

Achieving Just Migration Regimes Through Socialist Praxis

Written by Raia Apostolova

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RAIA APOSTOLOVA, SEP 22 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed extraordinary degrees of migrant exploitation in the European Union (EU). While millions of Europeans were locked down in unprecedented anti-epidemic efforts, it became very clear that many of the essential workers were also the most socially insecure labourers. The German slaughterhouse Tönnies, for example, became known for its horrific labour conditions. There, Bulgarian and Romanian workers were forced to work over eight hours in freezing and humid conditions, coerced into sharing a single sleeping room with numerous other workers, and not allowed to take sick days. The conditions for care workers in the West follow a similar precarious structure. Migrant women are often forced to live with their employers, extending their job obligations to 24/7 shifts. They also struggle with low payments and cannot count on unemployment, health and pension benefits once they leave their jobs.

What the pandemic revealed is actually a long-lived reality for millions of EU citizens, who travel freely within the Union, without having to bear the burden of borders and visas. Having finished my research on Bulgarian labourers in Germany in 2015, I have seen first-hand the effects of the economic violence that rips through their bodies: homelessness, withholding of wages, imprisonment, untreated work-related diseases. The contemporary forms of economic organization seem to require the constant production of violated migrant bodies. To better grasp what is at stake in today's international movement of labour power, we need to look at its opaque form. This piece looks back in history to argue that the organization of labour migration in socialist international relations points to a different material reality for thousands of foreign workers who took part in the 'building of socialism': a moral and material economy that was often used to exercise political influence over the postcolonial world. This economy created a peculiar migratory category: the foreign friends (Menge, 2007).

I will delve into socialist political thought of migration and take the example of the relations between People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in order to demonstrate that socialism articulated the international movement of labour power in a way that aimed at cancelling the possible contradictions that arise between production and social reproduction in capitalist forms of social organization – a model that we clearly see in contemporary patterns of East-West migration. Certainly, the socialist experience is not void of its own contradictions, political limitations and unsuccessful attempts. However, the socialist praxis of international migration points to a possible way out of the current unjust political conjuncture. This praxis must be taken seriously by activists and scholars alike in their political attempts to build migration regimes based on equality and internationalist solidarity.

Socialist Political Theory of Migration

International collaboration in the field of labour power developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Eastern Europe. Although different forms of labour migration had been utilized between Eastern Bloc states (e.g. between the German Democratic Republic – GDR, and Hungary starting in 1967), a more rigorous theoretical commitment in regards to workers' mobility can be traced back to the Scientific Symposium of the Experts on Labour Power. The Symposium took place in 1968 in Budapest, when Jozsef Rozsa (Hungary) and Asen Dobrev (Bulgaria) placed the question of socialist cooperation in the sphere of labour power transfers.

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East European socialist ideologues had it clear that the international migration between socialist states must appeal 'to an internationalist doctrine of solidarity and struggle against the capitalist West' and, for this, the migration apparatuses should be organised in the exact opposite manner to the 'exploitive and racist' practices that the West German *gastarbeiter* programs adhered to (Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes, 2007: 11). Furthermore, the Symposium accelerated sociological and economic research in the field of international migration.

Although international migration was not a widely discussed topic among East European social scientists, some philosophical accounts appeared prior to the Symposium. One such account was of the Bulgarian sociologist Zahari Staykov (1962). Staykov envisaged a 'communist world without borders' (Staykov, 1962: 227), where the public ownership of the means of production would undergo a process of internationalization, thus becoming a property of the socialist peoples as whole regardless of their national belonging. Such process, according to the author, supposed the territorial spread of labour power, available knowledge and technological achievements so as to bring about scientific synchronicity across the socialist world.

A few years later, the sociologist Minko Minkov was given the task by the Labour Research Institute to explore the 'conditions, opportunities and benefits for the [People's Republic of Bulgaria] from the planned movement of labour between the COMECON member-states' (Minkov, 1970: 3). Minkov's mission came at a time when the People's Republic of Bulgaria was looking for ways to rationalize the usage of the available workforce as the country was expecting that in 1970 it would experience a labour shortage of 52 600 workers; a shortage that was to deepen in the next decade due to demographic imbalances (State Central Archive Fund 1/Inventory 35/archival unit 1220, page 30).

In this background, Minkov attempted to construct a methodological apparatus that would create 'mutually beneficial migration relations between the socialist states' (Minkov, 1970: 4). This 'mutual beneficial migration relations' were not a slogan emptied out of practical meaning, but a thoroughly weighted program that counted on complex prognosis and calculations in regards to both the past and future social reproduction costs accumulated on the part of host and home countries. Minkov had one particular goal in mind: to organize the international movement of labour power in a way that would not economically injure the different countries in particular and the socialist system as a whole.

In his studies, he exemplified the capitalist forms of migration existing at the time (the guest worker and freedom of movement programs) as antidotes to fair migration regimes. Building upon Karl Marx, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Z. Foster and E.P. Pletnev, the author demonstrated how the capitalist modes of production historically produced surplus populations; spontaneous and sudden forms of migration that followed the concentration of capital; national differences in wages; conflictual interests both between local and foreigner workers and within immigrant communities; and deep contradictions in the development of capital and labour power. But how was the socialist world to organize the international movement of its labour power so as to avoid such bourgeois practices?

First of all, Minkov insisted, the socialist world should not allow the creation of the uneven development between states that capitalist forms of migration both produced and profited from. With this goal in mind, the author imagined a socialist system of migration that would work in accordance to the 'economic potential' of each territorial unit within the socialist system. He conceived of migration as bringing this potential to the fullest: the units that experienced labour shortages would bring in labour power from the outside, and those who experienced abundance of labour power would export it where it was needed. Two were the questions that each socialist organization of migration must answer in order to avoid the production of material disparities between the different territorial units: a) what amount has the exporting country spent in order to reproduce the labour power that would eventually be utilized by the importing country and b) what can this labour power produce.

Although Minkov's task was to construct a program that would benefit the PRB as an importer of labour power, his methodological decision was to place himself in the shoes of the weaker states (in terms of technological and production development) and proceeded from the assumption that the exporting country is in an unfavourable position. The latter's weak position is determined by the fact that the country-exporter has spent material resources for the reproduction of the labour power that would realistically work in a different country and hence, produce social

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goods for that country and not for their own. Moreover, as the reproduction of the non-productive population (the pupils, the people with disabilities and the elderly) depended upon the active and available labour fund, the country-exporter would deprive this population from material support.

As the importing country would gain more out of migration, – as it did not participate in the reproduction of the migrating labour power prior to its actualization in the receiving country, and as the migration injects even more active labour power for the support of the inactive population – Minkov (1970: 55) believed that these countries needed to ‘hand over part of the surplus product’ produced by the foreign workforce and pay a particular amount of financial support to the country-exporter. He was clear that the immigrants themselves must be freed from such obligations and that the importing state had the socialist and economic duty to support the country-exporter.

The formula by which this ‘surplus product’ and financial sums were to be calculated depended on the ratio between the life fund (the life-years of each state’s population) and the labour fund (the labour-years of each state’s active population). Concretely, each state involved in relations of migration had to provide account of the following indicators: 1) the life fund of the average future life expectancy of the population according to gender and age; 2) the labour fund and the average future active labour life of the population according to gender and age; 3) the productive possibilities of the population and the average future production according to gender and age; 4) consumption possibilities of the population and the average future consumption according to gender and age (Minkov, 1970: 61). Certainly, different variables had to be taken into consideration such as the qualification and level of training of the labour force, their age, and the social conditions of reproduction in the home and host countries, and others.

The above methodological apparatus – necessarily represented here in a simplified way – had the goal to determine whether or not the export/import of labour power would be beneficial to the home/host countries. Having the task to explore the economic benefits of potential immigration of foreign workers in Bulgaria, Minkov made sure to construct a methodology that would guarantee the dignity of both the exporting states and the foreign workers. The sociologist outlined a moral economy of migration, according to which four criteria must be fulfilled in order to guarantee just migration patterns between socialist states: the export of the surplus labour power must guarantee that, in home states, the costs required for the production of a certain volume of social production would not exceed the cost accumulated for the reproduction of living labour; the export is economically advantageous only if part of the national income produced in the host countries is transferred to the home countries; the export must be socially advantageous (e.g. export is justified when a country is struggling to find work for its surplus population); and if the migrants return home with belongings and savings that would increase the national wealth of the country-exporter.

Minkov’s was an exercise in socialist internationalist thinking par excellence, where the national units were subsumed under the logic of the international in a way that cancels possibilities for potential exploitation of migrant labour but also of reducing to a minimum the possibilities to create conditions of uneven development between countries through unfair migration patterns.

Socialist Migration 1973–1989

Although various countries participated in migration agreements with the People’s Republic of Bulgaria– among them Cuba, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Mongolia – the largest group of foreign workers to labour in the country were Vietnamese citizens. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese workers came to Bulgaria between 1973 and 1989 as part of mutual agreements in the sphere of labour migration. They were employed in various economic sectors (agriculture, chemistry, construction, mechanical engineering and others) and were spread throughout the entire country. The official negotiations between the two countries started in the beginning of 1973 and lasted five consecutive days. They took place in a context heavily organized around the anti-imperialist and solidarity struggles with the people of Vietnam and were headed under the slogan of ‘Fraternal solidarity and absolute unity!’

The socialist internationalist framework of the negotiations heavily influenced their outcome. Although the Democratic (at the time) Republic of Vietnam was in a disadvantageous position, considering the heavy human and material loss inflicted by the war and the frequent military conflicts at its borders, Bulgaria had to step back from various points it initially wanted to include in the contract. Perhaps the most peculiar one concerns the omission of the word ‘worker’

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from the title of the future official document. Instead, Vietnam insisted on sending 'practitioners.' This might seem as an insignificant caprice on part of Vietnam but in fact it had both symbolic and material effects in the ways the Vietnamese citizens were to be treated while in Bulgaria. The gesture secured the Vietnamese state with the assurance that part of its citizens could return once their training was over, and that the purpose of the agreement did not merely consist of transferring labour power but instead tied the transfer to Bulgaria's obligation to train and produce highly qualified specialists in particular production fields.

Following Minkov's theoretical work concerning the position of the export country, the Bulgarian state pardoned 51,000,000 rubles out of the 57,000,000 previously accumulated Vietnamese debt as a solidarity gesture towards the export of labour power (SCA 259/44/283, 1975). Additionally, Bulgaria was obliged to cover the cost of the returning flights for all Vietnamese practitioners, to provide underwear and workwear to all Vietnamese citizens, and to accommodate the foreign workers in dormitories free of charge. The Vietnamese practitioners had the same rights under the Labour Code as their Bulgarian counterparts (except for family benefits) and were provided with nine extra days of holiday as compared to their Bulgarian colleagues. All Vietnamese citizens were provided with free lessons in labour safety, Bulgarian language and culture and only 50% of them had the obligation to remain in the country in order to work, while the rest were free to go home after the initial professional training that lasted for six months. Moreover, the Bulgarian state had the obligation to pay the Vietnamese state 300 BGN for each Vietnamese worker annually in order to compensate for the accumulated work experience and subsequent social benefits such as pensions and health care.

Starting in the early 1980's the content of the then renewed labour agreements changed dramatically. The 'practitioners' were substituted by 'workers'; the length of the Bulgarian language classes was shortened; following the state decentralization in the PRB, the labour agreements were now signed on individual basis between enterprises and workers, which weakened the bargaining power of the Vietnamese state; and the entire contingent of Vietnamese workers was expected to labour in Bulgaria for no less than five years after their arrival. The Perestroika period brought about even harsher conditions. The PRB refused to pardon the newly accumulated debt of Vietnam which hit the Vietnamese workers negatively. The labour contracts from 1986 stipulated that the labourers themselves had to repay Vietnam's debt and 10% of their salary was deducted for this purpose. Moreover, the 300 BGN that Bulgaria was paying to the state of Vietnam was now transferred towards the credit balance between the two states.

With the regime change the labour contracts of all the Vietnamese workers were terminated, their social security discontinued and the entire contingent due to be expelled from the country between 1990 and 1994. In the first years of the democratic transition, Vietnamese citizens were often subjected to various racist attacks on part of the militia and the newly emerging trade unions. The implementation of free markets was accompanied by violence that recreated the social fabric in a way that radically redefined the relation of foreign workers to capital and the state. From friends, the foreign workers in Bulgaria were turned into foes.

Conclusion

While labour power is a transhistorical category which expresses the ability of people to create material and immaterial goods for their reproduction, the economic form this labour power undertakes – including the forms of its international movement – is historically determined. We see that the labour migration contracts enacted between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were not free from their own contradictions, especially during late socialism. Different factors have played out in the changing environment of these relations ranging from the deepening economic intensification in the PRB, through the changing forms and definitions of internationalism (Alamgir, 2014), and to the accumulation of large amounts of debt on the part of Bulgaria.

What must strike our political imaginations, however, is the ways in which the question of social reproduction was taken as an axis around which migration was theoretically constructed and operationalized in the first years of the contracts. Minkov's methodological apparatus is a political vision that was not afraid to propose an ecumenical setting where social justice is the driving force behind international relations and where fair redistribution is organized not solely within the boundaries of the national but undertaken as an international endeavour.

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This line is diametrically opposed to both political theories and forms of labour migration we experience in our contemporary world. While today we are used to seeing migrants struggle with low salaries, disproportionate wages and working conditions as compared to local labourers, homelessness, devaluation of their labour power, and not least, with a significant rupture between what they produce and how they reproduce, socialist sociologists such as Minko Minkov were well equipped to propose a methodological apparatus that had the potential to cancel out the possibilities for the creation of such conditions.

What we witness today is how different states – Austria, Germany, and the U.K. – propose further revisions of the EU rules on freedom of movement of which the aim is to impose strict social welfare boundaries to migrants (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2016). The discursive formation of migratory categories such as the ‘social benefit tourist’ and its embedding into infra-legal structures within the EU creates the conditions for a double penalization: firstly, in migrants’ countries of origin, where outward movement becomes a condition for the renewal of life cycles; and secondly, in their host countries, where the ‘burden’ of reproduction is left at the hands of the individual. Moreover, contemporary forms of migration utilize mobile labour so as to suit wealthy centers of production, while creating conditions for entire regions to become a mere source for the export of cheap labour, as it is the case with post-socialist countries.

To have just migration regimes, we need to revisit philosophies whose political primacy is rooted in the ideas of equality, internationalism and anti-racism; whose ideological imageries are able to construct ‘friends’ and not ‘guests’. The political theories of socialist scholars are a good starting point in this endeavour.

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