2024: 252–267) contribution, 'Venezuelan Migrants in Delivery Platform Work During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Buenos Aires, Argentina: Between Exploitability, Precariousness, and Daily Resistance'. In this study of the deteriorating living and working conditions of Venezuelan migrants in the delivery industry in Buenos Aires during the pandemic, the author shows how the 'precarisation' processes of migrant workers in South America, which was already underway over the past several decades, intensified during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. His piece also demonstrates that illegalised migrants, being an essential element for the expansion of the delivery economy in Argentina, survive at the intersection of super-exploitation and super-exposure to contagion without any state protection. Ultimately, his analysis exemplifies that the supply of illegalised and therefore 'unfree' migrant labour may also feature a *laissez-faire* approach by state authorities which actively ignore and tolerate the widely known presence and hyper-exploitation of illegalised labour migrants on their territory.

Following the same line of thought in 'Economic and Mobility Repercussions of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Chile–Bolivia Border', Nanette Liberona and Carlos Piñones-Rivera (2024: 268–283), analyse how health restrictions implemented by Chilean state authorities favoured the reconfiguration of racist immigration policy based on the control and management of migration, leading to a further deterioration of the living and working conditions of illegalised Bolivian and Venezuelan migrants. Providing empirical evidence from Chile's northern borderlands, they demonstrate the economic repercussions on the everyday life, mobility, and survival strategies of Bolivian and Venezuelan cross-border workers. This reorganisation of established migrant labour supply chains is part of what they call 'post-pandemic capitalism'.

In their article 'A Corona-Carnival? A Carnavalesque Interpretation of (Im)Mobilities under Covid-19 Lockdowns', Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobarrubias (2024: 284–301) draw in turn on the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) to make sense of the situation of the first phase of the pandemic during which the established rules and existing norms of the European border and mobility regime were – at least temporarily – suspended or even inverted. To this end, they dwell on four terms that gained prominence as keywords during this period: the 'superspreader', the 'essential worker', 'remote work', and the adoption of slogans and policies to 'stay at home'. The first two keywords highlight how the 'normal' rules and norms of Europe's border and mobility regime were – at least initially – inverted: while hyper-mobile economic and political elites were recast as ruthless superspreaders, precarious, and sometimes even illegalised migrants working in low-paid jobs were celebrated as 'essential workers'. The mass expansion of 'remote work' in the home office and related 'stay at home' campaigns constituted, in the words of Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, another 'carnavalesque experimentation with labor' during the double crisis, essentially resembling the reverse side of the re-framing of jobs requiring face-to-face interactions as essential work. One important site of struggle and negotiation was, and continues to be, the boundary between life and work in a home which is, indeed, gradually transformed into an office. Using Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in this context highlights how the rules and norms defining the 'normal situation' are, ultimately, reified and newly exposed through their temporal suspension and inversion.

Finally, Hannah Pool (2024: 302–316), in ‘Immobility beyond Borders: Differential Inclusion and the Impact of the COVID-19 Border Closures’, discusses differential inclusion in Europe through migrants’ experiences of the closure of the European Union (EU) Schengen borders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the lived experiences of Erasmus students, asylum seekers, and seasonal workers, the article empirically investigates how differential inclusion is reflected in migrants’ perceptions of border closures and the impact of these border closures on their access to international mobility. Drawing on the concept of ‘differential inclusion’ (cf. Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012, 2013), she examines how the governance of divergent border mobilities intersects with processes of subjectivation in a moment of crisis. The article shows that borders are embodied through migrants’ perceptions of borders, and are thus crucial for processes of differential inclusion and the enactment of unequal access to mobility. Furthermore, it demonstrates that pre-existing mechanisms of differential inclusion were exacerbated during border closures in a global health emergency and that borders during the pandemic continued to serve as flexible means for (im)mobilising people according to capitalist economic demands.

In sum, the contributions to this SI demonstrate that the study of the contested maintenance, repair, and adaptation of migrant labour supply chains offers a valuable analytical entry point to expose larger transformations and reconfigurations of capitalism and related reconfigurations of racism and modes of exploitation. They also demonstrate that, contrary to some over-simplified depictions of COVID-capitalism, these processes of adaptation and transformation are not reducible to smooth or automatic processes of refinement and repair, nor do they follow a systemic logic or deterministic plan. Instead, they are contested processes of recuperation (Scheel, 2018) that are rife with politics, fraught with multiple struggles, contestations, and antagonisms, not only between (migrant) workers and capital, but also between different fractions of capital. In this way, the recurring, self-generated crises of global capitalism become apprehensible not only as new sources of profit and opportunities for the recalibration and refinement of the mechanisms enabling the subordination and exploitation (migrant) labour. They also become tangible as potential openings for alternative, more just and more sustainable modes of production and world-making.

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Note

1. Moulrier Boutang's argument resonates with but complicates and extends the theory of the dual labour market proposed by Michael Piore (1979). Referring to the customary assumptions of the Fordist era, Piore argued that migration is caused by a demand for migrant labour that is inherent to the economic structure of societies with industrial mass production. Industrialisation, Piore contends, leads to the diversification of the national labour market into a primary capital-intensive segment and a secondary labour-intensive segment. In contrast to the primary segment, jobs characterised by low wages, high instability, severe working conditions and a low-social prestige are concentrated in the second segment. Since the 'national' labour force avoids these jobs at the lower end of the labour market hierarchy, there exists a structural shortage of labour-power in the secondary sector that can only be solved through the recruitment of migrants. Accordingly, the latter accept the severe working conditions as well as the low social prestige of the jobs in the second segment of the labour market because they tend to regard them as temporary means for attaining the long-term objective of advancement after the projected return to their countries of origin. However, in contrast to Piore, who conceives the segmentation of the labour market along ethnic lines as a specific feature of industrialised capitalist economies, Moulrier Boutang pursues a genealogical approach which allows him to demonstrate that the existence of unfree labour conditions is a feature of all 'free' labour markets regardless of the level of development of the means of production (Moulrier Boutang, 1998).

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