

Original Research

Inside the North American tragedy: the exploitation of Mexican and Brazilian migrant children in American tobacco farming

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Abstract: This study aims to reflect on the situation and exploitation of migrant Latino children in the United States of America, especially in the production of North American tobacco. It is the result of postdoctoral research carried out between 2020 and 2021 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). We conducted online analyses, research, interviews, and field research with data collection on farms in Virginia and North Carolina. Data analysis was performed using content analysis (Bardin, 1977) and Marxist theory on the relationship between the current reality and the Marxist system totality. The results of this study pushed academic boundaries given the current situation of migrant children in the US, which reflects a contemporary form of colonialism and the capitalistic tragedy of working-class children. In line with Meszaros (2009) and Stetsenko (2016), we defend the need for taking a radical and daring approach to engaged research with a view toward denouncing and changing the situation of exploitation of migrant children (and entire families) in the US. If reality is in a state of constant movement and transformation, the direction of change depends on our practical-theoretical engagements toward substantial human emancipation.

Keywords: Migration, Labor exploitation, Childhood, United States of America

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the situation and exploitation of migrant Latino children in the United States of America. It results from postdoctoral research developed between 2020 and 2021 at the City University of New York (CUNY) under the supervision of Professor Anna Stetsenko in the Graduate Program in Psychology and Urban Education. A portion of the research received support and funding from Capes/PRINT/UFSC through the granting of a scholarship linked to the project titled "Repository of Intercultural Practices - REPI/UFSC".

The research took place amidst the COVID-19 pandemic when New York City became the epicenter of the pandemic.

This situation caused the extension of field research and limited data collection methods, with research starting to be conducted predominantly online. In addition to performing analyses of Human Rights Watch reports, research on capitalism, colonialism and culture, online interviews, field research, and data collection were carried out on farms in the states of Virginia and North Carolina during August and September 2020, when COVID-19 infection rates dropped in the United States. Data analysis was performed using content analysis (Bardin, 1977). According to Bardin (1977), the content analysis phase was developed through a three-stage process: pre-analysis, material exploration, and results treatment. During the results treatment, we used Marxist theories about the relationship between the specific problems and the system totality. Every singular

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matter is reflected in the totality (Marx, 1989; 2013).

Throughout the pandemic and the field research carried out, we noted how Latino immigrant families constitute an essential part of the North American economy despite their illegal immigration status due to not having a US work visa. They make up the largest workforce employed in the countryside, where tobacco and food production stand out. Immigrants are therefore essential to maintain and nourish life in big cities, especially during the strict lockdowns generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, many jobs must be carried out by immigrants who are considered illegal and constantly threatened with imprisonment and deportation.

This manuscript is divided into three parts. The first presents the research problem regarding the issue of immigrant labor in the US, where the intrinsic relationship

between capitalism, colonialism, and exploitation of the immigrant workforce appears. Then, we deal with the specificity of rural labor, highlighting North American tobacco farming, where Latino workers, including children, are exploited. Lastly, in line with Meszaros (2009) and Stetsenko (2016), we defend the need for taking a radical and daring approach to engaged research with a view toward denouncing and changing the situation of migrant children (and entire families) in the US. If reality is in constant movement and transformation, the direction of changes depends on our practical-theoretical engagements toward substantial human emancipation.

The exploitation of immigrant labor in the United States



Figure 1 Hands of children with tobacco in North Carolina. HRW archive provided to author during research in North Carolina during August/2020. (Conde, 2020)

This manuscript starts with the above image which we found in the Human Rights Watch Files during our research in the USA. In this picture, it is possible to see the dark stains on the children's hands from the nicotine contact, which causes nausea, vomiting, dizziness, and intoxication in children. The tobacco leaves are collected manually and still wet (to guarantee the quality of the product) and therefore their toxic substances are easily absorbed by the skin. Due to their physical immaturity and developing bodies, children are even more susceptible to the effects of excess nicotine and therefore are subject to more intense side effects than adults. The same situation was found in our previous studies conducted in Brazil on children who have suffered work accidents and children who work in Brazilian tobacco farms (Conde, 2016; 2020; Conde & Vendramini, 2014; Conde & Hermida, 2021; Conde & Silva, 2020).

The US is the second richest country in the world and has a sophisticated economy with vast investments in space research, 4.0 technology, and the defense industry. According to Giroux (2016), the country has plenty of money to offer quality education to all students and the problem is not a lack thereof, but where the money goes. "The United States spends an estimated \$960 billion on war and defense-related projects. In fact, the cost of war over a ten-year period will be at least \$3.7 trillion and could

reach \$4.4 trillion" (Giroux, 2016, p.11). Notwithstanding the above data, according to Human Rights Watch (2015), about 300,000 to 400,000 children under the age of 18 are currently working in the US and most of them are Latino immigrants residing in the countryside, where it is common to find children working without any kind of protective gear during scorching summers, on weekends, and after school.

Teachers notice on a daily basis the effects related to child labor on the bodies of some of their students, such as cuts on the hands, nausea, sunstroke, skin burns, drowsiness, and fatigue. The parents, generally from Mexico, take their children to work because they need the money to buy basic products and not because they think it is part of proper education or the culture, all of which is in line with the findings of our research in Brazil (Conde, 2014; 2016; 2018; 2020). Parents recognize that such work drains their children's childhoods and is harmful to their health and development, but the families still need the money to survive. In the US, laws allow children to work in the fields as long as they have parental permission. Every year, approximately 10 million adult immigrants come to the US to work in the fields, 90% of whom are undocumented. They work under difficult conditions, receive low wages for long work hours, and suffer various forms of racism. They live in precarious, poorly ventilated accommodations infested

with insects. Farm work is considered one of the most dangerous in the country. Many workers suffer from malnutrition, heatstroke, sunburn, skin diseases, and infections caused by poor living conditions. Children often work to help with the family's basic needs or even work on their own when their parents have been deported or arrested. In these cases, they are even more exposed to exploitation and violence, which is not uncommon in reports on Latino immigrant girls.

According to the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture)'s Economic Research Service (2021), 73% of agriculture workers were born outside of the United States. For the Human Rights Watch Report, the massive majority of migrants who work for farmers in the United States are Latino. In 2019, 258,000 migrant workers were granted the H-2A Visa on a temporary basis - less than 4% of the total number of migrant workers in the country. If farmers lost their foreign-born workers, North American agriculture would fall by 30 to 60 billion dollars (USDA, 2021). These data reveal the truth that farm workers and their children are essential to rich agricultural production. Nonetheless, white American citizens and politicians continue to speak out against these immigrants. Hate speech against immigrants is part of an environment that justifies the exploitation of Latinos as if they were people of lesser value and without discipline, and as such, they deserve to be exploited and disciplined to learn how to work from an early age and in order to become better adults in the future. Under this ideology, migrants are laboring for the benefit of the capitalist system and the American white supremacist elite.

Justin Flores, vice-president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), in an interview given in September 2020, outlined the difficulties of organizing immigrants in labor unions and struggled for better living and working conditions in the USA:

"Our job is so difficult in the union because we don't have specific legislation in our favor. We don't have any rights, minimum wage, minimum age, workday limits... Bosses can pay whatever they want and the workers may work 10, 12, or 14 hours a day. In American cities, the situation is very different from in the fields because there is labor legislation in each state. The illegal situation of many immigrants contributes to weak union organizations and so they normally accept the worst wages and conditions without complaint." (FLORES, J. Interview on September 7th, 2020 – apud Conde, 2020).

After the above interview, we visited small and large farms in North Carolina, where we met over 300 farm workers originally from Mexico. During our visit, everyone was working under the watch and control of a supervisor. They lived in barracks with shared bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom. The stations were located far from cities and the public transport line. Whenever they need something such as food, medicine, or clothes, they depend on transportation and assistance from the boss or supervisor. They earn 500 - 1000 dollars per week and work 10-12 hours a day, seven

days a week. Seasonal workers, who live in cars or trailers, park their cars or mobile homes near the farms in order to work every day. They travel each season to different cities and farms in search of seasonal jobs. During our visits, we observed that language is an element of distinction of social origin, as the bosses speak only English and the workers speak only Spanish. In this case, language, as a constituent element of culture, reveals the class and place they occupy in society.

The stark inequality among the high number of Latino immigrant children working in the second richest country in the world highlights a contemporary form of colonialism that occurs within the Global North and that cannot give up the exploitation of an early-age workforce. Therefore, the immigrant labor force is more of a solution for the American capitalist economy than a problem, as is commonly stated by the xenophobic conservative discourse of the American white elite. According to Marx (2013), capitalism is a vampire that sucks the workforce from a very early age and workers are an essential part of its inheritance.

Based on studies on the primitive accumulation of capital (Marx, 2013) and on the current configurations of the capitalist system, we understand that the former British colony in North America became one of the richest countries in the world through the exploitation of blacks (primarily) and the labor of undocumented immigrants, as we find it now. The history of slavery, racism and migration on the North American continent merges with the history of the United States itself, giving rise to an internal social divide between the white elite of European and Protestant origin and the immense black population and migrants from poor countries that make up the main ethnic origin of the rural and urban workforce.

The contemporary form of colonialism presents substantial differences in relation to the colonial period of the great European navigations. It is no longer a period of primitive accumulation of capital based on the slavery of Indians and blacks, but an exploitation of free and immigrant labor that occurs not only in colonies distant from the great colonizing metropolises but in the great centers of the rich Global North.

According to Taylor (2016), capitalism is a system based on the exploitation of the many by the privileged few. It is based on strong social inequality, which uses refined tools to divide the exploited majority. Based on the myth of scarcity and using racism and colonialism to plunder, exploit, dominate and enslave, it creates competition among the exploited, pitting them against each other. Divided by skin color, origin, religion, or gender, they step aside from the unified struggle of the majority against the minority. The feeling of privilege confuses whites, who then do not identify with the agendas of non-whites. The reverse also occurs, and non-whites also do not identify with the agendas of exploited whites and members of the working class. These forms of exploitation confuse and create a false appearance, which, deep down, due to the fragmentation of the exploited, benefits only the exploiters.

According to [Conde and Cassiani \(2021\)](#), this ideology of white supremacy has had effects on the US, a fact observable in data on violence, poverty, and quality of life. In this sense, [Taylor \(2016\)](#) shows how, in places where the idea of white supremacy prospered, the labor movement declined and a real war between whites and non-whites was instituted. Also according to the same author, the way in which racial theory and white supremacy ideology were implemented in the US (under strong funding from the Ford Foundation) culminated in the dissemination of a superficial approach to the racial problem, an approach taken based on the feeling of hatred and competition between whites and blacks.

It is in this sense that [Conde and Cassiani \(2021\)](#) state that the categories of race and class intertwine and show that the fact of being black or an immigrant cannot be understood outside the context and social relations in which one lives.

Considering that, in the past, colonialism practiced the slavery of blacks and indigenous peoples, the theft of natural resources from the colonies, genocide, rape and violence against women and indigenous peoples can also be seen as the central element of primitive capitalist accumulation ([Marx, 2013](#)). Today, central capitalist and colonialist countries have exploited migrants from poor countries within their own territories (as in the USA) without having to allocate their companies and investments to poor countries. With the growth of the international migratory flow, especially by the unemployed populations of countries that are impoverished, in crisis, or at war, a wall is even built inside the richest country of the Global North that divides the North and its white supremacist elite from the South, from Latinos and blacks who are exploited and have their rights unprotected.

From 2016, with Donald Trump in the US presidency, the conservative movement and violence against immigrants and black people grew in the US. In general, conservative movements, social networks, and policymakers attribute social problems to immigrants who arrive from Latin America destitute with children and family dependents in search of work. After 2016, the Trump administration initiated a zero-tolerance policy toward immigrants, separating children from their parents and creating a special section of ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) for children. This American tragedy, being a real form of racism and neocolonialism, traumatizes and worries millions of immigrant families who are survivors of exploitation, violence, racism, sexism, and terrible living and working conditions.

To illustrate our descriptions and reflections above, we quote a passage by [Jacob Soborof \(2020\)](#) from his book "Separated: Inside an American Tragedy" where the author describes thousands of situations in which children are arrested and separated from families within ICEs, as in the Brazilian example below:

"I am a citizen of Brazil and I am seeking asylum in the United States. When I came to the United States, I passed my initial asylum interview ("credible fear interview") and I

am now in immigration proceedings before an immigration judge to seek asylum. Although this was my situation, I was convicted of the misdemeanor of entering the country illegally. When a border guard approached me a little after I entered the country [on August 26, 2017], I explained I was seeking asylum. I was still prosecuted. I spent 25 days in jail for the misdemeanor. After my jail sentence, I was sent on September 22, 2017, to an immigration detention center in Texas, called the El Paso Processing Center and then I was transferred to the West Texas Detention Facility, also known as Sierra Blanca. I have been in this detention center since that date. I am attempting to proceed with my asylum claim. My biological son, J., is 14 and he came with me from Brazil. He is also seeking asylum. When I was sent to jail for my conviction, my son was taken from me and sent to a facility in Chicago. I know that the jail did not allow children to stay with their parents. But I have now (been) out of jail and I have been in immigration detention since September 22, 2017. I am desperate to be reunited with my son. I would like to be released with my son so we can live with friends in the United States while we pursue our asylum cases. But if we cannot be released, I would like us to be detained together. I worry about him constantly and don't know when I will see him again. We have talked on the phone only five or six times since he was taken away from me. I know he is having a very hard time being detained all by himself without me. He is only a 14-year-old boy in a strange country and he needs his mother. I hope I can be with my son soon. I miss him and I'm scared for him..." (Declaration of M.S.C. in ICE, March/7/2018 apud Soborof, 2020)

The unspeakable tragedy above, a contemporary form of racism and neocolonialism, has attracted thousands of children, mothers and families in recent years. In October 2020, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, volunteers and lawyers, appointed by a federal judge to identify families of migrants who were separated, reported that they were unable to find the parents of 545 children (60 of them under 5 years old) because the families had already been deported to Central America without their children. Children, prisoners of children's ICEs, as shown in the image below, whose relatives and family members are unable to be found, must be forwarded to the North American adoption system.

According to [Meszaros \(2009\)](#), this barbarism announces the absolute limits of capitalism. The historical crisis provides a scenario for the struggle and action of revolutionary movements for social emancipation. The incessant search for cheap goods leads to the profitable exploitation of the labor force, which is considered just another commodity to be bought and sold. For this reason, the recent crises and reforms have dissolved labor regulations and created new forms of employment where it is possible to find the majority of working immigrants around the world: uber drivers, entrepreneurs, volunteers, the self-employed, and freelancers. In the same sense, [Antunes \(2009\)](#) states that the system has tried to resolve

these crises in a timely and specific way through reforms. However, structural problems are at the core of the

system, making them impossible to reform.



Figure 2 Migrant Children inside ICE Shelter, Brownsville, Texas, July/2018. Ilana Panich-Linsman/The New York Times, 2018.

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Immigrant children can work in American tobacco production

Tobacco production in the US has been around since the 1600s and forms a central part of the country's economy to this day. Its production is the fourth in the world, behind China, Brazil, and India. Four American states are the main producers: Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (HRW, 2015). Around 12 international groups are involved in the industry and the process uses heavy machinery, tractors, and mats combining just-in-case and just-in-time production standards, mixing Toyotist and Fordist standards. As shown in the figure below, it uses manual harvesting on conveyor belts, automatic ovens, standardization of quality and shape of the final product, and large inventories that drive the sales process.

In addition, production takes place on large farms, with the hiring of immigrant workers, and not on small family properties integrated into the large tobacco industry. According to Rony, owner of a farm that employs about 250 Mexican workers that we visited in North Carolina (Conde, 2020), Brazilian tobacco is cheaper than American tobacco and China (the main buyer of American tobacco) has preferred to buy Brazilian production because of the price. Rony states that "the solution to competitive pricing is to hire immigrant workers because they are willing to work for less. American workers want to earn more." With this statement, it is possible to reflect on the importance of the migrant workforce for the American economy. In this case, migrants are the most essential component in the production of this commodity for which the American economy pays the lowest possible wages.

Among immigrant workers (mostly from Mexico and other Latin American countries), it is possible to find children laboring and operating dangerous tools, working at height, and using heavy machinery while earning less than the adult salary. According to Human Rights Watch (2015):

"Tobacco companies do not bear the sole responsibility to protect the child tobacco workers. The US government has utterly failed to protect children. As a result, it remains legally permissible for children at age 12 to be hired to work unlimited hours outside of school on a tobacco farm of any size with parental permission, and there is no minimum age for children to work on small tobacco farms" (HRW, 2015, p.10)

For Meszaros (2009), the State, capital and labor form a structured triad. The State is not separate from capitalism and it would be impossible to create a new society without establishing the exploitation of labor and surplus value.

The creation of a new sociability prescinds a new society and a new form of State without the concession of capital into the hands of a wealthy minority.



Figure 3 (left) and 4 (right): Latino laborers harvesting tobacco in North Carolina during September/2020. Photographs by Soraya Franzoni Conde (Conde, 2020).

In the USA, as well as in Brazil, the risks for children are recognized, but the government does not act to change the regulatory framework. Daniele (14 years old), during an interview, told the Human Rights Watch researcher: "No one asked my age. They do not care. They just wanted people to work (HRW, 2015, p.7)". And Sofia (17 years old): "None of my bosses or contractors or equipment bosses ever told us anything about pesticides and how we can protect ourselves from them"(HRW, 2015, p.9).

Many families roam the US states in search of seasonal jobs. They reside in trailers or vans, as illustrated in the image collected during our field research below. The price of rent together with the low wages received make it unaffordable to pay for entire houses to live in. In addition, it is common to find more than two families sharing the same dwelling. The precarious living conditions have an impact on schooling, as the need for constant changes, the difficult life without a fixed home, and the need to work hinder the continuity of school education among Latino

children and adolescents.

According to Margaret Wurth, a researcher at Human Rights Watch interviewed in August/2020, the situation of child labor is worse in the US than in Brazil. Furthermore, the economic crisis generated by the pandemic has had an even greater effect on children since the increase in unemployment together with the shutdown of schools have increased poverty and social inequality:

"The issue involving children who work in Tobacco fields in the USA is a big problem because they work 10-12 hours per day contacting and absorbing nicotine, which makes them ill. Because of that, it is necessary to change the tobacco law and the exploration culture regarding migrant kids in the USA. In the past, black children were working with their parents in the fields. Now there are migrant kids in that position. The American legislation allows children to work at early age if their parents agree with it. In North Carolina and Virginia, children are working on tobacco culture, but in Tennessee, we have many children working



Figure 5 A migrant family's house in North Carolina, USA. September/2020. Photographs by Soraya Franzoni Conde (Conde, 2020).

on vegetable plantations: sweet potatoes, pumpkins, berries, and corn. The same situation takes place in different parts of the country. The worst one, in my opinion is the tobacco culture because children are in contact with nicotine, considered a toxic exposure. Besides, the kids and the families are also exposed to pesticides and this is a seriously complicated matter. Pesticides are spread on the farms next to places where the children are, and they may cause terrible health consequences. We haven't estimated exactly how many children have been working on the crops. Right now, considering COVID-19 and the schools being shut down, we can imagine the families' economic situation is worse than before. The economy is going down, and people have lost their jobs. COVID-19 and conservative politics are affecting years of progress against child labor in the USA. Since 2017, we can see the dismantling of those rules. The difference in Brazil is the regulation. Brazil has strong regulations for children. Although in reality some kids can be found working, it is considered totally illegal. Besides, farm workers in the USA don't have Unions to discuss their struggles and organize movements for better job conditions. Plus, it is so hard to find families and people who are willing to think and talk about these topics, because both the illegal situation and the violence against Latino migrants scare the farm workers. This is such a delicate matter." (Wurth, M. Interviewed in August 25th, 2020 apud Conde 2020)

The USA does not have specific legislation that protects rural workers and rural children. Furthermore, the risk of deportation, imprisonment, and separation from their families frightens migrant workers. This reality once again highlights the secret of the second richest country in the world. Beyond the exploitation of the migrant workforce (the cheaper manual labor in the USA), a terroristic environment is created that maintains the working class in a low-class social position. During the interview above, Wurth (apud Conde, 2020) told us about her latest field research, when she found children aged five to six working jobs. Without any legal restrictions, immigrant children and their families find themselves in the worst possible working conditions. While in many industries there is a minimum age to work (18 years), in American agriculture fields (in spaces far from the factory floor) this restriction is nowhere to be found. While in large urban centers, such as New York, it is illegal to work, however, in rural areas, child labor is allowed:

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) prohibits children under the age of 16 from engaging in agricultural work that the USA secretary of Labor has identified as hazardous. However, the US Department of Labor (DOL) regulations on hazardous occupation do not include any restriction for any children over age 12 to perform work that exposes them to contact with tobacco plants and tobacco leaves. (...) Under the law, there is no minimum age for children to begin working on farms with parental permission. At age 12, a child can work for any number of hours outside of school on a farm of any size with parental permission, and

at age 14, a child can work on any farm without parental permission" (HRW, 2015, p. 14)

As we can see, the laws are inconsistent and violate international conventions on children's rights. But, would legislation be able to solve the problem of child labor? In the studies we carried out in Brazil (2014, 2016, 2020) we noticed that working children are located in families with incomes of up to two minimum wages per month. The history of the problem of labor exploitation of children also has its origins in the need for children to contribute to the family income in the face of low wages. Considering this, it becomes possible to understand that child labor does not originate from the absence of legislation. On the contrary, according to Marx (2013), legislation was a useful instrument for the reproduction of capitalism since it regulates the exploitation of the workforce in a way that does not prematurely destroy its assumption (the workforce). Upon discussing the legislation and regulating the "less bad" and "more tolerable" forms of work, we no longer discussed the exploitation of added value and shifted the focus onto the apparent and phenomenal forms of the problem.

Normally, the children work in the fields after school and during weekends and holidays. After work, they are fatigued, which hinders their dedication to studies, schoolwork, games, play, and rest. Thus, this work culture appears associated with the struggle for survival, contradicting meritocratic neoliberal discourses that defend it as an ennobling educational activity, especially for migrants from poor countries.

Conclusions

The contradiction between the high number of immigrant children working within the second richest country in the world shows us the new form of colonialism within the Global North and allows us to assert that the work of migrant families is a cruel solution to the recurrent crises that affect the American capitalist economy. According to Marx (2013), the capitalist system is a vampire that sucks the workforce from an early age and workers are an essential part of its accumulation and reproduction. According to the same author, while philosophers only sought to understand reality, the most important thing is to transform it. In this sense, it is not enough to understand the exploitation of children and how migrants are an essential part of the capitalist economy; it is necessary to act to overcome it.

We agree with Stetsenko (2019) on the need for a radical scientific approach aimed at guiding human agency toward substantial social emancipation where all children can have a childhood. These are not scientific, humanist, or legalist discourses, but radical actions supported by an engaged science conception. Paraphrasing Giroux (2016, p.22), "We may live in dark times, but history is open and the space of the possible is greater than what is on display".

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Author contribution

SFC conducted the research and wrote the manuscript. SFC has been researching children who work in Brazil, Portugal and USA for the last sixteen years. Her new research project is about big tech, migrant children, social reproduction and school education in Southern Brazil (CNPq funding).

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in preparing this article.

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