

CAPITALISM AND MIGRATIONS



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"This land is your land; this land is my land. This country is your country; this country is my country. From California to New York Island. From the redwood forest to the waters of the Gulf Stream. This land was made for you and me." Woody Guthrie, This Land Is Your Land¹

The recent drastic measures taken by Trump in the United States against immigrants, primarily of Latin American origin (Mexicans, Venezuelans, Colombians, etc.), undocumented but not unemployed, as well as those classified as "criminals" (the former of whom have already been sent to Guantánamo) have spectacularly put the issue of population migration under capitalism back on the agenda. Migration is strictly determined by the needs of capital and the need of the subaltern and disadvantaged classes to find other countries in which to settle in the hope of a better life and a more dignified future. Furthermore, the violence of these measures, which are nothing more than the brutal expression of capital's global demands for better management of migratory flows, is amplified by the fact that they come from leading capitalist power. Throughout its history, this power has relied for its economic development on successive waves of immigration (English, Irish, German, Italian, Chinese, Jewish, Mexican, etc.), as well as on the forced importation of slave labor from sub-Saharan Africa (Gulf of Guinea) and the Caribbean. The United States is, therefore, the archetype of capitalist development made possible by the regular importation of workers whose technical makeup and level of socialization correspond to the renewed needs of its expanding economy.

«The «American» example is not innocent; besides being the «homeland» of Taylorism, its «purity» allows us to understand a world historical phenomenon that would later take place in all the central countries (including Soviet Russia), and whose consequences continue to determine the fantastic technological transformations of the capitalist mode of production (CMP), and the social consequences of these («deskilling / over-skilling», crisis, unemployment...).» The submission² of the labor process to the valorization process through the example of the American labor movement (1887 - 1920).

¹This Woody Guthrie song is emblematic of the waves of immigration to the United States, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which expressed the immense hope of a large part of the world's proletariat in the migratory solution to the mythical American "paradise," which had a great shortage of specialized workers to contribute to the extraordinary development of its productive forces.

²This text: "The submission of the labor process to the valorization process through the example of the American labor movement (1887 - 1920)", can be consulted on our website : <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/archives>

The impact of Trump's measures, aside from their savagery, is thus multiplied ideologically tenfold and serves as an example for many other countries, although sometimes, paradoxically, for those experiencing a problematic aging of their working population (demographic crisis). This example also highlights the fact that the motivations for taking such measures include the political objectives of national protectionism mixed with racism that, in certain aspects, may even contradict the triviality of economic needs (especially regarding docile and unskilled labor). Moreover, these policies only openly reaffirm the fact that human labor power is nothing more and nothing less than a commodity that, like all other commodities, has a price determined in the market by the capitalist law of supply and demand. It is so cynical that the companies entrusted by Trump with repatriating and deporting the supernumerary men, women and children to his "immigrant detention centers" are two private companies, "GEO GROUP" and "CORE CIVID,"³ charging for their services per deportee and thus largely receiving a return on their investment from their abundant financial contribution to Trump's election.

As in the case of the deportees in the Nazi camps, repression, imprisonment, and murder, in addition to forced labor, must also be profitable businesses. Moreover, these protectionist measures necessarily provoke competitive reactions, also protectionist, that lead to the escalation of economic warfare as a prelude and preparation for military war. Protectionism, and its nationalist essence, thus allows for a warlike conceptualization of the economy and is, in this sense, one of the main causes of the accelerated course toward generalized war.

Malthus and attempts to manage workers' production

In general terms, the demographic concept of overpopulation expresses the fact that a population "of a living species exceeds its capacity to supply the resources necessary for its permanence and, therefore, endangers its environment." It was the English reverend and economist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) who, as a good Christian apostle of capitalism, devised a "law" stating that: "human population would progress geometrically (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32...) while its means of subsistence would only follow an arithmetic progression (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...)". The result would be demographic catastrophes (famines, epidemics, exoduses, etc.) that could be avoided if birth rates were limited, especially among the "poor" classes, unable to support their offspring.

According to Malthus, this would be achieved through chastity, postponing the age of marriage, and "moral restraint" (sexual repression). It is evident that such a "law," which justifies the exploitation and oppression of the subaltern classes by making them bear the responsibility for such demographic disorders, has since been applied numerous times by the ruling classes on all continents. It is enough to recall here the Malthusian policy pursued by the capitalist and popular dictatorship of China from 1979 to 2015. By repressing parents with more than one child, but also by practicing mass abortions, kidnappings, and forced sterilizations, the State and the "communist" party attempted to curb overpopulation so they

³On the Aide-Mémoire website, a biannual review of memory territories, issue no. 91: <https://aidememoire.be/archive/aide-memoire/aide-memoire-91/prisons-priv%C3%A9es-%C3%A0-but-lucratif%20-la-porte-ouverte-%C3%A0-toutes-les-fen%C3%AAtres-ch%C3%A9z-l-oncle-sam.html>

could better invest in economic growth, which was undermined by the economic-ideological delusions of the "Maoist" period. The goal was to drastically reduce the surplus population, especially in the countryside, so that the Chinese capitalist dictatorship could claim to be fighting poverty (fewer people, fewer poor people!) by fostering the emergence of an urban middle class whose newfound consumer capacity would hypothetically allow for a revival of production⁴. China's neo-Malthusian "one-child" policy had a tragic and uneven outcome, which above all provoked widespread social resistance and human trafficking.

«As a result, selective abortions and infanticide have reached record levels. More than 10 million abortions are carried out each year, especially since marriage before the legal age (20 for women, 22 for men) is prohibited. Today, 116 boys are born for every 100 girls in a global population in which there are 105 men for every 100 women. 30 million Chinese cannot find a wife, a source of much frustration, of which, once again, women are the victims. These are deep-rooted problems that the arrival of a second child will not resolve. » Christian Makarian, «L'empire des vieux», L'Express (France), November 4, 2015.⁵

This policy was abandoned in 2016, primarily to combat an aging population and cope with the projected increase in military needs for soldiers. Finally, it should be noted that, if the situation remains constant, the number of human beings is likely to reach 10 billion by 2050; but with current productive forces (not to mention the issue of wealth distribution), it is already potentially possible today to feed that entire population while preserving the planet.

The global communist revolution thus further asserts itself as a historical necessity and the only barrier against future capitalist catastrophes. On the contrary, when labor shortages are realized, particularly after devastating world wars⁶, the State is forced to take measures to increase the **birth rate** to increase its working population (increased family benefits, tax cuts for large families, free daycare, etc.). But the main problem lies in the time required to produce, train, and socialize this future working population, which requires at least twenty years, if not more (family benefits for students end in Belgium at age 25). But the timescale for capitalist labor needs is much shorter, even immediate.

The "migration solution" arises from this excessive timescale (the availability of a labor force capable of working directly) and from the more than uncertain nature of **birth control measures** (opposition to women's employment, abortion, allusions to fascism, etc.). It should be noted that, for most capitalist metropolises, it was the "ex-colonies" or "historical allies" who initially met these needs, such as Algerians in France, Indians in Great Britain, or Turks in Germany. This labor force, initially male and temporarily imported for specific tasks (coal mining for Italians and Poles, or construction of the Brussels metro for Moroccans), had to settle, thanks mainly to family and community reunification, and gradually form permanent economic and cultural ghettos. After neighboring countries served as the primary source of emigrants for the capitalist metropolises, it was increasingly distant countries with very

⁴On this question, see Mylène Gaulard's book, Karl Marx in Beijing: The Roots of the Crisis in Capitalist China, Demopolis, Paris, 2014.

⁵On the website Perspective Monde – Université de Sherbrooke: https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BM_Eve/1307

⁶Net migration in Belgium, for example, turned positive after the First World War. "In 2023, Belgium's net international migration amounted to 66,349 people, meaning that more people immigrated to Belgium than emigrated from the country." <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/population/mouvement-de-la-population/migrations>.

different cultures that were mobilized to meet labor needs, reinforcing economic competition, xenophobic stereotypes, and communal divisions within the working classes. This almost obligatory recourse to immigration is reinforced, in many central countries, by the accelerated aging of the population, reflected in the inversion of the age pyramid, and, consequently, by the recurring problems in many of these countries regarding the payment of pensions and future retirements (Japan, France, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Belgium, etc.). For the MPCs, the issue of the aging of the world's population has become a true demographic bomb. Like the penetration of the railways, migratory flows uniquely summarize the very history of capitalism. By following these flows, we can easily reconstruct the uneven and dynamic development of a mode of production that has the world as its field of accumulation and its own contradictions as its limits. This is why Marx and Engels felt compelled to criticize Malthus's various "theories" at great length and virulently.

«This Malthus is characterized by a fundamental baseness of character, a baseness which only a priest can allow himself who sees in human misery a punishment for original sin and who, in general, needs an «earthly vale of tears», but who, at the same time, finds it entirely advantageous to «soften», with the help of the dogma of grace and in view of the prebends he enjoys, the stay of the ruling classes in this vale of tears.» K. Marx, Manuscripts of 1861-1863⁷.

Unlike Malthus's ideas, this is not about seeing a demographic surplus of workers relative to the resources produced or their living conditions. According to Marx, the goal of capitalist production is not to satisfy social needs, much less to use available labor to reduce everyone's workload. Its sole objective is the valorization of capital, the increase in the value of the capital invested in production through the creation of surplus value and the expansion of its accumulation thanks to this new value. Labor will or will not be employed by capital solely based on the needs of this accumulation. In the case of demographic surplus population, this is only relative to the quantity of labor determined by the demands of valorization and the needs of capital accumulation. This is why Marx speaks of **relative surplus population**: this population is only in excess relative to the needs and demands of capitalist accumulation.

«In short, within the framework of capitalist production relations, a part of the population is not surplus to the means of consumption that would allow it to sustain itself, but to the needs and opportunities to valorize capital in the process of accumulation by using it: paying for it and at the same time providing it with the monetary means to procure its necessary subsistence.» Alain Bihr, already cited, p.4.

Underproduction causes underpopulation

The notion of overpopulation is therefore fundamentally relative to a particular mode of production; surplus population is nothing at all. Each mode of production has (in fact) its own law of population, that is, its own method of managing the production of human beings, based on its distinctive social relations. As far as MPC is concerned, it is the need of capital in constant capital (fixed and circulating) that determine those of variable capital⁸, namely, it is

⁷Quoted by Alain Bihr, "The Malthusian Moment (II). Towards a Marxist critique of Malthusian theories" on the website: <https://alencontre.org/ecologie/le-moment-malthusien-i-pour-une-critique-marxiste-des-theses-malthusiennes.html>

⁸On this question of Marxist categories, we refer the reader to our texts: "Summary Notes on Valorization/Devaluation" Matériaux Critiques No. 1, "The Non-Decadentist Periodization of the MPC" Matériaux Critiques No. 7, "Crisis in Crisis Theory?" Matériaux Critiques No. 12, also on our site: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

the expanded accumulation of capital that necessarily translates into a corresponding increase in the demand for an adequate and active population.

«Economic conditions always give rise to a corresponding population mass. In capitalism, overproduction, by creating excessive consumption here, which lowers the birth rate in order to become even richer, gives rise to overpopulation where there is underconsumption, because poverty leads to an increase in population.» Roger Dangeville, Introduction to Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Critique of Malthus, p. 36, Maspero Publishing, Paris, 1978.

Furthermore, there is a capitalistic need to always have a surplus working population to form an "industrial reserve army." In addition to serving as a "reserve" in the event of an increase in labor demand, this reserve army is also useful because it allows downward pressure to be exerted on the wages of those who are working through competition from those who are looking for work.

«Along with the intensification of exploitation, accumulation has another important demographic consequence: to increase the industrial reserve army, capitalism can draw on an additional supply of labor if population mobility increases.» Yves Charbit, Capitalism and Population: Marx and Engels versus Malthus.⁹

The only advantage of Malthus's "law of population" was to reassure the ruling classes by shifting the "moral" responsibility for overpopulation onto them. Contrary to these claims, Engels showed that it was in response to the deterioration of their working conditions that workers married earlier and increased their fertility, to benefit more quickly from the additional wages for women and children. Thus, it was not a "natural or biological law," but a **social law**, that caused the birth rate among the proletarians to rise. Thus, the English Parliament combined this inhuman theory with the view that *"pauperism is a misery, the fault of which lies with the workers themselves, which must not be avoided as a misfortune, but, on the contrary, must be repressed, punished as a crime"* (Yves Charbit, cited above, p. 6). Engels thus shows the firmly established link between Malthusian theory and "overpopulation": *"The declaration¹⁰ of war of the bourgeoisie on the proletariat is Malthus's law of population and the new Poor Law which has been conceived in accordance with it..."* Engels.

«The central point is that it is not the evolution per se of the working population -growth or decline, either in absolute or relative terms- that must be taken into account: "It is not, therefore, at all a question of a relationship between two terms independent of each other, namely, the size of capital and the size of the working population, but, in the last analysis, it is only a question of a relationship between the free labor and the wage labor of the working population." The biologizing dimension of Malthusian thought has been eliminated; the principle of population created by the sexual instinct has been sidelined. Only historicized individuals remain: workers who sell their labor power.» Yves Charbit, already cited, p.6.

When this overpopulation is no longer necessary (the period is no longer one of economic growth, but of recession), it should be enough to return this "surplus" population, voluntarily or not, to its place of origin. But this is where the problem becomes entirely social. Indeed, the

⁹ On the website: <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-histoire-des-sciences-humaines-2005-2-page-183?lang=fr>

¹⁰ Quoted by Yves Charbit: "Capitalism and Population, Marx and Engels versus Malthus" on the website: <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-histoire-des-sciences-humaines-2005-2-page-183?lang=fr>

myth of returning to one's homeland crumbles with the passage of time, and socialization/assimilation, especially of children, does its work of "civilizing" integration.

«Until the 1970s, many Muslims on the Indian subcontinent shared the deep conviction that their stay in Great Britain was a passage, and nothing more. They thought that, after a decade or so in Vilayat (England), they would return to their native villages in Kashmir or Punjab to enjoy their fortune. This is not exceptional, of course, since, as Abdelmalek Sayad reminds us, «one can only accept living as a foreigner in a foreign country (...) if one is able to convince oneself that it is only a test, by definition temporary, a test that has its own resolution.» Olivier Esteves, The Myth of Return¹¹.

Numerous testimonies attest to the definitive collapse of the myth of return.

“A life of hard work with a single dream: to one day return to their homeland to enjoy a sweet retirement and die in the land of their birth. But today, after spending 20, 30, or even 50 years in France, that hope has become a pipe dream. “I have never returned to Algeria.¹² When I left, my parents had died, and I didn't know anyone there anymore. I grew up here, I lived here, I'm staying here,” explains an Algerian who arrived in France at 17.”

The only way to limit this overpopulation is forced return, deportation, whatever the pretext, whether racist, anti-Semitic, or security related. Trump's measures are a striking example of this, before considering the radical capitalist solution: the squandering of productive forces through destruction and war.

“(...) it is clear that armament is one of the most effective means in the neo-Malthusian arsenal to curb overproduction through the squandering of productive forces and overpopulation through devastating wars. (...)” R. Dangeville, already cited, p. 41.

As capitalism matures, a **relative surplus population will emerge**, as part of the working population will be freed from production by the movement of capital itself. The fact that a portion of the working population is freed from production by the very movement of capital (mechanization, computers, artificial intelligence, more efficient organization of work, etc.). This allows capital to dispense with a more or less significant mass of proletarians, who have become supernumerary, and use them, as we have seen, to drive down wages for the entire class.

«We call it "relative" because it does not arise from a positive increase in the working population that would exceed the limits of wealth in the process of accumulation, but, on the contrary, from an accelerated increase in social capital that enables it to dispense with a considerable part of its workers. Since this surplus population exists only in relation to the momentary needs of capitalist exploitation, it can swell and contract suddenly. » K. Marx, Capital.¹³

Marx also carried out a detailed economic analysis of the different categories that made up the working population¹⁴:

¹¹O. Esteves, Chapter 1. The myth of return. From invisibility to Islamophobia. British Muslims (1945-2010) (pp. 31-47). Presses de Sciences Po., 2011 on the website: <https://shs.cairn.info/de-l-invisibilite-al-islamophobie--9782724612103-page-31?lang=fr>

¹²For immigrants of the 1960s, the eternal myth of returning home (2014) on the France 24 website: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20140112-immigration-maghreb-retraites-algerie-mythe-retour-tunisie-maroc>

¹³On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1867/Capital-I/kmcapI-25-3.htm>

¹⁴This typology comes from the diagram of the evolution of the working class in relation to the evolution of capitalist accumulation synthesized by R. Dangeville: Marx-Engels, « Critique de Malthus », already cited, p.147-148.

- An **active** industrial army of workers and employees.
- A floating overpopulation, forced out of production by the evolution of technology and changes in the division of labor.
- A latent overproduction, mainly in the countryside and driven towards large urban concentrations.
- A stagnant overpopulation, determined to accept all unskilled work and marginal activities with very low wages.

An overpopulation of impoverished workers, the chronically unemployed, beneficiaries of all kinds of social assistance, widows, disabled people, the long-term ill, etc.

- The lumpenproletariat outside the working class: vagrants, traffickers, homeless people, criminals, beggars, and all the unproductive parasitic strata.

Thus, alongside the proletarian, working-class, and wage-earning population, a group of supernumeraries fluctuate, according to the succession of periods of average activity, expansion, crisis, and stagnation, constituting this relative surplus population. Therefore, capitalist accumulation cyclically generates a relative surplus population that the system must manage and sometimes eradicate violently. This is one of the functions of wars, as it is the explanation of the capitalist rationale for the measures taken by Trump and his followers.

«The organization of the developed capitalist production process breaks all resistance; the permanent generation of relative surplus population maintains the law of supply and demand for labor, and therefore wages, in line with capital's need to valorize itself; the silent restriction of economic relations seals the domination of the capitalist over the worker.» K. Marx, Capital, chap. XXIV, p.829, Messidor/éditions sociales, Paris, 1983.

Contrary to the opinion of vulgar economists, it is therefore the play of variations in relative surplus population that ultimately determines the fluctuations in the value of labor power in relation to the needs of valorization.

«The general movements of wages are, in general, regulated exclusively by the phases of expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army, which correspond to the changes of period in the industrial cycle. They are not, therefore, determined by the variations in the absolute number of the working population, but by the changing ratio according to which the working class is divided into an active army and a reserve army, by the increase and decrease in the relative volume of the surplus population, by the degree to which this population is sometimes absorbed, sometimes released again ...» K. Marx, Capital, pp. 714–715, Messidor/éditions sociales, Paris, 1983.

More and more refugees are fleeing capitalist catastrophes.

The delicate question of the ideologized experience of emigrants or immigrants remains to be addressed. Clearly, the reasons for emigration play a direct role in this experience. This is the case of "political" refugees, whose desire to protect their lives and safety determines their oppositional stance. For some, this means continuing a political struggle both in their adopted country and in "their" country of origin. In the history of the working class, many vanguard activists were emigrants who, as a result, had a clearer global vision and an internationalist streak. From Marx himself, through Bakunin, Lenin, Trotsky, Durruti, and others, to the expatriates of the Paris Commune, the Italian and Spanish revolutionary refugees, etc., there is

no doubt that they had a global vision and an internationalist streak¹⁵, exiles from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, etc., displaced persons from Iran, Turkey, Vietnam, Cambodia, Sudan, etc. But it is increasingly clear that the separation between "political refugees" and "economic refugees" is artificial. This porous distinction can be compounded by other causes, as in the case of climate refugees or those from oppressed ethnic groups (the Rohingya of Myanmar). In any case, the journey to idealized countries/refugees is fraught with traps, persecution, scams, and death. Too often, hopes and expectations are dashed, and the disillusionment is immense and tragic. The mirages of democracy are nothing more than the democratization of illusions.

*"Men were beaten and burned with electricity, according to survivors' accounts, and women were raped, sometimes offered to passing Libyans. Food was rationed, a handful of rice every three days," explains the Italian researcher, referring to the slaves.*¹⁶

"They (immigrants) are the representatives of dispossession, and dispossession is at home in France, where it is widespread and almost universal. It is the image of our unjust, unequal, and inhumane society that immigrants project to us. It is well known that immigrants have lost their culture and their country, unable to find another." Mezioud Ouldamer, *Le cauchemar immigré dans la décomposition de la France* (The immigrant nightmare in the breakdown of France), p.99, Gérard Lebovici Publishing, Paris, 1986.

Exploitation and wage labor are the order of the day, even in less overtly barbaric but more sophisticated forms. Wage slavery may seem less retrograde than outright slavery or serfdom, but it remains a form of servitude and enslavement in which the workers themselves are responsible for its maintenance and reproduction.

"The Roman slave was bound to his master by chains; the employee is bound to his employer by invisible threads. The appearance of independence is maintained only by the perpetual change of individual leaders and by legal fiction." K. Marx, *Capital*, p. 8.

But this in no way impedes the uninterrupted flow of proletarians and non-reserved people who risk their lives and those of their families in an attempt to cross deserts and seas to reach "the promised land" or, above all, to escape desperate and inhumane situations. It is this existential need that drives migrants to risk everything, undeterred by obstacles, distances, borders, and the construction of "anti-migrant" walls and barriers (in the US, but also in Greece, Hungary, Croatia, Turkey, etc.), which can never significantly impede their need to move and emigrate in an attempt to live in better conditions.

This uncontrollable migratory flow resulted in 281 million international migrants worldwide, and the number of displaced persons reached a record 117 million at the end of 2022, according to the State of the World's Migration 2024 report, which reveals the latest trends and global challenges facing human mobility.¹⁷ It is clear that the succession of health,

¹⁵It was mainly the Italian communist left grouped in Brussels in the 1930s around O. Perrone (Vercesi). Perrone (Vercesi), the "German" left in the United States around P. Mattick, K. Korsch, and O. Rühle, and later, the "Spanish" one in Paris authored by G. Munis and Jaime Fernandez.

¹⁶On the RTBF website today: <https://www.rtbf.be/article/nauffrage-de-lampedusa-tortures-viols-les-immigres-ont-vecu-un-cauchemar-8132184>

¹⁷On the IOM UN Migrations website: <https://www.iom.int/fr/news/le-rapport-sur-letat-des-migrations-dans-le-monde-2024-revele-les-dernieres-tendances-et-les-defis-mondiaux-en-matiere-de-mobilite-humaine#:~:text=>

climate, and war catastrophes only amplifies the problem of how to manage these excesses from the perspective of capital. In the long term, this situation can only lead to "solutions" involving repression, deportation, or even the massive and genocidal destruction of surplus populations for capital. The communist revolution reveals itself, even more antagonistically, as the only possible solution to the annihilation of the human species and planet Earth.

«If it is true that the industrial and economic potential of the capitalist world increases rather than decreases, it is no less true that the more it develops, the worse the living conditions of the human masses become in the face of natural and historical cataclysms. Unlike the periodic flooding of rivers, the flooding of capitalism's frenzied accumulation does not have the prospect of a "recession" like the downward curve of a hydrometer, but rather the catastrophe of rupture.» A. Bordiga, Flood and Rupture of Bourgeois Civilization, Battaglia Comunista, No. 23, 1951. In the collection, *Espèce humaine et croûte terrestre* (The Human Species and the Earth's Crust), pp. 29-30, Payot, 1978.

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Musical illustration: Led Zeppelin: Immigrant Song, <https://youtu.be/RIhD0oS5pk?si=HirwqykFYR0bCclt>

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