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A Message from the Editorial Board

Included in the 11th volume of the Pitt Sociology Review are three exemplary papers from undergraduate students in courses of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. After a lengthy review and revision process, these works were found to exemplify some of the greatest achievements of students in the department.

The Board expresses its sincere gratitude to the Sociology Department and to our faculty advisor, Dr. Robert Slammon.

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Reflection in the Oasis: Northeast Syria and the Rojava Revolution

Robert Henry

On the northeastern fringes of Syria, a remarkable experiment in democracy is unfolding. This is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – better known as Rojava. Started by a coalition of radical Kurds, Arabs, and other local groups, Rojava has implemented systems of direct democracy, libertarian socialism, gender equality, and other reforms unlike anything seen since Republican Spain in the 1930s (Graeber 2014). Simultaneously, Rojava has proven to be one of the most effective forces in rolling back ISIS' territorial gains in Syria and hosting the wave of refugees left in their wake (Sheppard 2017). While having serious shortcomings in tolerance and pluralism, Rojava represents the most radical revolutionary community in recent history and is a model for economic and gender equality, anti-authoritarianism, and direct democracy across the Middle East.

Rojava's creation and expansion in Syria (termed the "Rojava Revolution") cannot be fully understood outside of the greater context of the Kurdish independence movement. Following the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the Allied Powers attempted to establish a Kurdish state in what was then the Ottoman Empire. However, following Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's overthrow of the Ottoman government and defeat of the Allies, the new Treaty of Lausanne was signed setting the present-day borders of the Middle East, and crucially denying any Kurdish nation-state. Following Lausanne, the Kurds have been divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – making any movement for a unified Kurdish state exceptionally difficult (Council on Foreign Relations 2020).

From the 1940s through to the 1970s, Kurds in each of these nations faced harsh oppression, ranging from expulsion from resource-rich lands to being mass-stripped of citizenship (Council on Foreign Relations 2020). In 1974, the Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê or "PKK") in Turkey, which sought to achieve a Marxist-Leninist independent Kurdish state. After politically organizing and growing throughout the

1970's, the Party's military wing began an armed independence war in 1984, which has killed approximately forty-thousand people and still continues in a partially deescalated form today. In 2003, however, PKK members fleeing Turkey's ban of the Party relocated to Syria and founded the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat or "PYD") (Council on Foreign Relations 2020). The PYD follows the same democratic confederalist ideology of the PKK, strives for Kurdish autonomy within Syria, and also supports an armed wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or "YPG") (Keating 2019).

Pro-democracy Arab Spring protests in 2011, after overthrowing several regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, also began to arise in Syria. However, President Bashar Al-Assad, Syria's autocratic leader, reacted to the protests with violence, sparking the Syrian Civil War. The nation was quickly divided among various pro and anti-Assad factions. Taking advantage of the chaos, ISIS, the radical Jihadist militant group, invaded Syria, seizing significant amounts of territory. Now fighting a multi front war, Assad decided to consolidate his troops and retreated from northeastern Syria (BBC 2016). Left in a power vacuum, the PYD and YPG formed a coalition with other ethnic groups in the area, such as Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkmens. In 2014, they organized the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to halt ISIS' expansion into Syria and established a new autonomous government called Rojava. By securing the region from ISIS and gaining autonomy from the Assad regime, the PYD and its allies began a process of implementing radical democratic structures known as the Rojava Revolution (The Kurdish Project).

The ideology on which Rojava is built, known as democratic confederalism, comes directly from the political thought of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan. After he was arrested in Nairobi in 1999, Turkish officials sentenced Öcalan to life imprisonment, keeping him isolated on the island of Imrali for ten years. During this time, Öcalan studied various Western political philosophers ranging from Michel Foucault to Immanuel Wallerstein. Abandoning his Marxist-Leninist past, he advocated for a new ideology based on direct democracy, libertarian socialism, environmentalism, ethnoreligious pluralism, and gender equality (Shilton 2019). Above all, his political thought, and in turn the politics of Rojava, were shaped by the writings of the American anarchist Murray Bookchin, whose philosophy, known as Communalism, calls for

the dismantling of the state and replacing it with a cohesive confederation of direct-democratic polities. Communalism aims to break down gender, cultural, economic, and environmental structures of power on a society-wide basis (Bookchin 1999).

The political structure of Rojava, mostly based on the ideas of Öcalan and Bookchin, is systematically laid out in its constitution, the Charter of the Social Contract. The Charter states that it seeks to establish a government “in pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability” and “mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society” (Peace in Kurdistan). Rojava’s social structure, as outlined in the Charter, is based fundamentally on the Commune, groups of roughly a dozen families that manage most economic and social affairs amongst themselves. The members of the Commune form committees, which focus on a particular facet of society, such as commerce and women’s rights. Each committee is chaired by a man and a woman (Shilton 2019).

The members of each committee carry out the day-to-day workings under their respective jurisdiction, and this constitutes the vast majority of administrative effects on people’s lives. Only when a committee sees an issue as being beyond its power or jurisdiction do they send it to a higher level (regional, canton, etc.). In reconciliation efforts, for example, two-thirds of all issues were solved by the initial commune-level committee and only a third were sent to the next level. In this way, power in Rojava has a bottom-up structure, not a top-down structure common to most states in the world (Shilton 2019). This achievement is remarkable considering that it manages to break from the dominant free-market nation-based capitalist order, survives with such decentralized authority in a warring region, and has virtually no historical precedent on the same scale other than the brief anarchist period of Civil War-era Spain.

One factor that makes Rojava so unique compared to other governments is that it is an explicitly anti-national state. While Rojava is built on the Kurdish independence movement, its leader Abdullah Öcalan has completely rejected the concept of the nation-state and argues that a Kurdish nation-state would simply perpetuate the problems inherent to capitalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism from

which Kurds have been trying to break free. Fitting into his anarchist and socialist ideals, Öcalan believes that the nation-state consolidates near-universal power within the government and, by gaining authority from the “nation,” achieves a status similar to ruling by divine right (Öcalan 2017). Strictly following Öcalan’s political philosophy, Rojava rejects any claim to be a Kurdish state and actively promotes cooperation between Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Assyrians, and other local ethnic groups (Shilton 2019).

Similar to countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Belgium, Rojava is inherently multi-ethnic. Yet unlike these European countries, there is an active cooperation in which ethnic groups are guaranteed participation and representation together, rather than being broken up into separated ethnic regions that operate independently from one another (Rojava Information Center). Rojava’s structure can provide a model for building positive, strong inter-community relations, as opposed to tolerant separation, not just in the Middle East but in any multi-ethnic environment. Ethnic groups also cooperate in defense; the Kurdish People’s Protection Units have worked alongside militias from other ethnic groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a united military for Rojava (The Kurdish Project). The Social Contract provides explicit protections for any ethnic group to teach in their own language as well (Peace in Kurdistan).

One of the most dramatic social changes that has occurred under Rojava is the promotion of women’s rights. As stated before, each committee has a female co-chair, and according to the Social Contract, women must hold at least forty percent of seats on each committee (Peace in Kurdistan). This number is an incredible benchmark on the international stage, as only Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates have similar numbers of reserved seats for women, and they have the number 1 and number 3 ranks respectively for women’s representation in legislature (Chesser 2021). The communal system promotes women moving out of traditional household settings and into the workforce. Women have also been empowered to band together and challenge men who refuse to accept these changes in gender roles (Shilton 2019). One of the most iconic images of Rojava in recent years is the Kurdish female soldier, as women have their own military wing within the YPG, the Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin/YPJ). Women have

played a vital role in turning back the tide of ISIS expansion and securing Rojava's borders (The Kurdish Project).

The Rojava Revolution has unleashed a radical form of government and social structure that in the post-1989 world seems impossible; it has committed itself to a non-authoritarian socialist economy, cultural and religious pluralism, and improvements in gender equality, while situated in a region troubled by religious extremism, deep nationalism, and despotism. Still, Rojava falters in several respects.

The Communal system, despite being effective in organizing labor and resolving disputes in many communities, ultimately relies on citizens' deciding to actively participate. Public involvement is low. Many women have declined to participate in the Communal system, whether out of personal conviction or fear, due to it breaking traditional gender roles. Young people overall have been generally unenthusiastic, viewing the system as dysfunctional and ineffective (Shilton 2019).

While embracing the goals of pluralism, Rojava has still sounded the alarms of many international human rights groups. In 2015, a report from Amnesty International exposed Kurdish YPG forces demolishing primarily Arab and Turkmen villages and leaving the populations homeless with no military justification. These acts amount to war crimes under international law (Amnesty International 2015). Likewise, a 2017 report from the Assyrian Confederation of Europe documented several cases of abuse by Rojava and the YPG against Assyrians (Ulloa 2017). As many Assyrians live on territory near Syrian Arab Army forces, they are required to pay taxes to both Rojava and the Syrian government, doubling their economic burden. If Assyrians are conscripted into the Syrian Arab Army and serve their required years, Rojava does not recognize their service and SAA requires veterans to serve in the YPG for even more time. YPG forces have participated in the looting of Assyrian homes and have occupied Assyrian schools and businesses. Rojava attempted to pass a law in 2015 declaring all property liberated from ISIS to be publicly owned. The law claimed to protect property for refugees, but Assyrians feared it would be used to occupy and control non-Kurdish lands. The law failed to pass, but seizures of Assyrian properties and businesses have occurred anyway (Ulloa 2017).

While its ideology heavily stresses the importance of environmental protection, Rojava has done almost nothing to uphold these values.

Much of this is due to the necessities of life, as the economy is devastated by war, and people need food and income to survive. Despite the environmental damage they cause, oil drilling and refining remain the primary sources of income for Rojava (Shilton 2019).

Another significant issue in Rojava is freedom of speech and press. Rojava and SDF officials dominate communication with foreign leaders and media, and dissenting voices have little power. A number of reports show that critics of Rojava have been assassinated or silenced, and others have been forced to flee the region. Critics accuse Rojava of utilizing propaganda, especially through education. Regardless of ethnic background, schools are required to teach the ideology of Rojava and Abdullah Öcalan. Many amongst the different ethnic groups are supportive of this ideology, but Kurdish nationalism has still leaked through in some aspects. For instance, there have been reports that Rojava's textbooks feature pro-Kurdish historical narratives and use inaccurate maps to show Kurdistan as larger than it actually is (Ulloa 2017).

Above all, Rojava's greatest weakness is the reality of where it is situated – in a region consumed by civil war. Rojava grew significantly after its founding as American financial, material, and airstrike support allowed it to swiftly beat back ISIS and seize the territories it held in eastern Syria. However, once their anti-terrorist benefits had come to their completion, the US, under President Donald Trump, decided to abruptly withdraw all forces and support for Rojava. This left Rojava lacking in supplies and stretched thin, having to deal with thousands of ISIS prisoners, the Syrian government, and, most of all, Turkey (Court and den Hond 2020). Shortly after the US withdrawal, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ordered an invasion of Rojava's territory, and, with the support of local militias, seized control of the land directly along Syria's northern border. Unable to contain the Turkish threat, Rojava's leadership was forced to allow Syrian Arab Army troops, and with them the power of Bashar Al-Assad, into their territory to form a defensive line against the Turkish forces. While Rojava still stands today, the presence of SAA troops may significantly curtail its independence, and if the Turkish army would no longer pose a common threat, the Syrian army could swiftly bring Rojava to an end (Keating 2019). Rojava's internal issues are all major failings to live up to its own standards and the

standards of the international community. External threats could bring the Rojava Revolution to a fruitless end. However, the strivings for a society based on radical equality, democracy, and cooperation are still very much alive in Rojava, and perhaps provide the best vision for a peaceful and just future in Syria. Rojava's mission in Syria is not to form an independent state, but to establish an autonomous region within its borders. They seek to apply this plan to the whole of the country, envisioning a Federal Syria in which power is decentralized and regions and ethnic groups have greater autonomy. Öcalan, after his ideological shift in prison, has advocated for peaceful means of achieving autonomy through politics (BBC News 2016). Rojava's future is yet to be seen, but the example set by this society for building democratic and equitable political structures can serve as a blueprint for other regions seeking inter-community peace and economic self-determination.

There is no doubt that Rojava bears a number of faults and has taken an active part in the brutality that has plagued Syria for the past decade. However, looking above the dismal conditions of chaos and warfare, Rojava remains a promising new community. Despite its shortcomings, the societal revolutions that Rojava has brought about in gender equality, democratic development, and ethnoreligious pluralism are remarkable, especially considering the highly nationalist and authoritarian environment from which it arose. The Communal system may be flawed, but it is nevertheless a unique, revolutionary system that is still in its infancy and could grow and mature with time. On the world stage, Rojava stands as a groundbreaking community that has managed to defy both the free-market excesses and despotic authoritarianism that have been plaguing much of the globe. The libertarian socialist model, while still in development, may pave the way for a successful socialist economic system; breaking free from the failures of past Communist societies. While its future is far from certain, Rojava is an extraordinary experiment in democracy that deserves the study and attention of future political thinkers and leaders.

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The Commodification of Immigrant Lives at the Border and Beyond

Liz Timple

Introduction

The ongoing immigration crisis occurring at global borders is precipitated by the complex relations between migrants and various social and political structures that govern these boundaries. While this crisis, particularly in the United States and Europe, is instigated by the lack of robust immigration policy, one may feasibly argue that the larger concern in this matter is the blatant disregard for human life that is endorsed through the enforcement of current border policy. American and European governments authorize the dehumanization of immigrants, through a process that extends from their initial interactions with border control to the process of attaining legal status once they cross the border. The objectification of migrant lives is supported by and contributes to our lack of empathy for migrants, for the violence they endure in trying to cross the border, and for their experiences once they arrive at their destination. The commodification of migrants through systems that endow their lives with the attributes of a product is the most predominant driving force for this objectification.

I will address this concept throughout the paper by first discussing Karl Marx's ([1867]1887) definition and characterization of the commodity. I then elaborate on the commodification of migrants, drawing on accounts from Francisco Cantu's book, *The Line Becomes a River* (2018); scholarship on migrant smuggling by Anna Triandafyllidou; and the concept of accumulation by dispossession formulated by David Harvey.

Marx's Commodity

The commodity is fundamentally defined and characterized by Marx as an object that "satisfies human wants of some sort or another" ([1867]1887, p. 27). Commodities have both exchange-value and use-value. Exchange-value is the measure by which a commodity may be comparatively traded for other products, including money. Use-value is

derived from the properties of a commodity that satisfy human needs. Thus, the possession of these values contributes to a commodity's identity.

Additionally, Marx discusses how owners of commodities are often estranged from their products. He explains that "what makes [commodities] exchangeable is the mutual desire of their owners to alienate them" ([1867]1887, p. 61). For any commodity, the 'othering' of the product from the owner by means of exchange processes helps to distinguish the identity of these objects. In a capitalist economic system, laborers are fully alienated from the process of their labor, from the product they produce, from other laborers, and even from themselves. All of these different forms of alienation act to estrange the laborer and commodity which allows for them to be exploited. Because the consumer is alien to the labor and social relations that produce the commodity, the product is objectified and fetishized. Marx extends this idea beyond inanimate objects by introducing the human laborer as a material good through the concept of commodified wage labor.

The increase in cross-border mobility, precipitated by global inequalities, has generated a growing market in smuggling services. Enhanced border control has only intensified demand for the services of smugglers or, as they are known on the U.S.'s southern border, coyotes. Francisco Cantu (2018), a former United States border agent, refers to immigrants as commodities in *The Line Becomes a River*, while considering human smuggling by 'coyotes' or migrant smugglers. This classification of migrants as a commodity substantiates the depersonalization of nonimmigrants. Migrants are treated as a kind of cargo and exposed to multiple forms of violence and trauma, with little empathetic concern by the public. Cantu illustrates this in his work by providing a first-hand account of the physical and emotional abuse of immigrants by border control agents.

Cantu's book showcases the various forms of violence which are endured by immigrants through his firsthand experience as a border control agent at the U.S.-Mexico border from 2008 to 2012. Fundamentally, Cantu argues that the commodification of migrants emerged as a result of the profitable yield of migrants due to the development of formalized smuggling enterprises at the border. The increased enforcement of the borders paralleled a similar increase in the

fees that coyotes charged for smuggling. As a result, the profit directly generated from each migrant increased which has served to transform these individuals into mercantile products. These underlying economic forces are what ultimately lead to the commodification of the migrant.

Cantu discusses the 'drop houses' that are located in suburbs and towns of southwestern cities where migrants are packed together shoulder-to-shoulder by human smugglers after surviving the passage north. They are each called into a room where the coyotes then beat and threaten them in order to produce phone numbers of relatives in the U.S. that will wire transfer ransom money to the smugglers. According to a police report reviewed by the Wall Street Journal in 2009, almost two hundred of these houses were discovered in 2007 and again in 2008 in Phoenix, Arizona (cited in Cantu 2018, p. 92). The prevalence of these drop houses demonstrates the increasing demand for smuggling services by migrants hoping to immigrate to the United States compared to the process utilized several decades ago. In the past, smugglers regularly traversed back and forth across the border; in recent years, however, professionalized gangs have monopolized the market for transporting these individuals in response to the increased demand for people smuggling. Cantu explains that an inadvertent artifact of enhanced border control is the increased demand for illicit smuggling as one of the only ways to enter a secured nation-state; therefore, the profit from smuggling each migrant increases, and smugglers can maximize their profit by blackmailing immigrant families for ransom payments. The objectification by the process of human smuggling and the exploitation of cheap migrant labor confers exchange-value and use-value on their lives, but this value does not expand into the realm of civic value. As Matthew Allen notes, in describing the consequences of the escalation of smuggling: "the alien becomes a commodity" (cited in Cantu 2018, p. 93).

Jason De León argues that the government views immigrant life as having "no political or social value" (cited in Cantu 2018, p. 260). Migrants at the border exist in what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to as "zones of exception" (cited in Cantu 2018, p. 257). Agamben frames borders as areas where the normal rights of citizens are suspended since the laws of neither country apply in these liminal

territories. Agamben notes that human beings are reduced to “bare life” as they are stripped of the liberties that accompany citizenship (2004, p. 4). In this way, migrants possess very little political clout since they do not have voting rights or other means to meaningfully establish their voice in the U.S.; since they do not have citizenship, they are unable to exercise the rights that warrant them these kinds of important values. Without these critical rights, migrants are reduced to the status of commodities.

Immigrants and Exchange-Value

Ann Triandafyllidou (2018) argues that the operations of migrant smuggling are often misunderstood as simple criminal activity committed with the sole intention of exploiting desperate migrants. However, she explains that many smuggling enterprises have become increasingly professionalized as a result of more fortified international borders.

Migrant smuggling has existed in its present forms, according to Triandafyllidou, since the consolidation of distinct borders starting in the 1970s. The increased globalization of production, technology, and trade at this time encouraged the formalization and intensified policing of borders that were previously only loosely managed.

Julian Brachet, discussed in Triandafyllidou, examines this transition by exploring the historical migration patterns of individuals from Niger to Libya through Agadez. Traditionally, potential migrants would directly pay truck drivers to transport them across the border, and this was perceived as an “informal transportation service” as opposed to an illegal migrant smuggling operation (2018, p. 215). The relationship between the migrant and transporter involved no substantial power differential that could allow for the potential exploitation of immigrants. The same truck drivers are now considered human smugglers due to the fortification of borders, although in the context of the time, they were merely considered traders. In Triandafyllidou’s words, “cross-border movement shifted from informal to clandestine” (2018, p. 216). As the danger and potential for more punitive repercussions increased, so too did the complexity and expertise of smuggling services, along with increased exploitation of migrants.

The transition additionally establishes how migrants are commodified not only as objects with exchange-value, but as illicit articles of trade. The evolution of the truck driver's role from one of a businessman to a criminal smuggler extends the same legal implication onto migrants. This change in social roles has fueled the contemporary commodification of migrants and introduced a new understanding of the migrant and coyote. Migrants are often referred to as "illegal immigrants," a category that commodifies and criminalizes at the same time, serves to further objectify immigrant life, and encourages their depersonalized treatment at the border and beyond.

Triandafyllidou explains that illicit smuggling networks of the past were constructed from pre-existing community relationships. The smuggler-immigrant relationship, therefore, was more likely based on familiarity and trust rather than exploitation. Such relationships are no longer commonplace at highly trafficked borders. Smuggling networks operate according to more complex business models and the services they offer are more likely to be impersonal. Under these conditions, trust and rapport are replaced by exploitation and threat and migrants become trade goods like any other.

Donald Trump's border policies provide an example of the effect of enhanced border security on smuggling operations. President Trump's crackdown on the border has reduced legitimate methods for entering the U.S. and increased demand for smuggling services.

In an interview with the Guardian Daniel, a coyote, explained that there has been a boom in the smuggling of families across the border in recent years. In particular, Migration from Guatemala and Honduras to the United States has risen to its highest level in a decade (Kinosian 2019). He reveals that the rates for smuggling families have become much cheaper compared to individuals. Since the prices for human smuggling are sensitive to changes in border policy, prices for smuggling families fell following the public outcry once the reality of Trump's family separation policy was fully exposed. The easing of family separations presented, from the perspective of smugglers, fewer costs and less risk, relative to the movement of individuals. Thus, the prices charged by smugglers to transport individuals across the border increased

significantly. The policy of automatically turning away individuals at the border meant that smugglers needed to find ever more indirect routes across the border and more money to pay off officials and crime groups along the migration route.

Increase in demand for migrant smuggling services following the announcement of enhanced immigration restrictions and border enforcement by the Trump administration illustrates the relationship explored by Triandafyllidou (2018). Daniel's firsthand account of the increased demand for his services upholds the expectation that there will be an increased professionalization of smuggling operations as border restrictions strengthen. Moreover, the pricing differentials between individuals and families perpetuates the status of migrant lives as commodities possessing an economic exchange-value but no overt social or political value. Migrants have no ability to advocate for their own safety or rights throughout their journey and once they arrive in the United States. Daniel professes little regard for the well-being and safety of the migrants that he is transporting. And he is instead more concerned with the monetary gain and logistical tradeoffs that are associated with each strategic business decision. He refers to his smuggling services as "packages" and offhandedly notes that with the cheaper packages, "you're more likely to get robbed by organized criminals, kidnapped, raped, or killed for your organs . . . We don't recommend those routes, but we give people their options" (Kinosian 2019).

While it may be tempting to consider smuggling circuits at the U.S.-Mexico border as operations with the shared goal of transferring commodified migrants from Central America to the United States for a chance at a better life, some migrants have begun to utilize smugglers to return back to their homes in Central America. A Vice article details the recent efflux of migrants from the United States and Mexico back to nations including Honduras and El Salvador (Avelar and Bonello 2020). According to the report, more than 110,000 undocumented migrants (mostly from Central America) were returned to Mexico by the U.S. government between March and July. Many other Central Americans that were unable to pass into the U.S. due to border restrictions from the pandemic were also displaced in Mexico. Additionally, Guatemala instituted stronger border restrictions in response to the pandemic, so

migrants from El Salvador and Honduras were unable to travel home legally. Thus, with limited legitimate methods to pass through Guatemala and return home, many migrants turned to human smugglers to transport them across the border. Similar to the established smuggling operations that transport migrants north, smugglers guiding migrants to the south requested a monetary fee and money to pay for various bribes. Interestingly, a migrant returning to El Salvador revealed that the smugglers who facilitated their journey were not coyotes prior to the pandemic; they were financially impacted by the virus, so they decided to take on a role as a smuggler for the “opportunity to make money” (Avelar and Bonello 2020).

Change in migratory patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique account of the fundamental principles that characterize immigration and the movement of people across borders. The maintenance of the social elements between this migratory event and the conventional immigration patterns from Central America to the U.S. further clarifies the exchange-value of migrants. It is clear that, regardless of the pattern of movement or the destination of a migratory journey, human lives are objectified based on their exchange-value. The introduction of novel smuggling infrastructure as described by Avelar and Bonello, reinforces Triandafyllidou’s argument relating the growing professionalization of smuggling operations with enhanced border control. The increased fortification of the Guatemalan border during the pandemic has necessitated the generation of sophisticated smuggling operations to facilitate the migration of commodified immigrant cargo. Moreover, this report showcases the idea that migrants do not necessarily have a choice in the process of commodification. The motivation for their migration does not vanish when legal entry is discontinued, so their only option to achieve a viable existence is to participate in these objectifying transactions. The reproduction of this distinctive role substantiates the larger idea that the depersonalization and inhumane treatment of migrants is upheld by social and political structures that transcend specific geographic boundaries and nation states.

Immigrants and Use-Value

The consolidation of smuggling enterprises has promoted the commodification of immigrants. The general public is removed from the experiences of immigrants at the borders just as they are removed from the social, political, and economic factors that necessitate their movement. There is a strong emphasis of the exchange-value that is conferred through the handling of immigrant life in smuggling operations, which substantiates only part of Marx's ([1867]1887) classification of a commodity.

David Harvey (2003) investigates the unique ability to concentrate the use-value of laborers through the institution and fortification of borders. The geographic demarcation of borders has historically served to contain and control land and natural resources. Additionally, borders confine laborers by restricting their ability to move. This allows a state to exploit laborers for economic benefit. Harvey discusses this accumulation of wealth and resources through dispossession as a refined extension of Marx's ([1867]1887) idea of primitive accumulation. Marx defines primitive accumulation as "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" ([1867]1887, p. 508). Specifically, Marx discusses how feudal peasants were expropriated from their agricultural land and their exploitable labor force was channeled into capitalist modes of production for the sake of transitioning to an industrialized economy. This initial diversion from subsistence farming paved the way for a wage labor system that has commodified labor potential. The formation of this itinerant wage labor cohort helped to encourage precolonial labor motivated migration movements.

The process of accumulation by dispossession, according to Harvey, has accelerated in contemporary societies. And the resulting exploitable surplus of human labor that is produced has few opportunities to employ their use-value within the predetermined bounds of their native country. These human reserves possess use-value since they satisfy the desire for cheap, exploitable labor by capitalist economies. The excess of labor necessitates immigration to countries that have adequate opportunities for employment, facilitating the entrance of individuals into the migrant-commodity system. This Marxist geopolitical framework establishes the ways in which labor and

resources are restricted by the hegemony of state sovereignty. The privatization of once public resources also characterizes the role of nation states in their capitalist incentivization to generate wealth by securing their borders. Harvey argues that the generation of mobile labor power often leads states to relinquish regulatory frameworks that protect laborers and their rights. The mobilization of labor concentrates human use-value in the regions from which they have been uprooted and serves as motivation for many migrants to relocate in search of more viable employment opportunities.

The narrowing of the role and social mobility of migrants through accumulation by dispossession reinforces the objectification of migrants so that they can be continuously exploited with little push back against the corporations that employ them. The benefit of cheap, exploitable labor for owners of capital stimulates desire to restrict the role of migrant laborers beyond that of the conventional wage laborer.

The historic construction of borders and the formation of a globalized economy has resulted in the free movement of goods and services and the restricted movement of the laborers that produce them (Harvey 2003). This limitation substantiates the unique use-value of immigrants which is transferred from one state to another through the particular process of immigration. Harvey argues that the attenuation of certain regulations to protect labor from degradation has resulted in the loss of human rights. Since displaced groups no longer own the means of production, the only faculty that they maintain ownership of is their own labor-power, and there are only so many ways that this can be maximally employed to make an adequate living. Consequently, these conditions create the 'push-factor' for many immigrants to leave their native countries in search of seasonal or even long-term jobs.

A report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2019) describes how employers utilize threats and coercion to manipulate migrant workers and induce exploitative labor practices. The report is based on interviews from 237 migrant workers in the EU who detailed their experiences in the labor sector. Despite several provisions in laws, a large majority of the interviewees reported being underpaid, not receiving wages on time, and not receiving pay for granted sick leave. Additionally, many respondents reported that they worked more than 48 hours per week (the legal maximum), did not receive appropriate breaks,

and did not receive paid annual leave. Employers also withheld personal documentation, isolated workers, and restricted workers' movements in order to maintain authority of the use-value that these workers provide. According to the report, fifty-nine percent of respondents personally experienced some form of violence or threats from their employer and forty-nine percent stated that they witnessed violence and threats made toward their coworkers (2019, p. 56).

Many of Harvey's arguments regarding the theory of accumulation by dispossession are applicable to contemporary strategies adopted by employers of migrants. It is clear that the migrants' need for work, as a result of accumulation by dispossession, renders them powerless in the face of abusive employers. The owners of the means of production take advantage of the diminished status and desperation of immigrants who cross the border. The leverage employers wield allows them to abuse migrant laborers through threats and violence to fully exploit their labor potential. Within the context of a global economy and with the decline in subsistence farming, migrants can only maximize their use-value through capitalist modes of production. Workers are deprived of basic rights and freedom of movement through immigration policies that restrict migrants within sovereign nation states. These arrangements reduce migrant laborers to a far more precarious status compared to wage laborers in the formal economy, since the former have very little social or political leverage.

Conclusion

The dehumanizing treatment and conceptualization of immigrants has been perpetuated by their treatment as commodities. Migrants fulfill Marx's ([1867]1887) definition of commodities by possessing both exchange-value and use-value. Immigrants are objectified as they are transported across borders by human-smugglers and granted the status of illicit trade articles. Triandafyllidou (2018) indicated how migrant life has been traditionally objectified by investing migrants with exchange-value. In addition to possessing exchange-value, migrants possess a use-value through their position as wage laborers. David Harvey's (2003) analysis of modern accumulation by dispossession clarifies how the creation of exploitable pools of labor lays the foundation for the migrant

-commodity system. His arguments directly indicate how the value embodied by a labor force is inherently dehumanized and how this exploitable labor force further serves to commodify the immigrant.

Commodification through human smuggling and labor exploitation appears to reflect the way in which immigrants are treated by smugglers, border control, the government, and the general public. One can more effectively understand the plight of migrants by considering the role of these broader capitalist dynamics.

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"Cringe" Content in a Society of Control

Caroline Brody

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Michel Foucault describes a society in which people spend their lives moving between enclosures, spaces in which their minds and bodies are closely observed and trained to produce individuals who come to govern themselves and act as their own observers. Foucault identifies the strict methods employed in the schools, hospitals, prisons, military barracks and other institutional settings of the 19th and early 20th centuries. To most contemporary observers, the system of discipline Foucault describes may seem rather unfamiliar. As Gilles Deleuze outlines in his essay, "Postscript on Control Societies" (1992), disciplinary enclosures have become increasingly replaced by new configurations characterized by openness and freedom of movement and power operates more often through the promise of unlimited opportunities than through the threat of constraint. Discipline, according to Deleuze, is giving way to a new system he refers to as "control." For Foucault, the panopticon was the exemplar of disciplinary power. Deleuze cites a number of phenomena to illustrate the logic of control: outpatient clinics, digital code, and floating exchange rates, among others. In the following essay, I explore "cringe content" as a cultural expression of control.

The term "cringe" is broadly used to define content that features a subject engaged in behavior that induces second-hand embarrassment in the viewer, making them "cringe" with discomfort (Jennings 2020; Williams 2021). Cringe is a wide category and some of the content circulated as cringe is posted with the consent of the subject and often by the subject themselves (Jennings 2020). However, other times, cringe content is posted without the knowledge of the subject, uploaded to the internet by observers who decide to record an unusual or embarrassing behavior they encounter. Discretely captured by simple cell phone cameras, videos of people in public behaving in deviant ways have proliferated online. These videos reflect Deleuze's society of control in their role in managing behavior deemed unacceptable, as well as their place within a larger system driven by the demand for data collection and surveillance.

In "Control Societies" essay (1992), Gilles Deleuze describes how modern technologies have altered the disciplinary societies that once existed. Gone are the days of the total institution, with regimens and routines that regulate and mold the activities of individuals. Instead, society has taken on a new form, a society of control. Deleuze observes this change in the reforms brought to institutions previously disciplinary in nature. Instead of a single factory, there is the corporation, an amorphous conglomeration of departments and divisions. Salaries are supposedly based on merit and employees must compete with one another and pursue constant improvement in order to prove their worth. While moving from the factory to the office at first seems to confer more freedom to individuals, this brings the new constraints of an institution with limitless boundaries. Deleuze describes the modern corporation as "a spirit, a gas," and views it as just one way in which a society of control is emerging from a society of discipline (1992, p. 4). As these previously disciplinary institutions continue their spread, they also increase in their seeming omnipresence. The prison is not only localized to the building but exists in probation, house arrest, and ankle bracelets; the hospital expands into clinics, treatment centers, and group homes. Deleuze describes this new system in terms of "modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other" (1992, p. 4). Flexibility and adaptability are baked into the very structure of the systems, allowing individuals to escape the confinement brought by disciplinary society and embrace a new kind of freedom.

In fact, it is the freedom of the individual that societies of control encourage. Writing before the invention of the smartphone, Deleuze views computers as the society of control's greatest instrument. Today, computers in their various forms grant people the ability to work, shop, communicate, and consume media from almost anywhere and anytime. Access to vast amounts of information is not only possible but encouraged. Individuals are bombarded with small pieces of information, flowing through the massive superhighway that is the internet. In many ways this flow of information is the lifeblood of societies of control.

As a sprawling web of networks and systems, the institution is not confined to a location. Instead, it requires that people take advantage of

the free movements technology affords and compels them to move through it. Deleuze describes it almost as a series of checkpoints, at which information and data are recorded periodically. The more freedom individuals enjoy and the more information they consume, the more they interact with a society of control. While markedly different from a disciplinary society, a society of control still manages to accomplish much of the same goal: the production of people who largely govern themselves. This is done not through direct supervision but a much wider system of information, surveillance, and mobility.

Because the society of control thrives on mobility, both physical and virtual, new ways of sharing information have emerged. Social media provides channels through which bite-sized nuggets of popular culture are dispersed en masse. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube are just some of the platforms on which information can be widely and easily shared by anyone for the consumption of others. The sharing of information is encouraged, both for the simple social benefit online interaction offers, as well as the status that a larger online presence confers (Turkle 2011). In this digital culture, information about the self and others has become a form of currency (Turkle 2011). What is exchanged is not only confessional blog posts, vlogs, and Instagram captions but also in smaller, more shareable forms such as memes.

Not only can people use technology to share personal content, but technology also makes the gathering of such information significantly easier. The ubiquity of a cell phone camera means that most can take a picture of anything and anyone, holding the potential to create infinite content. The constant presence of a camera in all aspects of life, however, means that at any given time a person may be captured by one. This potential is eerily evocative of Foucault's panopticon (in which people are aware of potential surveillance by an authority but have no knowledge of when exactly they are being watched) with notable differences. Instead of the real and clear control exerted by the panopticon, the cell phone camera imposes a very mild form of surveillance. It is not carried out by a higher authority, or even by a person who necessarily intends to surveil. The absence of a clear authority is replaced by the amorphous authority of the network as a whole, largely carried out through people similar in power and status to oneself.

Cringe content of people recorded without their consent necessarily focuses on those engaged in deviant behavior. While a society of discipline may directly punish this deviant behavior, a society of control has the potential to immortalize such acts on the most popular online platforms. Instead of punishment coming directly from above, such as the police officer or prison guard, it comes from the vague collective that is the internet.

One such incident occurred in September of 2018 when a video of a middle-aged man shaving his face aboard a New Jersey train spread rapidly throughout the internet (Thebault, 2018). First shared to Twitter and viewed millions of times, the video sparked outrage among thousands, many of whom voiced their disgust (Thebault 2018). The man's behavior was met with swift condemnation, a chorus of disgust in the form of likes, comments, and retweets. In mere hours, the norms of public transportation were reinforced without the actions of any powerful figure from above. Later it came to light that the man, identified now as Anthony Torres, had been homeless for many years and had no other place to shave (Thebault 2018). This new information made the rounds in a similar fashion as the video that preceded it, provoking a nearly identical level of consensus in the opposite direction. Now, it was those who had mocked the man that were the target of the collective's ire (Thebault 2018).

Examples of deviant behavior captured and uploaded to the internet are plentiful. One only has to search the term "cringe compilation" to find videos that combine some of the most embarrassing or otherwise outrageous moments, recorded almost entirely on phones. These videos are so numerous and so readily consumed that specific subcategories have emerged. Topics include awkward middle and high school students, irate customers, and overzealous campus activists (CringeReport 2020; Cringe Station 2018; HexSquad 2018). On YouTube, entire channels are dedicated to "social justice warriors," a pejorative term for someone who holds progressive views (Stack 2017). Cringe content featuring "social justice warriors" (regularly abbreviated to "SJW") features college students, protestors, and activists whose left-leaning politics and sensitivity to offense is framed as extreme (Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2021). This particular genre of cringe began in 2014 and was

most popular from 2016 to 2017, with Google search trends showing YouTube searches for “SJW” and “SJW cringe” peaking at this time (Google 2021; Lewis et al. 2021). The most famous videos of this category garnered millions of views and thus millions of eyes on their subjects. One video, uploaded in April of 2016, showed a University of Massachusetts student enraged by the words of Milo Yiannopoulos (Campus Reform 2016; Singal 2016). Yiannopoulos, a conservative media figure known for his ability to generate controversy, was at the university on a speaking tour (Singal 2016). One of many protesters at the event, the student featured in the video interrupted speakers and yelled “get your hate speech out of this campus!” and “rape apologist!” at Yiannopoulos (Campus Reform 2016). A person nearby recorded her and the video went viral after being posted by the right-wing group Campus Reform (Campus Reform 2016). The video’s subject experienced a massive wave of online harassment, mocked for her weight, appearance, and emotional state (Campus Reform 2016; Singal 2016). Some were able to track down an online dating profile, increasing the harassment further (Singal 2016). Another subject of a popular “SJW” cringe video was Chanty Binx, a feminist whose confrontation with a group of men’s rights activists went viral in 2013 (18Upper 2013). Binx received rape and death threats, forcing her to lay low for years (Mulligan 2016). Even several years after the video was first posted, Binx still feared for her safety, saying “no matter what I do, I’m under a monitor” (Mulligan 2016).

As the above examples demonstrate, the most tangible consequences faced by the subjects of cringe videos are varying degrees of online harassment, which can range from hateful comments to death threats that must be addressed by law enforcement (Vogels 2021). While some might imagine online harassment to be less severe than in-person harassment, its effects are very real, and can result in anxiety, depression, and genuine physical danger (Duggan 2014). There are people like Cynthia Binx, who must avoid the public eye for long stretches of time, and others whose reputations and psychological well-being suffer long-term damage (Duggan 2014).

One reason cringe videos are so powerful is because they are exponential in nature. The more popular the content becomes, the more copies of it are created and the more quickly it spreads, moving from one corner of the internet to the other and gaining speed and mass with

every share. They are also often amplified by networks composed of people who react to cringe content, furthering the reach of the videos beyond the original post (Lewis et al. 2021). Not only do the videos rapidly establish themselves online, but they also do so within the identities of the sharers. They seem to serve a function that not only shames those who have somehow violated a norm but also helps contribute to the viewer's self-perception. By uploading a video, or even reposting or liking it, an individual distances themselves from the behavior depicted. It is a way for a person to both condemn as well as internalize what is appropriate and what is not. In some ways, the sharing of a video also provides a kind of vicarious experience; the viewer can imagine or place themselves in the shoes of the transgressor while affirming their position as a person who would never do such a thing.

In consuming this kind of content, people can also assume the privileged position of an observer. While it might be considered rude to stare at public displays of deviant behavior, an image of it shared on a phone gives the viewer no such constraints. The person cannot respond to them and cannot stare back at them. The viewer holds the power of watching someone who does not know they are being watched. While sometimes malicious, the covert filming of others is not always done with bad intentions. A person may not even be thinking about the individual they are capturing, only about the content that they might obtain. Both the person who films and first posts the video, as well as subsequent sharers and viewers, may not imagine themselves as surveillants. Instead, they are simply taking advantage of a situation that presents possible entertainment value. The person is reduced to the content they generate.

A key aspect of societies of control is an image of freedom; people are encouraged to move about freely, both literally and digitally, without the impression that they are being observed. The person viewing the video may do so easily because they are placed in an elevated position from which they can exercise complete judgment and scrutiny without fear of any reciprocation from the person whom they watch. Deleuze, however, emphasizes the sprawling nature of societies of control. It is constantly weaving its way into more and more aspects of life (Deleuze 1992). The old distinction between the observer and the

observed, the surveillant and the surveilled no longer holds. Instead, everyone exists within the nebulous system of information and data collection. As the old institutions morph, into new physical and digital forms, the primacy of data skyrockets. So much is gathered that the field of professionals trained specifically to analyze it struggles to meet the demand (Kim 2016). Even while a person shares a video, the algorithm of the social media platform they use recalibrates to better target advertisements toward them. Their information is noted and sold to companies to use for their own purposes. No one is the observed or the observer, instead, everyone is always both.

This can be seen as part of a larger process of “dividuation,” a term Deleuze (1992, p. 7) uses to describe the breaking down of a person beyond the unit of their individuality into even smaller components. People become data points, scattered about the internet with little control over how this data may be used. Mimicking the way a prisoner is dehumanized and reduced to a number in Foucault’s panopticon, a person’s individuality is broken up and reduced to the digital footprint they leave behind.

Within the context of Deleuze’s society of control, these videos function as one more way in which the control previously held in the confines of the institution is becoming diffused across all aspects of life. The videos and the people captured in them are simply a byproduct of this broader phenomenon, an expected result of what happens when information sharing is equated with social capital, data becomes supreme, and the very concept of the individual is eroded. The purpose they serve in allowing people to identify and shame others for deviant behavior is secondary to their purpose as fodder for a system that requires a steady diet of data to survive.

Ultimately, the recording, viewing, and sharing of individuals without their permission is a perfect representation of the multiple levels on which societies of control function. It bears both the more conspicuous consequences of violations of privacy and the public shaming that can result from them, as well as the two-fold benefits societies of control gain from such behavior. Not only does this mild but ever-present threat of surveillance incentivize most to adhere to prevailing norms, but it also encourages social media use and perpetuates the continual consumption and production of information that is necessary for the system’s survival.

Deleuze believes that the growth of societies of control and the growth of technology are inextricably linked, such that as the fusion of technology and daily life continues, so will the affects that accompany such innovations. However, societies of control are constantly changing. The very same influences that can be seen at the root of the cringe content phenomenon—the value and need for data, online platforms which encourage the sharing of said data in exchange for social capital and the “dividuation” of the individual—are bound to reemerge in new ways. As Deleuze writes, “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (1992, p. 4). What the new weapons of future societies of control will be are uncertain, but through his framework, it is clear that today’s online culture is being quietly wielded by these large, ever-changing networks.

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