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MULTISCALAR UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND THE SOCIOSPATIAL FRAGMENTATION OF LABOUR

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Contents

- 5 STEFANIE HÜRTGEN, NICOLAS SCHLITZ, NADINE REIS
Multiscalar Uneven Development and the Sociospatial
Fragmentation of Labour
- 24 ANGELA SERRANO ZAPATA, M. SOFÍA LUNA SIACHOQUE
Unpaid Women's Labour driving Value Chain Disintegration in the
Colombian Palm Oil Industry
- 50 CHRISTIN BERNHOLD
Class Differentiation, Fragmentation, and the Probability of Labour
Struggles in Argentina's Soybean Production and Processing
- 70 MÁRTON CZIRFUSZ
Fragmentation of Labour in the Hungarian Battery Industry
- 90 JAN KORDES
Die Produktivität von Anwerbe-Infrastrukturen: Re/Produktion und
Im/Mobilisierung philippinischer Pflegekräfte auf dem Weg nach
Deutschland
- 112 ELEONORA ROLDÁN MENDÍVIL
Imperialism and Super-Exploitation: Situating Migration and
Racism within the German Political Economy

Essays

- 134 PAUL SPERNEAC-WOLFER, AGNES FESSLER
Partikulare Realitäten, universelle Kämpfe: Schnittfelder
gewerkschaftlicher Strategien und Lebensrealitäten migrantischer
Arbeiter:innen in Österreichs Landwirtschaft

148 WOLFGANG KOZAK

Soziale Nachhaltigkeit: Effektivität der Rechtsordnung?

159 Editors and Authors of the Special Issue

164 Publication Details

ELEONORA ROLDÁN MENDÍVIL

Imperialism and Super-Exploitation: Situating Migration and Racism within the German Political Economy

ABSTRACT The argument elaborated in this paper is that the concept of super-exploitation that has been applied to the relation of workers of the Global South to the international capital accumulation process, and with it their unequal position in relation to workers of the Global North, can and should also be applied to an analysis of migrant labour within the Global North. In making use of Marx's Labour Theory of Value, I embed my analysis of super-exploitation within a framework of the German domestic job market. I suggest that an understanding of the specific conditions of exploitation faced by migrant workers and their descendants needs to look at how this exploitation can legally and illegally supersede the modes of typical exploitation faced by non-migrant workers and draw insights into the fragmentation of the working class in Germany along the lines of nationality and racialisation.

KEYWORDS *Imperialism, migration, super-exploitation, Marx, racism*

1. Introduction

Marxists have long argued about the place migration has in the capital accumulation process. What can generally be agreed upon, is that migration has an important impact on the ways the international division of labour and capital accumulation is organised – thus, it is global capital flows that shape emigration (outbound) and immigration (inbound) processes around the world. The migration question goes hand in hand with the question regarding which role racism takes in this very same capital accumulation process – especially when looking at newer and morphed forms of racism in our contemporary world. In order to outline an answer to

two of the basic instances fragmenting the working class today, I make use of a dialectical-historical materialist framework. How does the focus on processes of capital accumulation influence our analysis of migration in modern capitalism? What are the various ways in which workers are exploited, related to the law and ideological formations such as racism? The main argument elaborated in this paper is that the concept of super-exploitation, that has been applied to the relation of workers of the Global South to the international capital accumulation process, can and should also be applied to an analysis of migrant labour within the Global North. I will outline Marx's Labour Theory of Value to embed my analysis of super-exploitation within a framework of the German domestic job market. I suggest that an understanding of the specific conditions of exploitation faced by migrant workers and their descendants needs to look at how this exploitation can legally and illegally supersede the modes of average exploitation faced by non-migrant workers. Based on this, I will draw insights into the fragmentation of the working class in Germany along the lines of nationality and racialisation, for an updated Marxist racism analysis.

Marx outlines that value as an abstraction holds multiple moments that each require their own particular economic analysis. Hence, the very premise of surplus value production, that is: How do we get from money (M) to more money (M')? How can M reproduce itself to become M'? Marx calls this increment surplus value, the value added to the original sum: "The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but adds to itself a surplus value or expands itself. It is this movement that converts it into capital" (Marx 1996: 161). The working day is divided into two parts: one in which workers work for their own reproduction (necessary labour time) and one in which they perform surplus labour. The surplus value generated by surplus labour is appropriated by capital and, insofar as it is realised in the sphere of circulation, appropriated as profit (Marx 1996: 226f). This forms the basis of capital valorisation. Since workers, those who do not own the means of production, are forced to sell their labour power in order to reproduce themselves, on the market (Marx 1996: 183), and the (material and immaterial) results of their labour are not appropriated by them but by capital, Marx points towards the social relationship of exploitation. "Exploitation is not an exceptional case in capitalism, but an essential feature and central

object of class conflict.” (Puder et al. 2024: 16) The extent to which workers are exploited depends primarily on whether they are able to form collective bargaining power when selling their labour power to capital and hence curb specific conditions of exploitation, whether they have the necessary means of power to do so and use those means collectively. Thus, the aim of the capitalists, who own the means of production, is not to generate use-values, meaning things that can be consumed and are needed, but:

“it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations [...]. Use values must therefore never be looked upon as the real aim of the capitalist; neither must the profit on any single transaction. The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at” (Marx 1996: 164).

This is the essential difference between previous or other forms of production and trade. Instead of commodity-money-commodity, we now have money-commodity-money. What interests me here is the following question: If we look at “really existing capitalisms” (Anievas/Nişancioğlu 2017: 57), what are the concrete economic factors ideological formations such as nationality and ‘race’ infuse into this equation? Where do we find the factors of nationality and ‘race’ in $M - M'$? To answer this question, I make use of the concept of super-exploitation.

2. Super-exploitation

Though Marx does not explicitly make use of the term ‘super-exploitation’ in Capital Volume I and III he gives a short overview of his understanding of what later will be termed super-exploitation by some Marxists. Marx describes the level of exploitation that increased the exploitation rate of a single worker by making one worker do the same work that two or three workers used to do previously, e.g. through the lengthening of the working day, the cutting of wages per hour or the use of advanced machinery. Super-exploitation has had multiple meanings for Marxists and non-Marxists alike (Puder 2022: 20ff). Brazilian Marxist dependency theorist Ruy Mauro Marini used the term to describe the different levels of

exploitation of workers in the Global South and North back in the 1970s. In his hallmark “The Dialectics of Dependency”, first published in Spanish in 1973, he engages the question of the changed situation from direct colonial rule to imperialist dependency in Latin America (Marini 2022). Marini describes how the formally independent states in Latin America needed to be independent in order for global capitalism, as we know it, to come into existence. Since the formerly colonised nations primarily fill the ranks of the producers and exporters of cheap raw materials and labour for countries in the centre of the global economy, the labour power of these workers needs to be devalued (ibid.: 121). Thus, Marini observes that an “extraordinary surplus value” (ibid.) is extracted from workers of dependent states, one that enhances the “degree of exploitation of [their] labor” (ibid.). Marini’s analysis goes beyond other dependency theorists in so far as it emphasises the role of Latin American capitalists in this very super-exploitation. Super-exploitation is thus their strategy to compete in a world market that is characterised by unequal exchange (Latimer 2022: 74, 96).

This leads to a situation in which these workers either cannot reproduce themselves and their families to a minimum level or cannot reproduce themselves on the basis of the wage-labour relationship alone. This shows how exploitation is intensified and how capital can access the sphere of worker’s reproduction (Marini 2022: 130f). Thus, for Marini, the Global North economy is a normal, averagely exploitative one (ibid.: 132). Nevertheless, average exploitation conditions exist on a global scale (ibid.). Hence, “the problem that unequal exchange poses for Latin America is not precisely that of counteracting the transfer of value it implies, but rather that of compensating for a loss of surplus value” (ibid.: 130). Further Marini recognises that, “unable to prevent this loss at the level of market relations, the dependent economy reacts by compensating for it at the level of domestic production” (ibid.) Marini identifies three mechanisms that characterise “a mode of production based exclusively on the greater exploitation of the worker, and not on the development of his productive capacity”: (a) “the intensification of work”, (b) “the extension of the working day, and” (c) “the expropriation of part of the labor necessary for the worker to replenish his labor power” (ibid.). On the Latin American export economy, he notes:

“Because circulation is separated from production and takes place basically in the sphere of the external market, the worker’s individual consumption does not

interfere with the realization of the product, although it does determine the rate of surplus value. As a result, the system's natural tendency will be to exploit the worker's labor power to its very limit, without worrying about creating conditions for him to replenish it, provided that new hands can replace him in the productive process. The tragedy for Latin America's working population is that this assumption was always thoroughly fulfilled: the existence of Indigenous labor reserves (as in Mexico) or of migratory flows derived from the displacement of European labor, spurred by technological progress (as in South America), allowed for a constant increase in the mass of workers up until the beginning of this century. The result has been to give free rein to the shrinking of the worker's individual consumption and, therefore, to the super-exploitation of labor" (ibid.: 139).

For Marini, it is this form of standardised super-exploitation that constitutes the dialectics of dependency taken up in his title. The average exploitation of workers in the Global North is less than that of workers in the Global South, not just measured in terms of real wages but also in terms of working conditions, such as being unable to reproduce oneself and one's family at one's societal average level on the wages paid for a full-time job. In 2016, John Smith (2016) presented a compelling study of contemporary global political economy of imperialism: "Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century. Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis". After retracing Marini's arguments, he stresses the need to understand how global value chains and transnational phenomena such as outsourcing are shaping the ways in which super-exploitation is carried out today. Smith (2016: 18) contends that "the fundamental driving force of the race to the bottom and its attendant ills – starvation wages, rickety buildings, atrocious living conditions – is price-gouging by leading firms". The globalisation of production is nothing new, yet what began in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and developed into a steady stream in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century had finally, by the end of the century, become "a systematic pattern of firm restructuring that is moving jobs from union to non-union facilities within the country, as well as to non-union facilities in other countries" (Bronfenbrenner/Luce 2004: 37f.). In fact, countries at the periphery of global capitalism without access to large amounts of natural resources have focussed on export-oriented

industrialisation (Smith 2016: 51). This has become their only opportunity for taking part in capitalist competition on a world scale for more than 50 years (ibid.). It is during the era of neoliberalism that “outsourcing and migration have become two aspects of the same wage–differential–driven transformation of global production” (ibid.: 44). With very few exceptions, those Global South countries that have been successful in reshaping their domestic economies through alignment with neo-liberal adjustments have accomplished this only through mechanisms of devaluation of their domestic workers’ labour power (ibid.: 67). Smith looks at the two basic forms that production outsourcing take today: (a) “foreign direct investment (FDI), where the production process is moved overseas but kept in-house”; and (b) “arm’s-length outsourcing, when a firm outsources part or all of the production process to an independent supplier, independent in the sense that the ‘lead firm’ owns none of it even though it may control its activities in many ways” (ibid.: 68). Using Marini’s concept of super-exploitation, Smith shows how, in a variety of branches, Global South workers – and especially young female workers – are disproportionately exploited, way above an international average rate of exploitation for their area of work, position and skill. These conditions are not random, but mutually constitutive and therefore interdependent: as workers in the Global North reached basic achievements and standards, the exploitation of workers in the Global South needed to be intensified (ibid.: 313). A fragmentation of the working class along the lines of geographical location at the centre or periphery of global capitalism becomes evident.

3. Super-exploitation in the Global North

Having outlined key aspects of Marx’s Labour Theory of Value, as well as Marini’s (2022) elaboration and Smith’s (2016) application of the concept of super-exploitation that lie at the heart of the dialectics of dependency in the relationship of the Global North to the Global South, and vice versa, I want to proceed to applying this very concept to a Global North economy – to Germany.

My understanding of super-exploitation highlights the different conditions of exploitation to which groups of workers are exposed – be it

on an international, a transnational, or a domestic level. Thus, although there is a socially average level of exploitation that determines wage levels and working conditions in any given society, legal differentiations between different population sectors, for instance, according to their residence status or to their nationality or ‘race’¹, offer the possibility to undermine this general average level of exploitation. This undercutting of average exploitation levels is attractive to lawmakers and companies for a number of reasons. A fragmented working class that labours under a variety of different working conditions is less likely to understand itself as one social class with common political interests. Such a fragmented class will not easily stand in solidarity with one another and will most likely fight amongst each other: the permanently employed will see the temporarily employed or the day-labourers as competition, men will see women and/or children as value depressors to their wages, and domestic workers will see immigrant workers as a potential threat to the working conditions for which they have fought. Super-exploitation then describes working relations in which specific groups of workers are paid less than the average amount of a wage, that a comparable co-workers (a national for example) gets – for the same work, under similar conditions, with similar skills. “For the concept of super-exploitation this means: The time in which workers perform overtime would either have to increase so much that their labour force is overburdened or worn out (physically and mentally) without sufficient recovery phases; and/or their wages (and thus the necessary working time with increasing overtime) would have to fall below the socially defined subsistence level.” (Puder et al. 2024: 16). Due to the lack of access to trade unions and other forms of political organisation, super-exploited workers generally have no or significantly limited collective or institutional levers at their disposal in order to realise the value of their labour power above the minimal subsistence level of the workers in the economy in which they work.

Immigrant workers are much more likely to accept working conditions in the country of reception that native workers would reject, as the average working conditions in their home countries are usually worse. The following sections highlight how nationality and ethnicity shape the heightened potential for precarity and poverty among Germany’s working population and its reserve army of labour, one that is usually defined as ‘the unemployed’ by liberal classifications. Hence, this section looks at the

key structural mechanisms for why migrants in Germany are prone to super-exploitation. The argument will then be that it is super-exploitative working conditions that create the ground for an array of racist fantasies around the migrant population's abilities and worth – not an abstract idea of racialisation which is picked at random on the basis of inherent psychological bias of the wider German population. State practice, class, and racialisation hence become evident as conscious markers of the differentiation and fragmentation of the German working class, for the benefit of German capitalism.

The fragmentation of the domestic working class has many historical precedents and has been part and parcel of the development of capitalism, as it constitutes a central factor for big and small industry and commerce alike. Thus, generally speaking, the capacity to offer different wage averages for varying sub-groups within one's domestic economy presents an attractive asset. The imperialist competition over the penetration and domination of new markets takes factors such as the decreased likelihood of unrest and strikes into account. However, extreme dimensions of domestic inequality in the employment conditions of an economy's working class can also lead to a series of problems, such as violence amongst the workers which may lead to production disruption. Due to the differing conditions of exploitation, life situations, and immediate interests within, the working class is differentiated and fragmented. The divided working class is, among other factors, a product of these different conditions of exploitation, namely of "the diversity of exploitation" (Roldán Mendívil/Sarbo 2025a). A current example of a divided working class can be seen in the seasonal work that primarily Eastern and South-Eastern European workers perform in the agricultural or meat processing sector of the German economy (short-time contracts under strict regulations etc.) (Bouali 2025). So-called guest-workers in the Federal Republic from the early 1950s to the early 1970s serve as a historical example (Goeke 2020). Taking into account the general average degree of exploitation in question, it can be observed that first generation migrants to Germany are disproportionately represented among the unemployed population (Bundesagentur für Arbeit Statistik/Arbeitsmarktberichterstattung 2023: 10). In fact, in October 2022, 4.6 % of the overall German population, 7.1 % of the EU migrant population, and 9.4 % of the migrant population originally from the West Balkans was not

formally employed. 10.4% of third-country nationals (excluding persons from the eight main countries of origin of asylum seekers, encompassing the Western Balkans and Ukraine) were formally unemployed. This shows that it is twice more likely for a migrant with formal residency rights and a work permit in Germany to face unemployment, and all the complications around it, than for a German national. Thus, even migrant workers who have a formal work permit are more likely to accept inferior working conditions than German nationals (Huke 2023). Peter Birke (2022) has described this circumstance as one of “multiple precarity”. Insecure long-term residency rights, marginalisation in the housing market, and other factors lead to migrant workers labouring under poorer conditions in various sectors of the German economy. Some have proper employment contracts, but for many this is only disguised and through temporary employment agencies (ibid.; for a COVID pandemic-related discussion of these multiple forms of precarity see Birke and Neuhauser 2023). This situation is exacerbated for migrant workers without formal work permits, as these workers are even more prone to super-exploitation, since they are more likely to take up precarious work, such as informal employment as day-labourers (Wilcke 2018). These jobs – often in the areas of agriculture, construction, factory work, catering, sex work, care and domestic work (Wilcke 2018: 149) – are mostly paid in cash, way under the minimum wage tariff in Germany, and without any form of social security (paid sick leave, paid holidays, protection in case of unionisation etc.). The described developments are centrally shaped by German migration laws, which prohibit asylum seekers and those under a so-called ‘toleration residency’ arrangement (*Duldung*) from working, though legal exceptions are made².

Although 3.3 million political refugees, asylum seekers and those with a toleration residency were living in Germany as of September 2023, at the end of August 2023, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) recorded an additional 192,707 asylum applications pending a decision (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2023: 13). The number of so-called ‘tolerated persons’ has risen continuously in recent years: As of June 30th, 2022, 247,290 tolerated persons were living in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag 2022: 38). This total of about 450,000 people gives an approximate idea of the number of people without a formal work permit

who are also officially unemployed due to the German residence and work regulation situation.

When looking closer at migrants' educational and class backgrounds, some significant differences become apparent (Bundesagentur für Arbeit Statistik/ Arbeitsmarktberichterstattung 2023: 12): Since workers with a foreign passport have, on average, poorer (formal) qualifications than German nationals, it is the so-called 'helper jobs' that are the entry point into the German labour market for many migrant workers (Hartmann 2016: 75). These are low-skilled, mostly labour-intensive jobs, for which little knowledge of German is needed. Even though people without legal residence status are part of the social reality in Germany, it is difficult to find reliable figures which show how these types of irregular jobs have developed in the immediate period of strong waves of migration, for example. By December 2022, at least 56,000 persons who formally entered Germany and were obliged to leave the country were recorded by German authorities (Mediendienst Integration 2025). According to estimates by the German Federal Chamber of Physicians, in 2013 the number of undocumented migrants in Germany ranged between 200,000 and 600,000 (Bundesärztekammer 2013). It is likely that the majority of irregular immigrants are employed in some form of informal labour – meaning wage labour for which neither taxes nor social security contributions are paid (Pape 2005: 3). Working without a valid residence permit is prohibited in Germany, hence irregular migrants cannot be registered for employment (ibid.). However, every person working for money in Germany is entitled to a wage, regardless of their residence permit. The problem for irregular migrants, however, is that it is difficult to assert this claim in court. If the court learns of the lack of residence authorisation, it is required to pass this information on to the immigration authorities in accordance with Section 87 of the Residence Act (ibid.). In the majority of cases the consequence is deportation of the irregular migrant worker. And still, irregular jobs are profitable for both sides, by their own logic: while the irregular migrant worker hopes to make a much higher salary on a mostly short-term timeframe than back home, the national economy receives cheaper labour power, including fewer risks for production shortages, culminating in a higher surplus-value extraction in comparison with a native worker.

Even when a migrant worker holds a work permit, the *Inländerprimat* makes securing employment considerably harder. The *Inländerprimat* refers to the preference given to residents with German citizenship or permanent residence permits over third-country nationals who come to Germany to look for work. A work permit is only issued to foreigners if no nationals can be considered for the position. When a person applies for a residence and work permit in Germany, the Federal Employment Agency must give its approval. In the process, they evaluate whether the position can be filled by a German national first, EU national second or labour market national – someone trained in Germany – third (Virtuelles Migrationsmuseum 2024).

Additionally, there are the more highly qualified migrant workers, whose degree of super-exploitation is significantly lower. Compared to EU migrants, third-country nationals subject to social security contributions are somewhat better qualified (excluding the eight most important countries of origin of asylum seekers, those of the Western Balkans and Ukraine). In particular, the proportion of highly skilled workers is particularly high at almost a quarter and is only slightly below the level of German nationals. The higher the formal skills of a migrant worker, the lower the salary gap compared to German nationals (Bundesagentur für Arbeit Statistik/ Arbeitsmarktberichterstattung 2023: 12ff). This statistic does not show the brutal border regime that makes it nearly impossible for non-EU, third-country nationals to even arrive in Germany in the first place to make a living (Georgi 2025). Thus, part of the explanation for the highly skilled average of third-country nationals are the migration routes, which are, to begin with, open and legally accessible only for highly qualified workers of the Global South.

Generally speaking, the gap between rich and poor in Germany shows that the distribution of total wealth is very unequal: “the richest 1% owned around 18% of total wealth in 2017. In contrast, only 18% of total wealth is held by the poorest 75% of the population” (Finkler 2023). Thus, even without the focus on migration, Germany is a highly unequal society considering its economic strength on an international scale. In 2019, the poverty risk of people in Germany with a so-called ‘migration background’ was more than twice as high as that of Germans without a migration background (27.8% compared to 11.7%). Holders of a foreign

passport are more frequently affected by poverty than German passport holders with a migration background. First generation migrants are also more at risk of poverty than persons with a migration background who were born in Germany. The highest risk of poverty in 2019 was found among persons who themselves or whose parents immigrated from Syria (74.5 %), Iraq (66.5 %), Afghanistan (63.8 %) or Pakistan (54.3 %) (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2020).

4. Racism and super-exploitation

Racism has a functional moment: it serves as a tactic of differentiation of labour power and workers' position within the system of accumulation (Sarbo 2025). Ideas about a biologically or culturally distinct group's inherent ability to perform certain types of labour (e.g. physical labour) have been historically naturalised through a variety of ideological tools and transmitted through churches, schools, universities and the media. This racialised phenomenon of naturalisation can be traced back to early forms of specific blood-line markers and the idea of inherited cultural traits and predestinations in the early epoch of nascent European absolutism (Virdee 2023). It was during the Spanish Kingdom's reconquista, starting at the end of the 15th century, that European racism in its modern form – in its biologised and culturalised white Christian supremacist and colonial expression – started to take shape. The social formations preceding modern racism – from its biological to non-biological cultural expression – need to be placed at the interface of Early Modern Times around the 16th and 17th century (ibid.). We can speak of modern forms of racist formations around the late 18th and early 19th century only when the ascending economic system of capitalism brought about specific forms of alienated abstractions based on essentialised body markers, when society became completely permeated by racial laws of distinction, categorising populations into specific spheres of production and reproduction (with very limited options of escape), and when the system of capital accumulation expanded on a global scale (Roldán Mendivil/Sarbo 2025a: 10). Colonial racism thus based itself on a variety of religious, geographical, linguistic and/or cultural distinctions found in pre-colonial Europe, that were used

to segregate and limit certain populations' access to spheres of the labour market and to certain protections and rights (e.g. regarding Jewish and Romani populations in the European Middle Ages). But racism can also have a non-functionalist character – as seen in racialised or racist massacres, pogroms and fully-fledged genocides – which can be described as the elimination of exploitable labour power: “This demonstrates that racism must be understood as an independent and contradictory phenomenon that cannot be derived solely from the needs of capital; rather it develops as a momentum of its own” (Sarbo 2025: 31). Depending on the historical period and location, these contradictory tendencies need to be analysed as to their process of losing the functional aspect of that racism's original socio-economic constitution.

I argue that super-exploitation is a helpful tool with which to understand the dialectical relationship between labour relations and the forms of migration regimes and racist formations that shape the lives of working-class people in Germany specifically, because it relates the reified fantasy of 'race' to the concrete material subordination of the value of specific racialised workers' labour power. The forms of racism workers in Germany are exposed to vary from colour-coded to non-colour-coded racism (Cole 2015). Forms of contemporary colour-coded racism in Germany include a variety of post-colonial racisms directed at populations from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin-America and their (mixed) descendents. Non-colour coded racisms affect populations from the European periphery, namely Russians, Eastern and South-Eastern Europeans, populations from the Balkan States, as well as at times Greek, Iberian and Italian populations and their (mixed) descendants. Colour- and non-colour coded racism at times work hand in hand with forms of cultural-religious stigmatisation, leading to specific forms of anti-Jewish and/or anti-Muslim racism. Often mixed with colour-coded racism is an anti-asylum seeker sentiment. This phenomenon has morphed from a colour-coded to an at times non-colour coded racism, when Eastern European, and specifically Ukrainian refugees are targeted. Anti-asylum seeker racism has gained momentum with the stronger influx and visibility of political asylum seekers in Germany since the early 1990s. In 2015, Germany experienced the largest influx of asylum seekers in its recent history. One of many reactions to it was the re-strengthening of anti-asylum seeker fear among right wing and conserv-

ative political forces, such as the Identitarian Movement, the Alternative für Deutschland Party, and the Christian-Democratic Union. Yet, we can observe that today all political parties that are part of the parliament have taken up some form of anti-asylum seeker sentiment, even former parts of the Left Party, embodied by the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Thus, a mainstreaming of certain forms of racism (e.g. anti-asylum seeker racism or anti-Slavic racism) has gone hand in hand with an official line of anti-racist engagement and policy originating from the German state and government. These forms of racism are mainly directed towards educated middle- and upper-class migrant populations (see Roldán Mendívil/Sarbo 2020).

Racism as an ideological social formation defines in- and outsiders along racial and/or cultural lines – both being essentialising phenomena. It defines those deserving and undeserving of empathy, solidarity and state support. Racism holds a key social function in legitimising the real super-exploitation of certain populations. It is a means to link devalued labour to devalued bodies. This means that European and German labour and residency laws create a population of legally super-exploitable workers, plus a population of a reserve army of exploitable (national) and super-exploitable (migrant) workers. This argument can and needs to be stretched to include the dimension of gender (see Roldán Mendívil/Vögele 2025). Usually, studies on gender and forms of super-exploitation focus on migrant women workers. Yet, women and non-male workers in general as a social category in society can also be understood as a super-exploited labour force in themselves.

Global South workers cross borders into the Global North precisely because of the conditions of super-exploitation in the Global South. While they may receive a higher wage in the Global North than at home, they are still super-exploited in comparison to native workers. The theoretical argument of super-exploitation holds for Global North societies, as migrant workers' conditions of labour and of the reproduction of their labour power happens on a culturally decreased level in comparison to their domestic peers. These socially average levels of working conditions and labour reproduction are defined by general working-class standards of living on a national scale. In Germany, some of these factors include the fact that migrant workers are generally housed in poorer neighbourhoods, in smaller living quarters per person, with a higher degree of noise pollu-

tion, fewer accessible green spaces in the neighbourhood, as well as greater nitrogen monoxide and particulate matter air pollution than German workers (Darabi et al. 2023). To my understanding of super-exploitation, it is the general standard of the working class of a given society – like Germany in this case – that migrant workers fall below. The question of falling below the subsistence minimum is merely one of many possible features of super-exploitation (Burns 2023). Hence, super-exploited workers in the Global South and super-exploited workers in the Global North (not a static but a dynamic condition) experience varying degrees of the super-exploitation that modern imperialism relies on.

5. Liberal anti-racism

In recent years, Germany has seen wider anti-racist initiatives by civil society as well as a wide range of new anti-racist actors within the German economy. Battling with an ageing population, Germany needs immigration – especially one that is highly skilled. This has led a number of policy makers and advertising agencies to produce a very specific form of identity politics, as can be observed in a recent recruitment campaign of the German Police in Hessen (Polizei Hessen 2024), or by the recruitment advertisements of the German army (Bundeswehr Karriere 2024). These campaigns show Black and Brown individuals posing in German police and army uniforms, depicting Germany's development into a multicultural nation, in which even its repression apparatus transcends the colour (and gender) line – aiming to show migrants and their descendants that they belong in the German national narrative, as long as they follow the lines of national integration and are willing to play their part concerning the repression of national enemies. A peculiar way to mask the class function of the German police, which disproportionately targets working class people and migrants in Germany for petty crime and residence permit violations (see also Pilone 2025), as well as the German army's imperialist war efforts (e.g. in Afghanistan and Iraq). This form of performative liberal anti-racism is also particularly evident in the discussion about the economic usefulness of migrants, which has taken on macabre forms. The platform Social Bee, "Germany's first integration

service provider,” promoted the hiring of people with refugee experience in a 2018 campaign by underscoring their ‘social skills’ acquired while fleeing (Social Bee 2024). In darkened images, men are shown sitting at a table with folded hands; sketch-like scenes are depicted under their hands. “I am resilient,” is written in large white letters in the centre of one of the poster motifs. On the right one can read “Naser A. from Afghanistan: At the border to Turkey, we got nowhere. We had nothing to eat for three days.” (ibid.) “Social skills can come the hard way,” is written below the scene (ibid.). The social enterprise Social Bee, initiator of this advertisement, wants to achieve the “integration of refugees and migrants into the labor market and society” through precarious temporary work (ibid.). Sarbo and myself have recently insisted that “[i]nstead of demanding the same rights and access to the labour market for everyone – including the right to unionise during the asylum process – niches with ‘special competences’ are created and entire companies are thus raised” (Roldán Mendívil/Sarbo 2020: 120), which claim integration and diversity, all the while exploiting the precarity of devalued labourers.

Even though growing politics of representation, diversity policy, self-reflection and growth (keywords: critical whiteness and self-empowerment) are emerging, we can observe a yawning class gap widening in Global North imperialist countries such as Germany. Additionally, the lowest ranks of the German working class continue to be populated by precarious old and new immigrants – a class gap that is strategically sidelined in discussions around intersectionality and diversity competence in Germany, as both concepts aim to integrate all sorts of experiences as valuable instead of actually declaring a steadfast fight against capitalism and all its ills (Roldán Mendívil/Sarbo 2025b). The en vogue concept of classism, an integral component of intersectionality theory, has successfully degraded class to an experience within the capitalist mode of production instead of what it is – a relation of exploitation, but also one of worker’s power. Workers hold subjectivity and political agency beyond racism. The tragedy of the 20th century is the historical treason of social democracy – namely its party and labour union leaders – dating back to WWI (Lenin 1999). Imperialism, with all its super-exploitative consequences (North to South and within the Global North), was only able to flourish because of the abandonment of internationalist solidarity by the labour movement of

the Global North during those tragic months and years. The socialist Left never recovered from this historic blow.

What we are currently missing is an actual socialist workers' movement that can translate the slogan of "Hoch die internationale Solidarität"³ into material action across Germany and beyond.

6. Conclusion

Making use of super-exploitation as a transnational economic marker goes beyond largely sociological elaborations of migrant workers' self-organising and of labour market racism, as brought forward by a number of German-language leftist theorists (see for example Bojadžijev 2007 or Cafaro et al. 2025). The specific Marxist methodology applied to the relation of super-exploitation and racialisation brings forward the very structural bases of racist formations, all the while embedding it into the political-economic logic of national and international capital flows. Migrant workers and their (mixed) descendants are more prone to super-exploitation in Germany due to a number of intersecting reasons. A central pillar of this vulnerability is their legal status. A residency permit is likely to be directly linked to a specific employment position and/or to a limited time period. Further, non-German nationals will face structural and legal discrimination on the labour market due to the *Inländerprimat*, a legal construction favouring German nationals first, EU-nationals second and workers with vocational training in Germany third, before even considering a non-EU migrant worker for an employment position. Since legal residency is closely linked to stable employment, and this in turn is a precondition for renting an apartment, migrant workers face a combination of obstacles, shaping their situation as unequal workers on the German labour market. These legal conditions of vulnerability make migrant workers – with and without work permits – more likely to accept more precarious employment opportunities. Further, racist ideology creates anxiety within society regarding 'the other' – a position that has historically shifted back and forth from non-colour coded to colour-coded racism, as well as from biological racism to cultural forms of racism. Today, racism functions as a mechanism to create divisions among the labouring classes in Germany and beyond –

the imagined and classless community of ‘Germans’ is thus pitted against homogenised ideas of ‘asylum seekers’, ‘Muslims’ or ‘Ukrainians’. The functionality of racism is evident in the variety of forms of super-exploitation faced by migrant workers on the German labour market, the housing market and in everyday life. The latter is expressed in racist sentiments by neighbours and co-workers and intimately shapes migrant workers’ life experience and life expectancy.

In conclusion, I suggest that, through a study of statistical data of a given society, we can concretely estimate the super-exploitation rate of migrants and their descendants within given employment sectors. My argument stresses that dialectical-historical materialism allows us to unfold the multiple potentials of the concept of super-exploitation mediated through questions of nationality and ‘race’. This in turn helps to understand the specificities of global capitalism’s brutally uneven development. The working class encompasses everyone that does not own or command the means of production of capitalist societies. To democratise these societies means to bring labour power back under the control of workers. It is these coming battles that Marxists need to help prepare and lead for human and planetary survival, without producing yet another century of capitalist accumulation.

- 1 Examples are apartheid laws, historically in South Africa and currently in Palestine, but also general forms of migration and naturalisation legislation.
- 2 Individuals, whose asylum application has been formally denied but cannot be deported due to humanitarian concerns in the country of origin, because of serious illness, because they are underage, or because the person’s identity and nationality has not been clarified.
- 3 Roughly translates to: “Long live international solidarity.”

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ABSTRACT *Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass das Konzept der Überausbeutung – traditionell angewandt auf das Verhältnis von Arbeitskräften des Globalen Südens zum internationalen Kapitalakkumulationsprozess – auch auf die Analyse von Arbeitsmigration innerhalb des Globalen Nordens übertragen werden sollte. Aufbauend auf der Marx'schen Arbeitswerttheorie wird die Analyse in den Kontext des deutschen Arbeitsmarktes eingebettet. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass ein vertieftes Verständnis der spezifischen Ausbeutungsbedingungen, denen Arbeitsmigrant*innen und ihre Nachkommen ausgesetzt sind, zentrale Einsichten in die Mechanismen der legalen wie illegalen Formen von Überausbeutung liefert. Diese ersetzen nicht nur Formen der*

durchschnittlichen Ausbeutung, denen nicht-migrantische Arbeitskräfte ausgesetzt sind, sondern tragen auch zur Fragmentierung der Arbeiterklasse entlang von Nationalität und Rassifizierung bei.

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