

Super-Exploitation in the Global North and the Imperial Mode of Living: Some Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

A core hypothesis of the Imperial Mode of Living perspective is that workers in the global North may benefit from the super-exploitation of workers in the South through the availability of cheap commodities and services. The concept of super exploitation is essential to any meaningful understanding of the formation and functioning of global value chains (GVCs) helping to explain the proliferation of supplier firms paying workers at below-subsistence wages across the global south. So far the concept has been used primarily to explain labour regimes in the global south and their articulation with/through northern-owned GVCs. This paper suggests that globalisation and the proliferation of GVCs are also generating new dynamics of superexploitation across the global north. It also argues, however, that the concept of super-exploitation tends to ignore dynamics of unpaid labour (as it focusses primarily on very low paid labour), and provides examples to substantiate this claim. It suggests two implications of these dynamics for the Imperial Mode of Living research agenda. First that the latter must be based upon a nuanced conception of class relations in the global north, and second, that it requires a rigorous research methodology to investigate (and substantiate) its core hypotheses.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Imperial Mode of Living (IMoL) perspective aims to research and explain why international working class solidarity is so fleeting. One of its core questions is ‘Why do Northern workers frequently behave indifferently towards the misery of workers in the Global South?’ (Van der Linden: 2020, 1). To investigate these issues it pursues an historical materialist approach by addressing four interlinked questions:

i) the dynamics of global capitalism and its ramifications for the emancipation of the world working class; ii) the relationship between these capitalist dynamics and changing moralities; iii) the fear of slightly ‘privileged’ workers for deteriorating living conditions; and iv) the necessary conditions for organizing countervailing power and a radical counter-culture (Van der Linden: 2020, 1).

These questions are part and parcel of the IMoL perspectives conception of *relational inequality*.

A (perhaps the) theoretical pillar of the IMoL perspective is that of super-exploitation of labour (Marini: 1973, 1977). In its more restricted version superexploitation refers to workers being paid below the value of their social reproduction costs. A broader conception includes also the interconnected claim that the surpluses generated for capital through payment of below-subsistence wages flows to the imperial centre through processes of unequal exchange/surplus drain/surplus transfer (Foster et al: 2011).¹

¹ As John Bellamy Foster et al (2011, footnote 41). writes ‘It should be noted that the term “superexploited” appears to have two closely related, overlapping meanings in Marxist theory: (1) workers who receive less than the historically determined value of labor power, as it is defined here;

The implications for workers' living standards and class consciousness in the global north of the superexploitation of labour in the global south is that the former are likely to shy away from global solidarity. A core, working hypothesis of the IMoL perspective is that:

[W]orkers in the North may probably mainly benefit from the exploitation of workers in the South in two ways: workers (1) enjoy more purchasing power (cheap commodities and services) and/or (2) have more or better jobs because capitalist enterprises operate in special ways in the Global South. (Van der Linden: 2020, 1).

The present contribution endorses the more expansive concept of superexploitation as a category for explaining the formation and functioning of global value chains (GVCs) (Smith: 2016, Foster: 2011), and the globalisation of production since the 1970s (but especially since the 1990s). It relabels many of GVCs as global poverty chains to reflect, explicitly, their immiserating impact upon labouring classes (Selwyn: 2019, Selwyn et al; 2020). It endorses the claim that value is transferred/captured by Northern 'lead' firms from southern supplier firms through mechanisms of chain governance.

However, it also argues that 1) the proliferation of GVCs has generated intense competition, not only amongst workers across the global south, but also between workers in the global South and global North (and within the North); and 2) that these dynamics are generating new relations of super-exploitation within the global north (the more restricted conception of super-exploitation).

and (2) workers who are subjected to unequal exchange and overexploited, primarily in the global South.'

It also argues, however, that the more restricted conception of superexploitation (payment of below subsistence wages) itself is limited. It does not provide a vantage point from which to ascertain the importance of unpaid care work (social reproductive labour) to the class dynamics of modern capitalism. And yet unpaid care work is central to the daily and generational reproduction of capitalist wage labourers. It also represents a schism within labouring classes between those who get paid (however little) and those who do not get paid for their daily labour.

Whilst not disproving the IMoL (hypo)thesis – that relational inequality may generate barrier to northern workers’ solidarity for southern workers – the above arguments hopefully raises new questions: To what extent are superexploited workers and/or unpaid care workers in the global north subsumed within the hegemonic ideology, and material relations, of the IMoL? If they are only partially or not at all subsumed within this set of ideology and relations, what about workers who are ‘merely’ exploited (rather than super-exploited)? To what extent, and how, do we need to marry a conception of relational inequality (of classes, states and capitals between north and south) with a class-relational analysis of domestic social (class and gender) relations in the global north? What kinds of empirical questions/questionnaires/research methods do we need in order to highlight and investigate these relations and nuances?

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Following this introduction section 2 notes the importance of the concept of super-exploitation for explaining the proliferation of GVCs whilst also identifying what it considers to be limitations with the concept. Section 3 argues that this global proliferation has generated new dynamics of super-exploitation in the global north. It provides

empirical examples from the UK in garments, agriculture, and services, and also provides examples of the proliferation of unpaid care work under the contemporary covid crisis. Section 4 suggests some methodological issues which arise from the previous analysis. Section 5 concludes.

2 GLOBALISATION, VALUE/POVERTY CHAINS AND THE SUPEREXPLOITATION OF LABOUR

The majority of GVC analysis is capital-centric. These approaches view the operation and developmental possibilities of integration into GVCs from the perspective of lead and supplier firms. Most recently the World Bank's World Development Report (WDR2020) claims that GVCs 'raise productivity and incomes, create better jobs, and reduce poverty'. It draws upon Gereffi et al's (2005) conception of chain governance (rooted in transaction cost economics) to argue that lead firm governance facilitate knowledge transfer from them to supplier firms. As Varman (2012) puts it, the transaction cost economics framework represent an apology for monopoly capital.

Neither WDR2020 nor Gereffi et al (2005) consider the global class relational dynamics that underpinned the formation and functioning of the contemporary world of GVCs, nor the wages and living conditions of workers employed in GVC supplier firms. Rather, just as Adam Smith assumed the existence of wage labourers 'free' to sell their labour power to capital (Marx: 1990), so too do these authors assume the existence of pools of cheap labour ready to take up employment in GVC supplier firms.

And yet, when we look at the transformation of class relations necessary for the proliferation of GVCs, and the wages and conditions of workers currently employed within supplier firms across much of the global south, we see

something quite different from the mainstream celebration. We see the proliferation of what Selwyn (2019) calls global poverty chains (GPCs) where workers are systematically paid below their subsistence requirements/value of reproducing their labour power.

The proliferation of GCCs has occurred in tandem with, and based upon, the expansion of the world's labouring class, which has expanded from 1.1 billion people in 1980 to over 3 billion in 2005 (Kapsos: 2007, 13). In 2010 there were approximately 942 million working poor (almost 1 in 3 workers globally living on under US\$2 a day) (ILO/KILM: 2011 and ILO: 2013).² The expansion of the global labouring class has been managed closely by the international institutions as an attempt to facilitate local and global capital accumulation through heightened labour exploitation. For example, Brady and Martin (2007) report how workers in countries that implemented IMF agreements were 60 per cent less likely to be in a trade union after the programme. Cammack argues that the World Bank's objectives, as formulated in its annual World Development Reports, are 'to deliver an exploitable global proletariat into the hands of capital... to deny the poor any alternative, and to create a reserve army of labour that will enforce the disciplines of capitalist labour-markets across the greater part of humanity' (2002, 125).

The consequences of the deepening of capitalist social relations across the globe – through agricultural modernisation, structural adjustment programmes, the proliferation of export processing zones and openness to foreign direct investment and land-grabbing – is the proliferation of a 'planet of slums' (Davis:

² The \$2 a day purchasing power parity poverty line was the upper threshold for poverty (the lower one being the \$1 a day). Neither line takes into account actual living costs of the poor, and so are effectively arbitrary poverty lines (See Selwyn: 2017 chapter 2 for a critique).

2006) and the establishment of a vast global pool of labour, ready for employment by suppliers linked up to lead GVC firms.

Monopoly capital's ability to extract value from an increasingly numerous and geographically widespread global working class through mechanisms of chain governance is increasingly widely recognised. As UNCTAD's (2018) report puts it:

[T]he rise in the profits of top TNCs accounted for more than two thirds of the decline in the global labour income share between 1995 and 2015. Therefore, although the rising share of the profits of top TNCs has come at the expense of smaller enterprises, it has also been strongly correlated with the declining labour income share since the beginning of the new millennium (2018: 57)

Even the World Bank's WDR2020 acknowledges that:

In 63 developed and developing economies, GVC integration as well as other domestic within-industry forces, such as technology or markups, contributed significantly to the reallocation of value added from labor to capital within countries between 1995 and 2011 (WDR2020: 86).

The outsourcing of production through GVCs has impacted negatively upon sections of northern labour. It has enabled TNCs to attack workers' wages in core economies, as the latter often accept wage cuts through fear of losing their jobs off-shore (Dunn: 2009). In her study of eighteen industrialised countries between 1985 and 2000, Guscina (2006) found that the combination of trade openness, FDI and imports from developing countries all contributed to the falling percentage of labour's share in national income.

The concept of super-exploitation explains well these dynamics: monopolistic lead firms sourcing products from suppliers, pitted against each other in ruthless price competition, surviving competitively and profiting from employing workers at below their subsistence costs.

The concept of super-exploitation lies in the background of Marx's (1990) *Capital*, as the primary objective there is to uncover and explain the general form of capitalist exploitation. (In order to posit his theory of surplus value production and extraction, Marx assumes that labour power is paid for by capitalists according to its value, or costs of production).³ It was, however, taken up and applied by Marxist dependency theorists, in particular by Ruy Mauro Marini to explain the relationship between economic growth and labouring class poverty in Latin America. As Marini (1973, 71-2) wrote, The sub-continent's productive structure 'is... based in greater exploitation of the workers' [than in the economic core], and 'technical progress made possible capitalist intensification of the rhythm of the worker's labour, increasing his productivity and, simultaneously, sustaining the tendency to remunerate him at a lower rate than his real value' (Marini, 1973: 71–72).

As far as I know (and I'm the first to note my limited knowledge here), Marini and others who deployed the concept of superexploitation did not gender it. It is true that Marx wrote that '[t]he maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital' (Marx [1867] 1990: 718). However, he did

³ But see *Capital* Vol 3, chapter 14, section 2 which is entitled 'Depression Of Wages Below The Value Of Labour-Power' (Marx: 1974).

not follow up this observation to the extent that contemporary socialist feminist political economists have (Federici: 2004, Elson: 1999). The daily and generational reproduction of a capitalist wage labour force has relied, historically, upon vast inputs of institutionalised, unpaid care work by women family members. Contemporary globalisation has not just been based upon the expansion of the wage labour force, but of the increased pressures upon unpaid family members to support this labour force. As Hite and Viterna (2005, 54) note 'In households facing enormous financial pressures, women respond by employing a series of strategies within the household, by organizing their communities to demand government assistance, and by going to work or increasing the amount of time that they spent on paid labour ...'

Bolwig et al; (2010, 178, 179) argue that 'poverty should be analysed in terms not only of exclusion (from value chains...) but also of the (pre) conditions and terms of participation [in these chains]....' Moreover, 'poverty itself is a political and moral, not an analytical, term' and 'assessments of the 'poverty' impact of value-chain restructuring and governance should be alive to the whole range of meanings and concerns that animate both policy jargon and popular discourse about poverty.' From this perspective, integrating into GVC analysis a focus upon the connections between workers' wages and their broader livelihood strategies is a worthwhile objective. It can be attempted by positing a political economic conception of what constitutes a living wage vs a poverty wage.

The Clean Clothes Campaign's (CCC) concept of a living wage derives, initially, from the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948), article

23 on the right to work, which holds that a worker is entitled to the right to 'just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity'. According to the CCC, a living wage:

should be earned in a standard working week (no more than 48 hours) and allow a... worker to be able to buy food for herself and her family, pay the rent, pay for healthcare, clothing, transportation and education and have a small amount of savings for when something unexpected happens. ('A living wage = a human right', <https://cleanclothes.org/livingwage>).

The reference here to a wage workers' ability to cover costs of their families' social reproduction costs implies a recognition of the unpaid care work that family members undertake that enables workers to sell their labour power successfully on the capitalist labour market.

The CCC and its sister organisation Asian Floor Wage have documented poor pay and working conditions across Asian textile and clothing production. As the above analysis would expect, super-exploitative labour practices - as measured by payments below a living wage - are rife across the region (see table 3).

Marini and his critical dependency theory colleagues, contradicted Brenner's (1977) linear assumptions about forms of capitalist exploitation - that they developed from absolute to relative forms of surplus value extraction - by illuminating how super-exploitation in the south facilitated relative surplus value extraction in the North. But, as far as I know, he did

not consider the possibility (theoretically or empirically) of whether super-exploitation could occur in the core of the global system. Nor, as far as I know, did they consider the importance of unpaid care work as a foundational pillar upon which super-exploited wage labour forces are reproduced daily and generationally.

If we adopt a more limited conception of super-exploitation (payment of below subsistence wages, without assumptions of surplus capture/drain), and dispense with linear conceptions of development, we could expect super-exploitation to exist side-by-side with other forms of exploitation and unpaid (care) labour.⁴ The CCC definition of a living wage represents a useful benchmark (or at least starting point) for this endeavour. One of the research challenges is to apply this benchmark to the analysis of in-work poverty across the global north (a question raised, but not resolved, in section 4 below). There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that super-exploitative labour dynamics do exist beyond the global south (former third world).

Poverty Chains in the Former Second World

The CCC and Selwyn et al (2020) have documented how super-exploitative labour practices exist beyond the global south/former third world. Selwyn et al's (2020) research on export footwear production in Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) find that sub-living wage payments to workers are the norm rather than the exception across the footwear sector.

⁴ It could be argued that contemporary dynamics of uneven and combined development are, precisely, the dynamics of combinations of different forms of exploitation in different world regions and the ways in which they are structurally articulated.

As part of the project of constructing relatively flexible labour markets ECE states, in conjunction with international financial institutions and the EU, have established very low wage floors. The legal minimum wage in all researched countries is less than 60% of the average wage (the relative poverty measure in many countries).

Table 1. Worker's Wages and Estimated Living Wage 2015.

Country	Legal Minimum Net Wage in Shoe Industry (1/1/2015) ¹	Lowest Net Wage (including overtime and bonuses) ²	Mean Net Wage (including overtime and bonuses) ³	Highest Net Wage (including overtime and bonuses) ⁴	Estimated Minimum Living Wage ⁵
Albania	140 €	100 €	143 €	251 €	588 €
BIH RS	164 €	169 €	204 €	256 €	859 €
Macedonia	130 €	137 €	161 €	194 €	726 €
Poland	301 €	164 €	492 €	586 €	1000 €
Romania	145 €	143 €	177 €	238 €	706 €
Slovakia	339 €	350 €	500 €	600 €	1360 €

Sources:
1 Official government statistics
2 Calculation based on Interviews with workers
3 Calculation based on Interviews with workers
4 Calculation based on Interviews with workers
5 Calculation based on Interviews with workers

Source: Selwyn et al (2020).

Table 2: Legal Minimum Wage as a Percentage of Estimated Living Wage (2016)

Country	Legal Minimum Net Wage in Shoe Industry ¹	Estimated Minimum Living Wage for a family of four ²	Legal Minimum Wage as a Percentage of Estimated Living Wage ³
Albania	144 €	588 €	24%
Bosnia- Herzegovina	164 €	859 €	19%
Macedonia	145 €	726 €	20%
Poland	318 €	1000 €	32%
Romania	156 €	706 €	22 %
Slovakia	354 €	1360 €	26%

Sources:

- 1 Official government statistics
- 2 Based on interviews with workers
- 3 Calculation based on interviews with workers

Source: Selwyn et al (2020).

Across the sector, workers recounted how they found it impossible to regularly pay for utility bills, that they often missed their rent payments and that they could not afford a family holiday within the country. For most of them, holidays entail weekend barbeques or family get-togethers. Many workers recounted how they relied heavily upon family and friends for loans, and for free or very cheap agricultural goods. They noted how they rarely, if ever, were able to afford medical (especially dental) check-ups, that they suffered from poor hygiene, and that they could not afford school uniforms and school supplies for their children. A Romanian worker recounted how her family relied upon remittances from their parents:

We are renting a flat in the city and the most difficult thing is to pay for heating in winter. I am afraid to look at the bill. If we fail to pay for more than two months, we get cut off. Our parents, who work in Spain, send us money every few months and that's how we get by.⁵

Access to land, loans and other forms of financial assistance, in addition to help from parents and extended family are frequently mentioned as representing coping mechanisms. Another Romanian worker recounted how:

We have to spend everything we have on daily needs and sometimes run out of money before the end of the month. Luckily, the local shop owners know us well and let us get products for free if we run out of money, allowing us to pay them later. We don't want to borrow money, and my

⁵ Interview, Romania, December, 2015.

husband had to take 5 months' leave from his factory job to work in construction in Germany

She also noted how access to land, for agricultural production, was necessary to provide her family with sufficient food:

We have a garden and some animals. If I had to buy meat, like chicken breast from the shop, I would not be able to afford it. So we must also take care of our animals every day because they are some of the only food we can afford. Sometimes my sister comes in to feed the animals when both my husband and I are away for work. 6

What is notable about the above cases are that they exist in a broader dynamic where rates of super-exploitation (measured as the gap between real and living wages) are higher in Eastern and Central Europe than across much of Asia (table 3).

Table 3 Legal Minimum Wage vs Living Wage: Eastern Europe and Asia Compared

Eastern Europe (including Turkey)	Minimum Wage as a Percentage of Living Wage	Asia	Minimum Wage as a Percentage of Living Wage
Slovakia	21%	India	26%
Ukraine	14%	China	46%
Romania	19%	Bangladesh	19%
Moldova	19%	Cambodia	21%
Georgia	10%	Malaysia	54%
BiH	25%	Sri Lanka	19%
Macedonia	14%	Indonesia	31%
Bulgaria	14%		

6 Interview, Romania, December, 2015.

Croatia	36%		
Turkey	28%		

Source: Clean Clothes Campaign (2014, 34).

So far, we have seen how super-exploitation exists in the former third world, and in the former second world. In the next section we'll see how it exists in the former first world (now global North).

3 SUPER-EXPLOITATION IN THE UK: 3 CASE STUDIES

Contemporary globalisation has generated, and been built upon, a vast global labouring class, divided along numerous lines, and pitted against each other through their employing firms' price competition. Under these circumstances we could, hypothetically, expect segments of workers in the global north to be engaged in close (even direct) competition with workers in the global south, with the latter's wages and conditions representing a competitive cost base-line.

In-work poverty has proliferated in the UK – because of numerous factors ranging from Tory government austerity to rising costs of living. We might hypothesise that the globalisation of production is also generating downward wage pressures across certain economic sectors across the globe and across the north.

A 2018 report by the Joseph Rowntree foundation found that:

- The number of workers in poverty in the UK was 4 million in 2017 (1 in 8 are working poor) – a rise of 500,000 since 2012 (and see table 4).

- 4.1 million children lived in poverty in the UK (out of a classroom of 30, that's 9 children).
- 'Since 2004/05, the number of workers in poverty in the UK has increased at a faster rate than the total number of people in employment'

The report notes that:

'Workers in four types of industry have particularly high rates of poverty: accommodation and food services (25%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (23%) administrative and support services (22%) and wholesale and retail (18%). This compares with a poverty rate for workers overall of 12%.' (JRT: 2018, 5).

Table 4: Workers in Poverty in the UK 2017

Workers in poverty	4,000,000	13%
Full-time workers in poverty	2,600,000	11%
Part-time workers in poverty	1,500,000	20%

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018).

Some of this in-work poverty is caused by underemployment (insufficient hours of work), but it is also caused by systemic low pay, so that even when workers labour for a full working week, they are unable to afford a basket of basic goods.

The above data and discussion does not, however, identify the importance of unpaid care work to the reproduction of the UK's wage labour

force. A more thorough version of this paper would provide such details alongside the sectoral case studies it discusses below. However, for now it is worth noting that unpaid care work in the UK economy is crucial. In the UK prior to Covid-19 approximately 9.1 million people (mostly women) undertook unpaid care work for relatives. Since the onset of the pandemic an additional 4.5 million people have become unpaid carers of which the vast majority are women.⁷

One area for research for the IMoL agenda might be to investigate the ways in which in-work poverty is linked to globalisation (especially the globalisation of production through global value chains) and the consequences for workers' conception of their position at the 'top' of the imperial system.

We can speculate that the above-noted dynamics underpin/contribute to more extreme cases of in-work poverty and super-exploitation. The remainder of this section provides examples from Clothing, Services and Agriculture in the UK.

Clothing:

In June 2020, while Coronavirus was still the prime concern of most people, news stories broke across the UK media about what even it described as extremely exploitative working conditions at garment factories in Leicester.

⁷ Amelia Hill, 'Coronavirus: 4.5m people in UK forced to become unpaid carers' *The Guardian*, 19 June 2020, Accessed June 2020 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/19/coronavirus-45m-people-in-uk-forced-to-become-unpaid-carers>

Many of these factories were supplying the fast-fashion label Boohoo, were engaged in paying below minimum wages to their workers, and were forcing the latter to labour in unsafe conditions.

Boohoo is a UK based online fast-fashion retailer aimed at teenagers and young adults. It has over 30,000 own-brand products. By 2019 it had sales worth almost £900 million and profits of almost £60 million. Its success is based, in part, on selling its products very cheaply. A red dress, for example, retailed at £4 in mid 2020. ⁸ Boohoo sources approximately 60% to 70% of its production from Leicester (Labour Behind the Label: 2020, 3).

The fast-fashion industry specialises in rapid product innovation (as opposed to the traditional four-season styles) facilitated by quick design, production, and store delivery. The fast-fashion sector has received much criticism for its deleterious environmental impacts, but this time the media stories were concerned about workers' appalling conditions, which it was also speculated, might have contributed to a regional spike in Covid-19 infections across Leicester.

As a Labour Behind the Label Report notes 'Garment manufacturing is a major industry in Leicester with over 1000 known sites, excluding homeworking. Most factories in Leicester are small workshops, often housed in dilapidated buildings with little investment in building safety and modern ventilation.' (2020, 3).

Workforces in Boohoo supplier factories are mostly Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) and around one third are immigrants from countries

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jun/22/cost-cheap-fast-fashion-workers-planet>

such as India, Pakistan and increasingly from Eastern Europe. Many don't have documented resident status and are particularly vulnerable to deportation by the Home Office.

During the Covid-19 lockdown Boohoo was sourcing 3-4,00,000 units from Leicester workshops. For example, it paid £1.90 for a pair of cycling shorts (which retailed at between £3-10). Wages of £2-3 per hour are commonplace (Labour Behind the Label: 2020, 4).

The Boohoo case exists in a context of a long-term decline, since the 1970s, in garment manufacturing, followed over the last decade or so, of an increase in production for fast-fashion labels. The Boohoo case is not exceptional. A 2015 report by Leicester University's Centre for Sustainable Work and Employment Futures found that:

There is considerable evidence that the... business strategies [similar to those noted above] are associated with severe violations of work and employment rights. Throughout the Leicester case-study, most widespread is the under- or non-payment of wages at the National Minimum Wage (NMW), the absence of employment contracts, late payment of wages, and the official declaration of a portion of wages only. Employers often consider welfare benefits as a 'wage component' and force workers to supplement wages below the NMW with welfare benefits. These problems are endemic in the industry: reports consistently put the average wage at £3 per hour and state that this applies to 75-90% of jobs in the sector. A conservative estimate on the above evidence would put the underpaid wage sum

in apparel manufacturing within the East Midlands at £1 million per week.

And that:

Management practices have created a segmented workforce that works under different price/quality/social compliance parameters. Sketched broadly, the highest, and smallest segment, consists of workers who do not have an employment contract but, overall, are paid at NMW rates. This is followed by a much larger segment of mostly female workers whose language and/or socio-cultural capabilities are too limited to work in other industries. These workers earn around £3/hour, are forced to complement their wages with welfare benefits and work under the conditions described above. Finally, migrants on student or visitor visas as well as undocumented migrants who no longer have the legal right to work and remain in the UK constitute the most vulnerable groups. These groups often work for even lower or no wages, work night shifts, and are dismissed at will, amongst other potential issues (Hammer et al: 2015, 10-11).

Farming:

Workers' conditions on British farms have always been more precarious than in other economic sectors. Average farm workers' earnings are about two thirds of those in the rest of the economy. Trade union representation and collective bargaining has only a minimum impact on workers' wages, especially since the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board in 2011. Because much of the sector is seasonal, farms rely upon highly flexible, often short-term migrant labour forces. Farming is the most dangerous place for workers, with a higher number of deaths at work than in other sectors (Clutterbuck: 2017).

In the spring of 2020, at the height of the Covid-pandemic, thousands of Eastern European migrant workers were employed in the UK's fruit and vegetable sector. They were housed in cramped temporary accommodation, often four to a room, in breach of the government's social distancing directions and at risk to their health (Salyga: 2020).

A Report by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) *The Nature and Scale of Labour Exploitation Across All Sectors Within the United Kingdom*, documents the nature of super-exploitation (what it calls modern slavery) within segments of UK's agricultural sector, showing that there are an estimated 10,000-13,000 people subjected to 'modern slavery' in the UK food and agriculture sector. The Report notes how:

Workers in agriculture can be expected to work 40-60 hour weeks, though some report 15 hour days, sometimes working seven days consecutively, completing double shifts with insufficient breaks in between. There are workers reportedly living and sleeping in vans which transport them across the UK for days at a time, with the driver both working and driving to the next venue....

In many cases, pay in this sector is reported to breach National Minimum Wage, particularly when deductions are made for accommodation and / or transport. There are reports of workers signing deduction authorisation for rent to be taken from their wages if they fail to pay it, and for rent to be taken from future wages if they do not earn enough money to cover the rent in one month.

At some locations there is no regular pay day, with wages given sporadically and at different rates. Some businesses have not carried out a fair piece rate calculation and this can also result in the National Minimum Wage not being paid. There are issues with workers not receiving their payslips and / or wages, or payslips not

accurately reflecting the hours or nature of the work completed.

This falsification can make it appear that workers are being paid a fair hourly rate...9

SERVICES

The previous two examples of super-exploitation might be explained by these sectors' direct competition, as tradeable goods, with supplier firms in the global south, as noted in section 2. However, super-exploitation also exists within the non-tradeable service sector, where there is no direct competition from suppliers in the global south.

The rapidly expanding food delivery sector is notorious for poor pay and conditions. Platforms like UberEats and Deliveroo offer multi-restaurant food-delivery services. These 'match and coordinate interactions between workers, restaurants and consumers via their digital eco-systems while retaining flat organisational structures' (Veen et al: 2019). These platforms classify their workers as independent contractors rather than employees, thereby avoiding employer responsibilities such as health and safety provision, health insurance and pension contributions. Workers must purchase, and are responsible for, their

own equipment (smartphones with data, bicycles/motorbikes/cars, delivery bags).

Workers are paid predominantly by piece rate. Some platforms have ‘core’ workforces whom are guaranteed a minimum number of jobs per shift, while non-core workers hustle for work from the platform by accepting jobs as quickly as possible. Workers are not paid as they wait for jobs or wait at restaurants to collect meals. A Deliveroo driver describes how:

‘You log in to work at about 6pm or 6.30pm for the evening rush, and you find that there are already 20 other people at the branch waiting for work. You often sit around waiting for an order. By 7.30pm there might be 50 people logged in. All you end up getting is about £20 to £25 a day. I only work for Deliveroo. I used to do work for Uber Eats but they blocked me after a customer complained that I hadn’t delivered something, when I had’
(Collinson: 2018).

The three cases above – garments, agriculture and delivery services – suggest that super-exploitative labour practices exist (and may be expanding) across the UK. It is not too much of a stretch to conceive that such and related cases may be occurring in other core economies – consider

for example, workers in the US food industry (from fruit-picking to meatpacking), its garment sector (where sweatshop conditions are well-known about), or its paid care work sector.

4 The Imperial Mode of Living: Some Methodological Questions

The above examples suggest that super-exploitation is not an exclusive property of countries of the global south, but that it exists and may be expanding across the global north. Furthermore, unpaid care work needs to be factored into any analysis of super-exploitation. The austerity imposed upon northern labouring classes since (at least) the 2007/8 financial and economic crisis will, almost certainly, have generated new conditions for super-exploitation as general wage rates have been pushed down. The Covid-19 crisis has increased, dramatically, the numbers (of mostly women) undertaking unpaid care work that is so essential for the social reproduction of the UK economy and other economies.

It could be argued that the above cases of superexploitation are quite limited and only represent outliers of a more general picture of combinations of absolute and relative surplus value extraction. Some might argue that, to a significant extent, many of the workers in the above cases are immigrants and therefore not 'really' part of the UK's working class. But perhaps it's better to consider these (and other) cases as areas to be researched as part of the IMoL agenda?

Such research may consist of the following:

- Documenting cases of super-exploitation across the Global North.
- Tracing and analysing how these cases intersect with (e.g. are dependent upon) dynamics of unpaid care work.
- Investigating and highlighting their relationship with broader world-wide processes of super-exploitation.
- Tracing links between such cases and consumer baskets and habits within the Global North.

In terms of a key IMoL hypothesis – that workers in the North may 1) benefit from the exploitation of workers in the South by enjoying more purchasing power and/or 2) having more or better jobs because capitalist enterprises operate in special ways in the Global South (Van der Linden: 2020, 1) – we may choose to consider the following issues:

- How conscious do we think northern workers are of these dynamics, what role does this play in their political formation/outlook, and what kind of research methods would we need to demonstrate these phenomena and their interconnections?
- Does it matter if northern workers are only partly, or not at all conscious of their benefits from relational inequality?
- To what extent are northern workers variegated into groups who benefit more, less, or not at all, from relational inequalities?
- Do some northern workers actually suffer from relational inequality in that their super-exploitation enable other Northern workers to have better conditions? (re-call Bohoo's red dress selling for £4 in the UK).
- To what extent does the institutional invisibility of unpaid care work constitute the sub-structure of super-exploitative labour regimes?

- To what extent is the presence of unpaid care work a pillar of the mentality of rational homo economicus, and a pillar of the individualist, anti-solidarity mentality that accompanies this worldview?
- What kinds of questions would we ask northern workers in order to ascertain whether they (think they) benefit from relational inequalities?

5 CONCLUSIONS

The concept of super-exploitation is vital if we are to comprehend dynamics of the globalisation of production and sourcing, and its substructure - the hugely expanding and overwhelmingly poor global labouring class. Mainstream GVC analysis is capital-centric, viewing the world from the perspective of lead and supplier firms, and equating development with capital accumulation. Much critical GVC analysis has documented how the world of GVCs is one in which workers in the global south have been integrated into new forms of exploitation and subordination to capital. The IMoL perspective aims to push critical GVC research further, by investigating the effects of GVCs on Northern workers' political consciousness.

A key hypothesis of the IMoL is that northern workers' lack of international solidarity is partially a consequence of relational inequality – their ability through their geographical location to benefit from the super-exploitation of workers in the global south. However we need to keep in mind that the initial impulse towards global outsourcing from the 1970s onwards, was for capital to escape worker militancy in the global north. Furthermore, such dynamics, by contributing to the vast expansion of a global labouring class, divided along myriad lines (geography, gender, race etc) and pitted against each other by firms

engaged in cut-through competition, subjected Northern workers to intensified competition from workers receiving vastly lower rates of pay. The impact has been, across some sectors in the global north, significant downward pressure in pay rates, shifts of wealth from labour to capital, and the (re?) emergence of new forms of super-exploitation.

At the same time, it is probably clear that certain sections of Northern middle and perhaps working classes have benefitted from employment within economic sectors that capture value from value chains that traverse the north-south divide. Put differently, we are seeing renewed dynamics of labour fragmentation and variegation within the global north, as well as across the global south.

On top of, or perhaps underlying, these dynamics, is the presence (and probably expansion) of unpaid care work. The institutional gendering of labour into paid and unpaid work represents not just a huge subsidy to capital, but a schism within labouring classes across the globe. We could ask whether the IMoL perspectives considers north-south divisions rather than national level gender divisions, to be more significant in forestalling labouring class solidarity? More productively (dialectically?) perhaps, we could ask what are the relations between gendered and spatial divisions of labouring classes north and south?

What do such dynamics of fragmentation/variegation mean for international labouring class solidarity, in particular by northern workers for southern workers and by paid male workers for unpaid female workers? These are open questions which the IMoL seeks to investigate further. Hopefully this paper contributes in some way to this endeavour.

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