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Contra an anthropology of migrant workers in Western Europe

Claude Meillassoux

- 1 The choice of a disciplinary approach to tackle social problems is not only one of the method. It bears ideological implication as can be seen in the case of migrant labour.
- 2 Because of the geographical origin of a major proportion of this labour, there is a notion that ethnology is a relevant discipline to deal with the problem.
- 3 As an anthropologist by trade I want to warn against the use and misuse of such an approach which might be bound to cloak the real issues while at the same it might be revealing of a policy.
- 4 I would like to recall first a classical case, reported by Epstein in 1958 and commented upon by Max Gluckman (1960), as a prototype of the opposition between what I would call « ethnological » officering and class organisation. The case refers to a situation, which lasted from 1930 to 1940 on the mines of the Copperbelt in what was South Rhodesia. The African migrant miners were recruited from various areas and various « tribes » from British, Belgian and Portuguese colonies. The mining authorities decided to group the workers according to their « tribal » origin and to give them « tribal » representatives, through which they were to deal with the management... These representatives were chosen by the workers often among members of the dominant, royal or aristocratic families. As Gluckman noted: « Tribal organisation was projected into the urban industrial sphere ». This arrangement worked fairly well until 1935 when there were major disturbances for better pay and better working conditions. The tribal elders were sent to calm down the miners but they were accused of being in league with the Europeans, routed out and forced to seek new sanctuary in compound offices (with the whites) which were stormed by the mob.
- 5 After the strike the Tribal elders resumed their previous role and operated satisfactorily. But in 1940 again, a second series of strikes broke out and the authority of the elders was rejected again. Strike committees, with no tribal connection, were elected to deal with the management. This was the beginning of ousting of the tribal system from the mines and the emergence of trade unionism.

- 6 The tribal collapse was absolute after a referendum that gave 97% of the votes against it.
- 7 Gluckman stresses two elements:
- 8 – « Tribal elders, he says, had no connection with the situation in which African miners worked within the mines. In the mines they were organised in gangs and departments with which tribal affiliation was irrelevant.
- 9 – The elders had become, in the conflictual conjuncture, representatives of the mines and not of the workers ».

10

This case demonstrates that what is relevant for the workers, as it shows in a crisis, is not their tribal connection and organisation but their condition work i.e. their relation with the industrial capitalist sector in which they are incorporated as wage-earners, and not as tribesmen, and where is the essential of their living and survival.

11

Now this case had what can be said to be a happy end: through their struggles the miners gained the right to organize themselves into labour unions. But wherever there are migrant labourers coming from so called « backwards » countries, there are attempts to maintain them within their « customary » framework. This is still the case in South Africa where the policy of tribal separation is prevalent not only on the mines where the workers are represented by « indunas », but also in the black townships and on a national level. Every African, even born in town, is labelled as a member of a tribal group. In Soweto for instance, where city committees were instituted under the pressure of the inhabitants, the government insisted that the votation should take place within these tribal groups. The policy of the « independent » Bantoustans is based on the same assumption that Africans are unified by their colour but divided by their tribal affiliation and that their interest and political capacity lie only within their tribal tradition and social structures. But this policy is only to the advantage of the white man. It prevents the real social forces coming from the actual class relationships to find their way towards an active and potent representation. The Africans are tied up into irrelevant institutional structures against which they must fight endlessly to gain access to a true and relevant representation.

12

In France, the housing policy for the migrant labour was to put the workers into single-men hostels in which people from same areas and villages were kept together. In the case of the largest dormitories, some attempts were made also to house together hostile communities in an attempt to prevent solidarity. The maintenance of the migrant workers within their traditional structures was thought by the employers and the authorities to be a way to maintain social division within them, and to keep the workers under the authority of conservative elder men endowed with an extra power of representation that they could keep only if they complied with the demand of the management for law and order. Also the clustering of people among themselves was one way to keep them away from contact with other workers and with the local population, through which they could gain political consciousness.

13

It is true that by themselves the migrant labourers, particularly from Africa, wanted to keep together by villages or areas. Their stays in France were intended to be of limited duration and therefore they wanted to remain among themselves and to maintain their

relationships with home. Given the condition of instability and insecurity of work, such a link was essential to them in order to keep the family and village structures alive, not only among them, but at home as basis for return. Quite naturally they attempted to reconstruct among themselves the village hierarchy, to regard the elder one as the head of the community and also to revive the social relations of inequality as that of masters and slaves for instance.

14

But when you analyse the reasons why people stay together, you find that it is mostly the villagers community that is supplying functions the capitalist society fails to provide although these functions are immediately related to employment and life in the industrial milieu. The villagers group is acting as an aid for the new comers to find employment and housing, it is help to support the unemployed. It acts like an insurance to guarantee the return home in case of illness or casualties. These functions are essential in an industrial urbanised and capitalist milieu and they are a strong incentive to keep people together. But as the gains of some are increasing, when there is some possibility to save money on one's own, when some workers think of investing their wages in some individual enterprise in their country instead of participating in collective spendings, then the village ties tend to dissolve and to lose their organic content. They only remain on a more and more fragile moral basis.

15

To the difference with village life, in the dormitories, there are no women, no children, no families, therefore nothing but interpersonal male relationships, no relations between the constitutive units of a domestic society. Even the relations which were kept over from the village, because they were completely divorced from the social content, did not last very long.

16

The elder men, precisely because they were older, and usually less proficient in the French language, illiterate and poorly informed about bureaucratic matters, usually reluctant toward modern forms of action such as unionism or committees, these elders soon enough found themselves more in an honorary position than playing an active and efficient role. Younger men, better educated and better informed, soon became the actual leaders.

17

The traditional social hierarchy collapsed also. Michel Samuel who worked several years with African workers living in dormitories, reports of a case which is quite significant. Among a group of Soninke coming from a same village, it seemed natural at first that the men of servile origin should do the cooking for the others. This situation was accepted for some time until it became clear that, should you be slave or master, the condition of work in the plants were alike for everybody and the slaves were not less tired at the end of the day than the masters. After some debate and a firm stand for slaves, it was decided that the cooking should be done by everyone in turn without consideration of race, creed, colour... or class.

18

Dissolution of the traditional authorities and of the traditional hierarchy was soon to be followed by a tendency to dispersal of the people of the same villages into various parts of France or in private housing. Young men with a better education and/or with better pay, tried to escape the pressure and the censorship of their co-villagers and some

started to live individually. Others succeeded in marrying French women or in bringing their wife from home. They began to integrate the French society in a process which was more in accordance with their position in the French economy. This phenomenon of integration nevertheless is still very limited due to the restrictions put on this process by the authorities.

19

Among the workers who want go on living together in dormitories, the double process of collapse of the traditions within ethnic groups and of solidarity between previously foreign or hostile groups, led to a great move and to a common action against housing conditions. For the last five years all Air France workers from various origins living in dormitories owned by a single society (Sonacotra) have undertaken action. They are refusing to pay the rent unless major improvements are brought to the material and moral conditions of living.

20

On the labour front the tactic of the employers was different. While in the dormitories they tried to group people ethnically, at work they did the exact opposite: workers from the same countries were separated: on the assembly line the policy was to put side by side people from different origin unable to communicate: one Malian, one Yugoslav, one Portuguese, one Algerian: the idea was to prevent mutual understanding and common action against the management.

21

But as in the mines of the Copperbelt, the common conditions of work were enough to create solidarity among the workers in spite of their nationality. Foreign workers came to participate actively to the strikes and other actions side by side with the French workers.

22

Therefore on both grounds, housing and working, the employers' ethnic policy seems bound to fail and the effects of capitalist context in which the workers are inserted, to prevail over ethnicity. But the employers are using another method to perpetuate their privilege. They send back home workers who have gained some experience in labour struggle and organisation in order to recruit new labourers coming from other countries or areas, eager to find employment and ready to give up the advantages gained by the previous ones. The class struggle is interrupted before it takes a more radical turn. The fight of the worker is to start all over again.

23

In such a situation, what is the relevance of ethnology?

24

As a narrow specialised field, limited to the study of domestic or primitive societies, ethnology is not only inadequate to analyse the industrial situation, but bound to warp the problem. If there is a demand for an anthropological treatment of the situation of migrant workers, it is not only to preserve their culture and civilisation, it is also for precise economic, political and ideological reasons.

25

Economically, it has been clearly demonstrated now that the capitalist sector of production is saving on the cost of reproduction of labour power through the use and management of rotating migrations. I will not inflict this demonstration on you anew.

This is now largely accepted. Rotating migrations are the very conditions of overexploitation of labour. Politically, it implies that the migrant workers:

26

1- must not be accepted as permanent resident within the capitalist sector (or country)

27

2- that their families must not be accepted at all into the capitalist sector but maintained within the traditional domestic sector of production. And this for two reasons.

28

The family is made of a) people on whom the workers depends to maintain the domestic economic structures which must receive him periodically and when he is unable to work. b) his dependants, grown and bred within the domestic society to eventually replace him on the labour market.

29

Should the workers and their family be accepted permanently in the capitalist sector, the extra value coming from the domestic sector would vanish.

30

Therefore when the attempts are made to keep the migrant workers within their ethnicity, it is not only the effect of a mistaken view of the reality. It is above all in absolute congruence with the policy of non-integration of the migrant workers and their families. It is a requisite of the policy to brand them as foreigners, to insist on their specificity and even to pretend to promote cultural preservation.

31

There is where I consider that ethnology is in danger of being led astray by a natural tendency to privilege the ethnic aspects of problem and « to protect traditional values ».

32

Let this be clear. It does not mean that cultural values must not be promoted or respected. But this is above all the concern and the job of the migrants themselves. They don't need the anthropologist to be told what is their culture and how to practice it. In France there is every year a great cultural demonstration from several independent associations of migrant workers which is very successful.

33

It is done without the help of the anthropologists and very much against the attempts from the authorities to confiscate that sort of enterprise. I am myself trying to contribute to education in native languages which I believe necessary for a proper political education. But the danger of this move in favour of culture is that it could shift towards a preservation of ethnicity and soon enough of race; that it becomes institutionalised and used as a basis for segregation as it is actually the case in South Africa.

34

Although cultural values must not be deliberately sacrificed, it must be understood also that, in the context of capitalist exploitation, they are doomed to disappear and that the defense of specificity and culture will be vain if it does not goes through the abolition of exploitation.

35

In the present conjuncture, migration is a conjectural feature on which the capitalist governments want to keep a narrow control.

36

Today the flux of migration is reversing.

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The combination of democratic expansion created by the imperialist policy since the last world war, with the unemployment caused by a new jump of capitalist technology, put a terrible threat on the survival of millions of people in the Third World. All European countries are now trying to get rid of the relative overpopulation they created themselves within their boundaries. The French government is preparing a law, which is shameful and scandalous to expel migrant workers. They are already thrown out from their dormitories into the streets. Arbitrary sequestration is used against them to accelerate the expulsion.

38

People with black or brown faces are arrested in the streets and the subways, searched, compelled to exhibit their « passbook » and taken to the police under all sorts of pretence.

39

Their fate in their country of origin is not the concern of the French government. They have worked in France, they contributed to the wealth of the country, they were treated while here as sub-humans, therefore in the eyes of our dominant clan, we are even. It is true the investments will be made in third world countries to use cheap labour on the spot. But this employment will be very small in comparison to the demand and the needs of these people. Their fate is unemployment, hunger and misery for the greatest part of them.

- 40 In such a dramatic occurrence, an ethnological approach to the problem is something of derision. It is in terms of exploitation and overexploitation of labour, in term of the world reserve army of labour, in terms of international class struggle that the problem must be conceived.

NOTES

1. Inédit.