

From Fields of Power to Fields of Sweat: the dual process of constructing temporary migrant labour in Mexico and Canada

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ABSTRACT This article examines the social construction of migrant labour forces through an analysis of the exterior and interior conditioning in an agricultural contract labour programme between Mexico and Canada. I argue that forms of exterior conditioning, especially employers' point-of-production control, establishes the context within which migrant workers' experience unfolds, for which reason it contributes to their 'interior conditioning'. But I argue as well that the result is shaped by workers' employment of a 'dual frame of reference' through which they gauge Canadian wages and working conditions the only way they can, which is in relationship to Mexican ones. Given that neoliberal policies have reduced the options available in Mexico, and diminished the attractiveness of those that remain, contract labour in Canada presents one of the few opportunities many poor, rural Mexicans have to acquire the income necessary for a minimally dignified life. Consequently most workers in this programme do everything possible to please their employers and continue in the programme.

More than 20 years ago Stephen Castles wrote what he referred to as an 'obituary' for contract labour programmes. Focusing on post-World War II Europe, Castles maintained that such programmes played an important role in postwar capital accumulation during a period of robust growth and low unemployment between 1945 and 1974, but that they became less necessary following economic downturn, reduced industrial profits and the global dispersion of intensive production processes to low wage countries made possible by revolutionary innovations in communications, transportation and control techniques—features of what has come to be known in many circles as the 'New International Division of Labour'.¹ Moreover, the longer temporary workers remained, the more likely were they to reunite their

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families and settle out. The family reunification stage of the migratory process produced upward pressure on wages and demands on the state for housing, education, health and social amenities. In the six European countries examined by Castles guest worker programmes were terminated around the time of the 1973 oil crisis.²

Three decades into neoliberal economic restructuring such programmes are on the rise once again, many of the earlier lessons—particularly those related to the purported permanence of temporary or guest workers—having been put aside or forgotten. Birth rates are generally low in the capitalist North, domestic populations are ageing and demand for flexible, low wage labour is high in sectors ranging from construction, meatpacking, horticulture and child care to the restaurant and hospitality industries, among others. In the South liberalisation has ravaged agriculture, small business and much industry, leading to a growth in unemployment and, especially, underemployment. Most of the new entrants onto job markets in Latin America confront a series of unappealing choices: precarious and poorly paid work in the informal sector; criminal activity—referred to by Portes and Roberts as a form of ‘forced entrepreneurialism in a context of widespread relative deprivation’;³ or labour migration, which more often than not means, at least in Latin America, undocumented migration to the USA or, in a few cases, a European or Latin American country (Ecuadorians in Spain, Bolivians in Argentina, Chile and Venezuela or Nicaraguans in Costa Rica). As if the culmination of a diabolical plan—though better framed as a product of 30 years of accumulation by dispossession⁴—neoliberalism has produced an apparent complementarity of interests between poor countries with unambiguous labour surpluses created, exacerbated and transformed under neoliberal reforms, and wealthy ones with sectoral labour deficits, especially in low-waged, unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Indeed, during a recent visit to California, Mexican President Felipe Calderón stated: ‘You have two economies. One economy is intensive in capital, which is the American economy. One economy is intensive in labor, which is the Mexican economy. We are two complementary economies, and that phenomenon is impossible to stop.’⁵ As David Bacon comments, ‘To Calderón and employers on both sides of the US–Mexico border, migration is therefore a labor-supply system. Immigration policy determines the rules under which that policy is put to use.’⁶

Throw in the decline of the Western welfare state, add a dose of home-grown xenophobia over the purportedly denationalising consequence of permanent migration, spice the mix with a bit of post-9/11 paranoia, stir well and behold the result: a growing interest in temporary foreign worker programmes among public officials, employers and large sectors of the public both in the North and the South. In a broad adaptation of Mark Twain, one might say that ‘the reports of the death of guest worker programs have [proven to have] been greatly exaggerated’.⁷

This essay deals with what I think of as a ‘dual process of social construction’ of Mexican migrant workers involved in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), which sends annually more than 20 000 Mexican and Caribbean workers to work in Canadian horticulture for periods of

between six weeks and eight months. Drawing on a modified version of Henri Lefebvre's ideas, Robin Cohen differentiated between exterior and interior conditioning of migrant workers. For Cohen exterior conditioning refers to social relations/reproduction of labour at the point-of-production under capital's control, although it also implicates state policing of borders and state and employers' roles in recruitment. Interior conditioning consists of 'those elements of the workers' conditioning and ideology that sustain and reproduce the forms of control generated at the exterior level'.⁸

Here I argue here that exterior and interior conditioning work off one another, and particularly that so-called 'exterior conditioning'—including employers' point-of-production control—establishes the context within which migrant workers' experience unfolds, for which reason it contributes to their 'interior conditioning'. But I argue as well that the result is shaped by workers' employment of a 'dual frame of reference' through which they gauge Canadian wages and working conditions the only way they can, which is in relationship to Mexican ones.⁹ Given that neoliberal policies have reduced the options available in Mexico, and diminished the attractiveness of those that remain, contract labour in Canada presents one of the few opportunities many poor, rural Mexicans have to acquire the income necessary for a minimally dignified life. Consequently most workers in the SAWP, where wages are several times higher than in their home communities, do everything possible to please their employers and continue in the programme. In other words, the field of power in which exterior and interior condition unfold—and through which migrants are constructed as a productive workforce that can be profitably deployed—is constituted through the social reproduction of labourers both at the point of origin (in Mexico) and at the point of production (in Canada). The squeezing of surplus value from migrant labourers within Canadian horticulture is predicated on the squeezing of Mexican labour markets through neoliberal restructuring.¹⁰

Neoliberal reforms and precarious labour

Space limitations prevent a detailed discussion of the impact of neoliberal reforms, yet it is necessary to contextualise the motivations of Mexican contract workers when they sign up to work in Canada. The agrarian sector experienced growing structural dualism during the post-World War II period as a result of government policies that kept food costs low and contributed to urban industrial capitalist accumulation. Nonetheless, Mexico remained self-sufficient in basic grains and oilseeds until the late 1960s, when the internal contradictions of import substitution industrialisation began to unravel. The oil shock and the succeeding 1982 debt crisis set the stage for structural adjustment and the shift to neoliberalism that followed. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1980s the government sold off parastate industries, effectively privatised the rural banking system and dismantled state purchasing and distribution institutions (Fertimex, Tabamex, Inmecafe, Conasupo) that had provided nominal support to many small and medium farmers. Finally, the state subscribed to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in

1986, amended the land reform provision of the Constitution in 1992 and signed on to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.¹¹

Collectively these policies resulted in a huge reduction in government assistance to small farmers (peasants) and sharp declines in many producer prices. Most significantly, NAFTA was accompanied by a multinational takeover of Mexican grain commercialisation and massive imports from the USA, leading to further real price declines. The overall effect has been the consolidation of a shift from 'food self-sufficiency', in which Mexico produces grains and other basic foods, to so-called 'food security', where government relies on international markets to supply those foods that can be more cheaply obtained elsewhere or, perhaps better stated, are sold more cheaply because producers receive massive state subsidies.¹² In Mexico the small PROCAMPO grants permitted under NAFTA fall far short of compensating for rising costs of production. Moreover, they expire in 2009, by which time NAFTA negotiators *presumed* that Mexican farmers either would have modernised in order to compete in global markets or would have abandoned farming in order to dedicate themselves to some other activity.¹³ In 2003 former finance minister Fernando Canales Clariond ordained that 'The campesinos will have to transform themselves into industrial workers or true businesspeople, particularly the poor corn and bean producers'.¹⁴

Many small producers did abandon rural areas for the cities, but compared with the 1950–80 period of import substitution industrialisation and relatively rapid economic growth, cities are now less able to absorb rural migrants. Like other areas of Latin America Mexico has experienced growing 'informalisation' and a rise in pluri-activity, through which rural and urban households diversify income sources and intensify work in an effort to compensate for declining real wages.¹⁵ While David Barkin is probably correct in touting the resilience of the Mexican peasantry, the fact is that between 2000 and 2005 Mexico lost a million and a half jobs in the countryside, the number of workers competing for casual agricultural day labour jobs in Mexico's north and west swelled, and the Mexican-born population in the USA increased by two million, drawing migrants from states outside the historic western Mexican sending areas.¹⁶ In the present social and economic context one can understand how legal, international contract work at wages far higher than those within reach might appeal to a many people.

Bureaucratic mandates and unfree labour

The neoliberal crisis of agriculture establishes the contemporary context for the SAWP but the programme began in 1966, more than 15 years before structural adjustment arrived in Mexico. Canadian horticulture has always involved hired workers, although the farm family itself probably supplied the bulk of labour power until rapid postwar industrial growth pulled young people away from rural areas and into better-paying urban employment, generating labour shortages that were relieved by postwar European migration and seasonal movements of people from depressed First Nations' reservations and underdeveloped regions of Quebec and the Maritimes.

An overtly racist immigration policy, which blocked horticulturalists from drawing upon workers in the Global South, was reversed in 1962 and the Canadian and Jamaican governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding initiating the SAWP in 1966. Over the course of the following decade a number of other nations in the English-speaking Caribbean—including Trinidad & Tobago and Barbados—entered the programme as well.¹⁷ According to Satzewich, Mexico was invited into the SAWP in 1974 in order to provide a check on the growing negotiating power of Caribbean workers.¹⁸

The SAWP attracts applications from rural workers and small peasants negatively affected by neoliberal policy and who lack the resources, network contacts and/or will to risk undocumented migration to the USA. Ministry of Labour (MOL) officials advertise a contract of known duration—which may be as short as six weeks or as long as eight months—with a minimum 40-hour work week, a set hourly wage rate six to eight times that paid in rural Mexico, employer-provided housing, subsidised airfare and health and life insurance. Mexican consular officers, or liaison officers in the case of Caribbean participants, oversee SAWP workers in Canada in order to protect their human and labour rights. The MOL targets landless or land-poor rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, who are physically fit and in their peak productive years (18–40). Although the ministry gives preference to married males with children (or other dependants), women were allowed into the SAWP in the mid-1980s at the request of Canadian growers. Their numbers grew rapidly from that point, yet women currently represent less than 4% of total Mexican contract workers. Demand for this programme—determined by the needs of participating Canadian horticulturalists—has always exceeded the supply of available slots; some applicants are rejected, others enter a labour reserve which can be activated to meet emergencies and shortfalls.

The first phase of recruitment generates a labour force which, at least on paper, meets the minimum criteria for inclusion. The more interesting process concerns the manner in which ‘raw recruits’, albeit adults with substantial work experience in agriculture, are moulded even as they mould themselves, into a work force capable of generating copious amounts of surplus value for Canadian growers. Although this ‘moulding’ takes place at the Canadian work and living site, I believe that the conditions in the Mexican living site serve as a constant, and indispensable, reference point. Labour mobility, or rather the lack of it, provides the key here.

To begin, the MOL assigns workers to an employer for the duration of their contract; as is the case with other contract labour programmes, they have no right to circulate on the labour market. When the contract season terminates, employers then complete an end-of-year evaluation that each worker must turn in to the regional MOL office shortly after their return if they desire to work in Canada the following year. The results of that evaluation heavily determine the worker’s SAWP future. Employers comment on the worker’s performance and comportment while in Canada and choose (or not) to invite him back for the following year. Those asked back are known as ‘named workers’ (*nominales*); barring bureaucratic error or oversight at the Mexican end, they return to the same employer the following season. Those

favourably evaluated without being named usually receive a transfer to another employer. But the MOL punishes the recipients of negative reports with temporary (one- or two-year) suspensions or expels them permanently from the SAWP, unless there exist mitigating circumstances. This extensive and relatively unchecked employer power undermines many contractual rights and guarantees, including the workers' right to refuse dangerous work or requests for overtime or weekend work. When Ontario growers acclaim Mexican workers' reliability and desire to please, treating these as intrinsic cultural or even 'ethnic/racial' characteristics, they engage in a convenient form of social amnesia involving the erasure of their coercive power over workers and the consequences of that power for workforce compliance.¹⁹

It is useful to analyse the weak position of Mexican (and Caribbean) workers in terms of their 'deportability'. Writing about Mexican migrants in the USA, Nicolas De Genova stated that, 'It is deportability, and not deportation as such, that has historically rendered Mexican labor to be a distinctly disposable commodity. "Illegality" is thus lived through a palpable sense of deportability whereby some are deported in order that most may remain ... as workers.'²⁰ Differently from undocumented Mexican migrants, SAWP workers from Mexico and the Caribbean enter Canada legally, although to remain there and to return in the future they must carry out their duties to the employer's satisfaction. A failing grade in work performance, or even personal comportment, results in dismissal and deportation. In other words, when a worker is fired, the contract is voided and the right to remain in Canada automatically suspended. The legal worker is transformed into an 'illegal' who must be 'deported'.

That is one kind of deportability. But I want to suggest that legally sanctioned migrant workers can also be 'dismissed' (expelled, ie 'deported') from Canada, or at least from a future there, as a result of negative work evaluations tendered by their Canadian employers and delivered to the MOL in Mexico. Non-renewal (equivalent to dismissal) of a previously active programme participant who is 'resting up' in Mexico between work trips to Canada has the same effect as deportation, even though it comes *after* as opposed to *during* the contract period. No worker can state with absolute certainty that return in future years is *guaranteed*, regardless of previous experience. Even workers who have rendered years of faithful service—during which they generated large amounts of surplus value—are potentially subject to replacement by younger persons better able to sustain intense work rhythms.²¹

Second, new Mexican recruits are unable to transfer away from employers who abuse or overwork them because of an unwritten MOL rule that requires contract workers to complete three seasons with the initial employer before they are allowed to even request a transfer. The rule ensures a modicum of workforce stability for employers who provide short contracts and/or work weeks, poor working and/or living conditions and abusive treatment, but it has the opposite effect on migrant contract workers, who experience personal *instability* resulting from poverty, overwork, illness and accidents and insults to their dignity. Those able to '*aguantar*' (withstand or bear up under) the

situation are allowed to re-enter the ‘employment lottery’, where their next assignment will hopefully improve on the previous one. Others drop out of the programme in frustration, but they are easily replaced. Of course contract workers who are satisfied with their current situations—and they are numerous—do everything in their power to meet the employer’s expectations, secure a good evaluation and receive an invitation to return the following season.

The daily consequence of this unfree labour regime was narrated by Domingo Rodríguez, who chronicled two years of SAWP contract labour in Ontario, in a University of Tlaxcala social work thesis. Rodríguez contrasted his first, mean and abusive employer with the kind, even lax treatment meted out by the second. The latter even sent Mexican crews off to pick fruit without supervision, in contrast to the first employer, who exercised close and constant supervision of his Mexican workers, routinely criticising their performance and urging them to work faster. The unsupervised crew could have slacked off or at least toiled at a more leisurely pace. However, crew members showed that they had internalised the disciplinary regime when they reached agreement among themselves to work steadily in order to justify the trust the grower had placed in them, as well as to avoid repercussions should he be dissatisfied with the amount of work accomplished.

this boss ... neither supervised us nor sent someone else to do so, he said nothing about whether we should work fast or not, or whether the work was poorly done. During the 10 am rest break all the *compañeros* commented on the boss’s attitude and we concluded that we had to give a fair day’s work [*teníamos que trabajar lo que era justo*] so that he would be satisfied and wouldn’t send anyone to keep an eye on us.²²

Obviously these workers hoped to be named by the employer the next season.

Once back in Mexico SAWP participants compare and contrast employers, work and living conditions; occasionally a worker attempts to get a friend or relative transferred to the same farm by asking his employer to request the person, sight unseen, by name only. This kind of network hiring, which is extremely common both among undocumented migrants and Mexican participants in the H-2A contract labour programme in the USA²³, can yield occasional positive results in Canada too, but its effectiveness is diminished by the MOL’s control over work assignments and strict enforcement of the three-year rule.

Consular officials: *Entre la espina y la pared*²⁴

On the workers’ side there exists no institutionalised recrimination-free procedure through which they might check the enormous power that employers exercise over their present and futures. In Ontario Mexican contract workers’ interests are represented by five officials working out of the Mexican consulate in downtown Toronto, supplemented since 2005 by several more in a satellite office in Leamington, located in the province’s extreme

southwest. However, because Mexico competes with Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago and other Caribbean nations for a limited number of annual worker placements, its consular representatives are under pressure to maintain good relations with Ontario growers, who have the right to choose the source countries from which they draw their workers. The more vigorously the consulate advocates on behalf of Mexican migrant workers, the greater the likelihood that growers will opt for Caribbeans over Mexicans in the future. Alternatively, if consular officers side with employers, as workers often claim, Mexican workers themselves bear the consequences. Workers who suffer accidents or illnesses that required hospitalisation or need to make an emergency trip home to Mexico to resolve an urgent family matter usually receive prompt and effective assistance from the consulate. But many workers criticise the consulate for taking the employer's side in labour-management conflicts. Consular officials declare that, while they seek to defend the rights of Mexican workers, they must also 'assure that the worker respects the agreement' (*asegurar que el trabajador respecta el acuerdo*) and sanction those workers who violate it.²⁵ When consular officers are called in by workers to deal with labour conflicts, they attempt to negotiate a solution but, too often, according to workers, the 'negotiation' favours the employer. In any case the consulate's preference for a 'negotiation strategy' over a more aggressive 'advocacy strategy' has helped forge among workers a 'common sense' belief that they lack effective institutionalised channels of protest in the face of substandard living conditions, abuse and overwork. Forty-eight seasonal workers (26% overall) interviewed in northwest Tlaxcala stated that they had requested assistance from the consulate on at least one occasion during their last trip to Canada, and 15 of the 34 (44%) willing to discuss the matter claimed to have been poorly attended or stated that their complaints were ignored. Informants in Tlaxcala and Ontario frequently opined that they kept most grievances to themselves because, they said, 'the consulate resolves nothing'. According to home country surveys, a quarter of Mexican workers reported that their employers had mistreated them on occasion, but 'less than half ... complained directly to the consulate'.²⁶

Mexican and other consulates may occasionally remove a particularly abusive grower from their rolls. However, labour market competition means that growers dropped by one country can usually count on obtaining replacement workers from another. Though reticent to admit to it publicly, consular representatives feel pressure from their governments to place as many workers as possible, and jump at the opportunity to increase their numbers—even when the benefits of additional placements may involve significant costs to *their* workers. In Ontario the government and employer bureaucracies charged with managing the SAWP 'splice together' five *separate, bilaterally negotiated and competitive* contract labour programmes. If Mexico refuses to supply agricultural workers on Canadian growers' terms—channelled through the Foreign Area Resources Management Services and endorsed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada—plenty of other underdeveloped Latin American and Caribbean countries, inside and outside the SAWP, are eager to do so. In 2004 Guatemala began sending

agricultural contract workers to Quebec in a new Foreign Workers Program that appears to have attracted some Quebecois employers formerly inscribed in the provincial SAWP programme.²⁷

Divided they stand ...

On the other hand, the dialectic of Self and Other, channelled through nationalist (and racist) discourse, works to reinforce a collective sense of pride in *Mexicanidad* (Mexicaness) among workers that also benefits employers. Eusebio, a 52-year-old from the state of Morelos with 16 seasons in the SAWP, mentioned that his employer regretted having replaced some Mexican workers with Trinidadians, because she now understood that the Mexicans work harder: 'She's got fourteen Trinidadians', Eusebio said, 'but they don't produce as much as the Mexicans, neither by the hour nor by piecework'. 'We might be lazy [people]', he stated with a trace of irony, 'but we get the work out' (*Aunque seamos flojos, sacamos el trabajo*).²⁸ Clarito, a 43-year-old married male from Nanacamilpa (state of Tlaxcala), claimed that on his Canadian farm he was among the first group of Mexicans hired to replace Jamaicans, whom the owner, according to him, characterised as *mañosos*, ie as 'sly' or 'cunning', always seeking advantage. He said that Mexicans accept as many hours of work as they are offered, while Jamaicans refuse to continue after a certain point. Insofar as Mexican workers reproduce employer prejudices about Caribbeans, racialised as Black, some Mexicans, racialised as Brown (or maybe just as 'Mexican'), collaborate in their exploitation by working more intensively, and placing themselves more readily at the beck and call of employers than their self-perceived Caribbean rivals. Indeed, for a variety of reasons—white racism, cultural stereotypes and perceived docility among them—Mexicans increased their representation in the SAWP labour force from 20% in 1986 to more than 50% two decades later.²⁹

Yet more than ideology is at stake here. For many Mexican workers must be aware that failure to outperform Caribbeans—with the employer as the sole accredited judge—could lead to *their* replacement, should the employer decide to switch labour supply countries. Behind an employer's approving remarks lurks an ever-present threat to which those remarks direct attention. Workers have no way of knowing what their employer *really* thinks about their work—a point highlighted earlier in the experience of Domingo Rodríguez—for which reason most adopt a conservative strategy and adjust to accelerated work rhythms and extended workdays in the fields, and accede to employers' 'requests' for overtime and Sunday work even when they might prefer to forego additional income for some time off. There exists no careful study of comparative labour productivity in the SAWP, but employers routinely claim that contract workers work two to three times as fast as Canadian nationals, more than sufficient to compensate for the relatively high cost (wages, housing, transport, etc) of the SAWP labour force. If these subjective evaluations are correct, SAWP contract workers produce considerably more surplus value, both in terms of rate and mass, than domestic agricultural workers. Indeed, by 2000 the SAWP had become indispensable to

the economic survival of Ontario's horticulture industry, accounting for 52% of employed workers and 45% of employed hours worked.³⁰

While in Canada, temporary Mexican and Caribbean contract workers have limited space for manoeuvre. Some feign sickness or injury in order to gain a brief respite but, taken too far—and the precise limits of the employer's tolerance cannot be known in advance—such practices can redound to a negative end-of-year evaluation and future suspension or dismissal from the SAWP. As Larkin pointed out, some growers follow a policy of selective retention by not annually inviting back workers whose performance falls short of their conception of a proper work ethic.³¹ Too much 'backchat' or complaining can have the same result, especially on larger farms, where many workers compete annually for a limited number of relatively secure spots, with the remainder of the vacancies being filled by new recruits. Another form of protest involves dropping out of the SAWP: opting not to turn in the evaluation form to the MOL at season's end, abandoning the farm and returning to Mexico or, more common in the case of Caribbean than Mexican workers, activating contacts with family members or friends residing in Toronto and other cities in order to live and work illegally in Canada. However, individualised protests are like small ripples dissipating outwards in a large pond: they leave the contours of the social field and the power relations therein undisturbed. Driven by poverty and the prospect of gaining legal access to work at far better wages than they can earn in Mexico, new recruits take the places of those who drop out or retire, and things proceed pretty much as before. This is decidedly *not* the kind of situation in which 'resistance', or at least the collective forms of it that matter most, are on frequent public display—at least not yet. In various ways and to different degrees the contractually sanctioned powers granted the employer, competition among source country governments and the contradictions that permeate the liaison/consular official role conspire against contract workers, whether Mexican or Caribbean. The workers are not powerless and do not lack agency. But the use (or threat) of force—embodied in the annual evaluation, the three-year rule, arbitrary dismissal and so on—is usually enough to confine grievances to the margins, out of sight and hearing of their targets.

Personal labour relations

Living and working close by the owner (or the owner's representative) establishes conditions for the development of personal labour relations. Employers benefit from their position of power over contract workers in order to obtain 'favours' from them, such as working on weekends or late into the evening to bring in a harvest. As we have seen, economic need and concern over possible reprisals motivate many workers to 'volunteer'; but some also strive to gain the employer's approval in the hope that one favour will be paid with another, as customarily occurs between patrons and their clients in rural Mexico. This strategy may work occasionally, but most growers like to keep their work life and personal life separate. A common result, documented by Larkin in the case of Anglo-Canadian employers

and their Caribbean employees, is ‘the reciprocal construction of a divided world’:

without the Ontario employers, the West Indian men could not work in Canada; and without the West Indian employees, tobacco, fruit and vegetable farmers would not have a reliable source of labour. But it becomes equally evident that while the West Indian workers and the Ontario farmers share the world they have created on the farms, there is another level at which they divide this world along lines of mutually exclusive cultural values and expectations: the West Indian men work on the contract for reasons which can only be understood in relation to the meaning of migration in the West Indies and the Ontario farmers import the West Indian workers for reasons which only make sense in relation to the crisis of farming in Ontario.³²

It seems probable that ‘reciprocal construction’ occurs in the case of Mexican contract workers and Canadian growers as well, based on social, cultural and linguistic differences between the groups. Indeed, Mexican workers’ efforts to please employers and develop social relationships with them, and the effort of employers to maintain formal relations with and a distance from employees, indicate different *habitués* at work.³³ Even so, whatever small advantage workers might obtain from efforts to micromanage work and living situations, they know that power rests with the grower and that confrontations, complaints, frequent illnesses, a refusal to work overtime or on weekends and/or phone calls to consular officials can result in a negative evaluation at the end of the contract season and suspension or dismissal from the SAWP. Whether in Canada or in Mexico, they are, after all, ‘deportable’, for which reason it is an error to treat ‘reciprocal construction’ as framed by functional complementarity, as does Larkin. Only by ignoring the very different positions that workers and employers occupy in this social field of power, which is transnational in scope, can one sustain the notion that the exchange of labour power for wages is a fair or balanced exchange. Mexican workers’ deportability, and the dire implications that deportability holds for their economic presents and futures, *binds* point-of-production relations in Canadian horticultural fields to the neoliberal-based social construction of surplus labour power in the Mexican countryside.

Conclusion

Resistance to such a highly structured and controlled social environment—similar in many ways to the ‘total institutions’ (military schools, mental institutions, hospitals, etc) studied by Erving Goffman—does occur, despite the possibility of reprisals.³⁴ For instance, in recent years a few farms have been subject to spontaneous work stoppages in protest over low wages and substandard housing conditions or unfair treatment.³⁵ Moreover, countless examples exist of the strategies that Mexicans implement to lighten workloads and make difficult situations more liveable—the southwest Ontario version of Scott’s ‘small arms in the class war’ or Ong’s

'cultural struggle'. Most workers agree, however, that, even as they complain, the best way to 'get ahead' in Canada is to work hard, respect the law and keep a low profile, especially in public, whatever the physical and psychological cost.³⁶ It is this behavioural code that, put into practice, makes Mexican workers so attractive to southwest Ontario horticulture producers.³⁷ As a Mexican male with 20 seasons work experience in Canada explained to Ofelia Becerril, 'It is really hard to do something [to make a difference]. If we protest, even if all 3000 workers stationed in Leamington did, we'd get sent back to Mexico. They can do that because there are another 3000 Mexican workers ready to come to Canada and work.'³⁸

It is tempting to represent the violence I have discussed as a vestige of pre-capitalist unfree labour forms that will disappear with the further spread of neoliberal capitalism. However, Robin Cohen has demonstrated that, regardless of whether one is discussing the periphery, semi-periphery or, as here, the so-called centre of the world capitalist system, capitalists have *always* drawn upon unfree labour, made practically invisible through a process that Ann Kingsolver refers to as 'strategic alterity'.³⁹ It is also important to note that the force involved in disciplining SAWP workers *cannot* be understood in isolation from the more amorphous socioeconomic forces that incline thousands of people to apply to the programme and, if admitted, to seek to remain in it. I refer, of course, to the struggle to escape the structural violence of the rural Mexican version of savage capitalism as it unfolds in northwest Tlaxcala, where I carried out fieldwork for this project, and elsewhere.⁴⁰ As bad as things may seem in the Canadian workplace, they are infinitely worse, on the whole, in the Mexican countryside, where poverty and precariousness—intensified under the neoliberal regime—await those who 'fail' in the north. Moreover, the material rewards of repeated trips there, which are real, concrete and visible to members of the community who have not worked in the SAWP, reinforce the practical value of 'working oneself to death' (*trabajar para matarse*) in Canada.⁴¹

At least at the beginning of their sojourn comparison of the promises, and to a lesser degree the objective conditions, of work in Canada and in Mexico establish what Waldinger and Lichter call a 'dual frame of reference'.⁴² But within a short time most contract workers learn that, even as they earn in Canadian dollars, they also spend in Canadian dollars; many also discover that hourly SAWP wages lie close to the bottom of the national salary scale and that, contrary to Memorandum of Understanding stipulations, they are paid significantly less than most Canadian workers doing the same jobs. Indeed, surveys in the Niagara region of Ontario documented that between 2001 and 2003 both Canadian citizens and legal residents received between 9% and 14% more per hour when performing the same tasks as foreign contract workers.⁴³ On the other hand, the cold brutality of making a living in Mexico, refreshed each year when contract workers return to their home communities, impels workers to continue subjecting themselves to the exhausting, alienating and highly coercive conditions of contract work, as mediated by differences in personal labour relations on the farm. Indeed, low wages and restricted opportunities in rural Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad,

Barbados, etc may go a long way towards cognitively stabilising a dual frame of reference. They constitute features of the structural conditions that frame workers' understanding of their experiences, through which a migrant horticultural workforce is constructed, even as it also constructs itself. Given that poor, rural Mexican males and females have few possibilities locally to obtain the resources required to acquire a dignified house and decent food, clothing and education for their families, this 'dual frame' accurately represents key elements of contract workers' objective experience. Together with the virtually unchecked power of employers over workers' SAWP future, the lack of labour market mobility, and physical isolation and a tendency for labour relations to become personalised, the dual frame of reference helps us grasp why feelings of discontent are commonly displaced on employers and their representatives—rated by workers as more or less desirable—and not on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program as an institution.

Discontent there is but, as I noted above, it develops under such severe structural constraints that collective forms tend to involve relatively spontaneous wildcat strikes and work stoppages. In more organised forms of resistance groups such as the 130 000-strong United Food and Commercial Workers union and Justice 4 Migrant Workers, a pro-migrant activist organisation working out of Toronto, act on the workers' behalf. But as these organisations mounted advertising campaigns and challenged provincial legislation limiting workers' rights, the Canadian government introduced a larger and more ambitious contract labour programme—devoid of most protections and oversights present in the SAWP—legalising the recruitment of Third World workers for a variety of mostly low-wage occupations.⁴⁴

Notes

I am indebted to Marcus Taylor for several helpful suggestions.

- 1 But see Cohen's critique of this concept in R Cohen, *The New Helots: Migrants in the New International Division of Labour*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1987, pp 223–241.
- 2 S Castles, 'The guest-worker in western Europe—an obituary', *International Migration Review*, 20 (4), 1986, pp 761–778. See also Cohen, *The New Helots*.
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