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The culture of child labor as a current expression of neo-colonialism

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Abstract

This article discusses how the persistence of child labor, especially in Brazil and the United States of America, constitutes a current facet of neo-colonialism. Cultivated as an educational and dignifying activity, exploited child labor persists and is naturalized. Schools, religions, and the legislation contribute to making the working class come to love and naturalize what in the past was understood as torture and punishment, thus jointly acting as a fundamental means of forming a new cultural form: the love of work. Initially, the article discusses how the culture of work is historically founded and then argues against the idealist and postmodern explanations that naturalize it. The argument is based on the understanding that culture has a material basis and is linked to the production and social reproduction of life. Data from the empirical research on child labor in tobacco farming in Brazil and the USA reveal the persistence of the problem among Latino children and families. We conclude with the need to found a new culture for contemporary society, based on other social and economic relations, which allows the working class to free itself from what dominates and exploits it.

Keywords: child labor, tobacco farming, culture, education, neo-colonialism

A kid's work is not enough, but whoever wastes it is crazy people"¹



Figure 1: Children's hands working in smoke, Human Rights Watch File, (Conde, 2020)

We started this article with the proverb and the image above, both from research we conducted in Brazil and the United States of America on child labor, which highlights two important aspects that this article addresses: (1) The persistence and indispensability of child labor culture (understood as educational help) for working class family reproduction and the capitalist system; (2) The harmful effects of this activity on the health and education of working children. Even in the face of this finding, the liberal individualist and meritocratic narrative has ignored the effects on the health and schooling of poor and migrant children and defended the culture of work as something ennobling, educational, and forging character, capable of teaching children how to work from an early age, contributing to their training and education in the future.

During our research on the subject in Brazil, Portugal, and the USA carried out since 2007 (Conde, 2016; 2020; Conde; Vendramini, 2014; Conde; Hermida, 2021; Silva, 2020), we observed many immigrants, family members and political personalities stating that the culture of work is part of the cultural customs of families living in rural areas: "This is part of the family culture"; "working is better than stealing and being lazy"; "it is necessary to learn how to work from an early age to be a good worker in the future." However, from the studies of Vygotsky (2002), the philosophy of praxis (Marx, 1989), and the Transformative Activist Stance (Stetsenko, 2017), we understand that the most important task of science is not only to understand human life but to transform it. In this sense, a transformative education cannot discard the past, present, and future dialectic. Understanding work, its contradictions, and actual effects on health, and how the culture of work is constituted is an essential part of a project of social transformation and change. According to Paul Lafargue (2003), the working class made a historic mistake by incorporating the bourgeois logic to claim the right to more work. In fact, it is about

¹ Brazilian proverb commonly found in the speeches of family farmers in Santa Catarina. In the survey we conducted in Portugal on child labor between 2009 and 2010, we found the Portuguese version: "trabalho de miúdo é pouco, mas quem abre mão é louco" (Conde, 2016).

fighting for the right not to work, free time, a rich table, art, science, literature, and laziness.

In this direction, the article discusses how the persistence of child labor, especially in Brazil and the United States of America, constitutes a current facet of neo-colonialism. For N’Krumah (1967), neo-colonialism configures the last stage of imperialism. It combines concentrated financial capital with disguised methods that operate in the political, religious, ideological, and cultural spheres, as we demonstrate with the apology of the culture of work as something that it ennobles and edifies (for capital). Many colonized countries, which fought for the independence of the European metropolis, ended up trapped in the financial control of North American capital, having their States indebted for the “aid” granted in favor of colonial “independence.”

For the author, the United States consolidated itself as a neo-colonialist country after the Second World War. With the apparent strong motto of freedom supported by military power, Yankee neocolonialism expanded its suffocating tentacles over Latin America and Africa, subjected to Wall Street’s invisible “wolves.” The advance of the cultural industry, with a strong ideology embodied in values and aesthetics that favor North American versions, standards, and heroes, together with the advancement of evangelical religious sects, have become powerful resources to stifle the possibilities of criticism and protest in colonized countries.

The school, legislation, and religion, making the working class come to love and naturalize what in the past was understood as torture and punishment, acted as fundamental means of forming a new cultural form: the love of work. The text brings together data resulting from a) our research on child labor and the schooling of working children in Santa Catarina, Brazil (conducted with the Nucleus of Studies on Transformations in the World of Work); b) research data developed during the post-doctorate at the City University of New York in 2020 (at Graduate Center with Anna Stetsenko supervision); c) analysis of *Human Rights Watch* files and reports on child labor in the US and Brazil; d) review of the literature on work, nature, learning, culture and human development.

Suppose in Brazil (particularly in the southern states) there is a predominance of family agricultural child labor (where child educational assistance and labor exploitation are confused) In the United States of America, the work of Latin American migrant children predominates; most of them are children of undocumented Latino workers and, therefore, available for the lowest wages and worst working conditions. Also, we highlight that, while in Brazil, child labor in the fields is prohibited before the age of 18, in the United States, children can work in the fields accompanying their families, as long as this is agreed between employers and the legal guardian for the child, there being not any labor legislation that protects children and workers in rural areas. In both countries, we see how the problem of child labor persists for poor and Latino children whose families, residing or not in major countries, come from colonized nations located in the Global South.

For Olivera (2003), the work of Latino children is not a sign of backwardness, but is part of an accelerated process of development, an atrocious form of modernization:

“In fact, the real process shows a symbiosis and organicity, a unity of opposites, in which the so-called “modern” grows and feeds on the existence of the “backward” [...]. Such a

postulation forgets that underdevelopment is precisely a product of the expansion of capitalism [...]. The emphasis on the dependence of underdevelopment on the developed, fails to address the internal aspects of the structure of domination. The problem becomes like an opposition between nations, forgetting that the problem of development is related to the opposition between internal social classes [...]. Attention is diverted from the class struggle (Oliveira, 2003, p. 32-34).

The emphasis on the opposition between nations and (more or less) evolved cultures is fundamental for the concealment of the class struggle between workers and bourgeoisie. Thus, the poverty is explained by lagging cultural behaviors that, if educated, could progress and become better in the future.

While American farmers champion early work as a cultural and educational enhancement to the education of poor and migrant children, our research locates the persistence of the problem in an economic issue for working-class families and the capitalist system. While Brazilian smallholder families believe in the educational power of work for their children, migrant families in the US do not. For Latin migrant families, the children are working, because they need it economically. For the American white middle class, early work is good for the betterment and education of the poor: “We are making a great opportunity for migrants! If they work hard, they can be great people like us!” During our research, while we found migrants working, American children and teenagers played with toys, a ball and a motorcycle. Therefore, the educational effects of the labor function as a hypocritical speech for foreigners and not for Americans.

The article is organized into four different and connected parts. First, we historically approach how legislation, school, and religion operate by fostering a work culture as ennobling so that the working class learns to work and has an aversion to laziness and vagrancy. Next, we present the conception of culture and education from dialectical historical materialism. Then we report the data from our research on child labor in Brazil and the United States. Finally, we defend the persistence of child labor as an expression of neo-colonialism and the urgency of a radical and daring Transformative Activist Stance (Stetsenko, 2016; 2017; 2019) in education and culture with a view to human social emancipation.

The Problem of Child Labor in Brazil

Although child labor in Brazil is prohibited for children under 16 years old (except as apprentices, between 14 and 16 years old), and there are social programs aimed at eradicating the problem (PETI, Bolsa Família, Auxílio Brasil, Escola em Tempo Integral, etc.), about 1.8 million (5% of the population in the age group) of children and adolescents work in the country (National Forum On The Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor in Brazil, 2016). If between 2004 and 2014, there was a reduction of around 81% in the number of working children and adolescents in Brazil, current estimates affirm the resumption of growth in the problem.

The advance of the economic and political crisis in the country, as well as the reductions in investments and resources destined for the social and educational areas, combined with the increase in poverty, social inequality, and absenteeism from school during the COVID-19

Pandemic, increased the number of working children. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization (Unicef, 2022), child labor in Brazil grew by about 26% between 2020/21. In line with this problem, there is an increase in school dropout cases, child and female violence, hunger, unemployment, and loss of purchasing power. Thus, scenes of children working in the streets and begging became commonplace in Brazilian cities.

According to our research, child labor in Brazil occurs predominantly in agriculture, livestock, and forestry, followed by commerce, general services, civil construction, and domestic work, in which girls' work is more evident. The number of children who work also increases with advancing age, and around nine years of age, the time dedicated to working increases, and the time spent studying decreases until a portion stops studying to only work (Conde, 2014; 2016). Between 15 and 17 years old, there is the most significant "slice" of early workers. Also noteworthy is that 60% are black or brown, and 80% attend school, which shows that the school cannot eradicate child labor. The overwhelming majority of working children belong to families with an income of up to two minimum wages; that is, the problem of exploitation of child labor has a class focus, both in its origin and today (Conde & Silva, 2020).

The Child Labor Problem in the US and the Migration Issue

According to a recent report published by McKinsey & Co (2022), the US is the second most prosperous country in the world, with a sophisticated economy, cutting-edge technology, and considerable investment in space research. According to Giroux (2016), the country has enough money to provide quality education for every student, and the problem is not the lack of resources, but the destination given to the available resources: *"The United States spends around \$960 billion on its wars and defense-related projects. In fact, the cost of war over a ten-year period "will run at least \$3.7 trillion and could reach as high as \$4.4 trillion" (p. 11).*

However, according to *Human Rights Watch* (2015), about 300,000 to 400,000 children under 18 are working in the United States. Most of them are immigrants residing in the countryside, where it is common to find children working without protection during scorching summers, weekends, or after school.

Teachers report daily the effect of early work on the bodies and minds of working students: cut hands, tiredness, nausea, heatstroke, sunburn, drowsiness, and fatigue. In the same direction as our research found in Brazil (Conde, 2016), parents (generally from Mexico in the case of migrants in the US) take their children to work because they need the remuneration from child labor to buy essential consumer goods familiar and not because they believe that working is something excellent and educational from an early age, as affirmed by the idea of work culture as something that dignifies and ennobles. The migrant families (all Mexican) with whom we spoke during the fieldwork in Kinston (North Carolina) recognize that work steals from and competes with their children's childhood and adolescence. However, families need money to survive, and US laws allow children to work as long as their parents authorize it.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture and Economic Research Service (USDA, 2021), 73% of US agricultural workers were born outside the United States. According to *Human Rights Watch* reports (2010, 2012, 2014, 2015), most are Latinos. In 2019, 258,000 migrant workers gained a temporary work permit (H-2A Visa), i.e., less than 4% of the total number of migrant workers in the country. If rural employers lose their foreign workers, North American agriculture will lose about 30 to 60 billion dollars annually (USDA, 2021). Such data reveal how the cheap work (Marx, 2013) of the illegal migrant has become increasingly essential to the capitalist accumulation mode.

During our field research in North American rural properties, we confirmed that many schools, public services, restaurants, bars, coffee shops, universities, and stores were closed during the intense lockdown of the Pandemic caused by Covid-19 in 2020; immigrants continued to work in the field. They were not entitled to paid quarantine because food production in the countryside is essential to supply all city dwellers.

Activists and migrants we interviewed highlighted the vulnerability of migrant children without schools during the Pandemic when rural worker parents could not stop working. Rural migrant workers made up one of the groups with the most cases of deaths from COVID-19 in the USA.²

The economic meaning of the labor culture from Dialectical Historical Materialism

The academic debate involving the issue of culture is always between materialist and idealist polemics that seek to explain it from the correlation between human nature and society, a classic problem for philosophy, psychology, and human sciences, among which include studies in the area of Education. While for idealists (sometimes elitists and members of the ruling class), culture is a natural feature present from birth, and reality reflects thought, structuralists reduce culture to a simple examination of the worldly life in which people work and live. Both approaches are insufficient for the materialist dialectic (Marx, 1989), which understands culture and subjectivity from praxis and practical human activity in the world, making it impossible to separate objectivity and subjectivity, material and immaterial, mind and body, culture, and human needs/social class.

If culture is characterized by customs, manners, human traditions, and social characteristics such as language, dance, food, clothing, and rituals, we understand that no human being is without culture. As Williams (1958; 1980) states, culture belongs to everyone and composes of human social nature (Vigotski, 2002). In this sense, the relationship between human nature and culture appears in history as intertwined, connected, and dialectical. If culture can be understood as what we do not inherit genetically and naturally, education between different generations is mainly responsible

² According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (2020), between March and November 2020, Latino people form the group with the most deaths from COVID-19, and the Black population makes up the second group in the USA. These data reflect the significant presence of non-white people in low-paid jobs, living in precarious conditions and without the right to paid quarantine, thus connecting the relations between social class and race.

for mediating younger generations' appropriation of culture, traditions, values, and customs.

From this same general understanding, theories critical of the colonial and elitist perspective of culture defend that each group needs to be considered in its own circumstance/context and that there is no human being without culture. In this sense, Thompson (1981) understands that popular culture is always rebellious and resistant to the capitalist system's expansive, imperialist, and colonial logic.

The colonialist system, the basis of the primitive accumulation of capital, exploited and expropriated Indigenous and Black people in overseas colonies. One of the justifications used for colonial violence was laziness, morality, lack of education, discipline, and culture of the people of the colonies who resisted and expressed in rites, customs, costumes, and religious ways of being, living, working contrary to the slave and/or exploited labor necessary for the expansion of the nascent bourgeoisie. From resistance to forced labor, the justification of violence, genocide, war, slavery, and annihilation of the colonial period was created. The culture was understood as restricted to refined habits and customs acquired through education only the bourgeoisie and the elites had access to.

Marx and Engels (1989) understood the culture, thought, subjectivity, and history at the center of the conception of human work activity. In the same direction, Vigotski's studies (2002) show human emergence with the appearance of language and the tools produced and producing changes in the human psyche. Culture, phylogenesis, and ontogenesis form a single, incessant, and non-fragmented complex. When human beings change the world through their activities, they transform themselves through contact with historical artifacts, tools, and practices from previous generations. Although peasants and traditional communities appear in elitist approaches as beings without culture, they are human beings without access to schooling but with customs, traditions, habits, values, rituals, languages, arts, and forms of education that differ from the one emerging with the bourgeois society.

The racist and conservative idea of culture is the most famous explanation for poverty among migrants, Black people, peasants, and workers. This elitist idea justifies the apologetic discourse of work as a builder of virtues, discipline, character, and wealth. According to Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), this limited vision, which stereotypes and labels social processes, disconnecting them from economic structures, forms the basis of racist and colonial ideologies that intend to justify and preserve social, educational, and economic inequalities among the wealthy and poor populations, between countries in the global north and south.

Education for the Culture of Work: Legislation, School, and Religion

"(...) master the ferocity of children's unsubdued passions; repress the excessive rudeness of their customs; punish the unpleasant and demoralizing obscenity of their language; control the persistent

rebelliousness of their desires; make them honest, obedient, cordial, diligent, submissive, and methodical³

“He starts his morning course

He never tires, nor stops to rest (...)

Like the sun, should I do my duties this day Start my work incredibly early and serenely

Continue on my sacred path⁴”

The culture of work and the apologetic discourse that qualifies it as an ennobling and edifying activity for human beings is intertwined with the history of capitalism itself when it was necessary to convert both European peasants and Indigenous and Africans from overseas lands into productive workers.

This conversion was neither quick nor simple. It took centuries for the activity that represented torture and punishment to be transformed into something dignifying and ennobling human nature. In the etymological origin of the word work, we find the instrument of torture, *tripalium*, that the Romans used to punish defendants and convicts. In it, the tortured was tied and whipped. Over time, the term ended up being associated with an instrument of agriculture, fatigue and suffering linked to the painful and manual activities slaves were forced to perform (Veschi, 2022).⁵

The transformation of the understanding of painful and tiring activity into something dignified and educational was a heroic task conducted by the rising bourgeoisie during the late Middle Ages and early Modern Age. Dependence on the exploitation of labor and raw materials from the colonies requires more sophisticated control measures and education for work culture. Thus, the nascent capitalist mode of production undertakes a real persecution of vagrancy and every form of existence and culture that resists the logic of salaried, exploited, and productive work. Such an enterprise occurs in the main European cities with dispossessed peasants from the rural enclosures of the late medieval period and in colonies overseas through slavery and genocide of Indigenous and African peoples. Repression, violence, school education, religion, and punitive legislation were applied to vagabonds and people averse to exploited or enslaved work through severe corporal punishment that sometimes culminated in deaths and moral defamation of those who resisted the logic and the emerging social form. Children were seen as uncontrollable and unsubmitive; women like witches, hysterical and crazy; Indigenous and Africans as savages and without culture; the impoverished working class as a braggart and undisciplined.

According to Marx (2013), the starting point of capitalist accumulation (the so-called primitive accumulation) is commonly presented as a result of the discipline and individual effort of a hardworking elite that accumulated wealth by saving and working so much.

³ Thompson (2002b, p. 291) refers to the education of the working class offered in schools and churches in England during the Industrial Revolution

⁴ Ditto note 2

⁵ <https://etimologia.com.br/trabalho/> Accessed on November 4, 2022.

Then appears the idea of an original economic sin committed by the poor and vagabonds. In the author's words:

“Adam bit the apple, and sin descended upon the human race. Its origin is explained to us with an anecdote from the past. In a very remote time, there was, on the one hand, an industrious, intelligent, and above all parsimonious elite, and, on the other, a swarm of loafers squandering everything they had and even more. Indeed, the theological legend of original sin tells us how man was condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but the story of original economic sin reveals to us how there can be people who have no need for it. Whatever. So it happened that the former accumulated riches, and the latter ended up with nothing to sell except themselves and the wealth of the few, which grows continuously, although they have long since stopped working... In actual history, as is known, the leading role is played by conquest, subjugation, murder to steal, in short, violence” (p. 785 - 786)

In the passage above, Marx highlights the bourgeois ideological fallacy of work as the source of wealth. The bourgeoisie did not poorly sleep one day, wake up rich the next, and did not even wake up incredibly early to work and save every penny through an economic life. The emergence of the new society takes place along with the western/colonial/white/male violence that constitutes the “midwife of the new society,” subjugating Black people, Indigenous people, women, and peasants to the logic of both exploited labors, in European metropolises, and the concomitant slave labor, in overseas colonies.

In 1696, the liberal John Bellers stated, “If anyone had 100,000 acres of land, and an equal number of pounds in money and cattle, what would that rich person be without the worker, if not a worker? (...) The work of the poor is the mine of the rich (apud Marx, 2013, p. 691).” Also, Mandeville (2022), in *The Fable of the Bees*, emphasized:

“Wherever property is sufficiently protected, it would be easier to live without money than without the poor, for (otherwise) who would do the work? (...) Just as one must not see that workers do not starve to death, so one must not give them anything worth sparing (...), it cannot be denied that the wisest plan for every private person, for every family in society, is to be frugal. Still, it is in the interest of all wealthy nations that the more significant part of the poor should never be inactive and yet continually spend what they earn (...) in a free nation, where enslaved people are not allowed, the safest wealth is in a multitude of laboring poor. In addition to constituting an inexhaustible source of men for the navy and the army, without them, there would be no satisfaction, and no product of any country would be valuable. For society (which is naturally made up of workers) to be happy and satisfy the people even under the most adverse conditions, it is necessary that the majority remain as ignorant as they are poor. Knowledge expands and multiplies our wants; the less a man wants, the more quickly his needs can be satisfied.”

Only in a society in which owners of the means of production confront each other on the one hand, and the other, workers who are free and stripped of any property (obliged, therefore, to work to survive) is wage-earning and exploited work able to establish itself as necessary and, therefore, needs to be naturalized as a cultural practice through education. The history of peasant expropriation and original colonial slavery, although it assumed

different shades in different countries, “was inscribed in blood and fire in the annals of humanity” (Marx, 2013, p. 837). These methods, far from idyllic, combined the violent use of the whip and legislation with the bible and the school to discipline the exploited and enslaved – peoples without culture to be taught.

Thompson (2002b) reports how children were educated by religion and school to accept their status as salaried workers. The appeal to the moralizing and edifying dimension of work affects the formation of the human being, who grows, in addition to being atrophied by the repetitive and alienated movement of industrial work, naturalizing the very condition of being exploited, incorporating a culture of work. In this sense, Mézaros (2006) states that no system reproduces itself without its own forms of internalization of social conduct. Thus, education (school, religion, family) appears as a mediator of the incorporation of social values, customs, and ways of being, doing, and thinking necessary for the system.

Getting a mass of workers to be exploited differs from getting workers with the skills, submission, discipline, and qualifications necessary for such exploitation. Thompson (2002b) warns about the importance of social coercion, the transformative power of the cross, and the school to combat the laziness and insubordination of the working class at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. For the author, what we call culture today encompasses what we called manners and customs in the past. The manners and customs of the plebs needed to be adapted to the intention of the capital, refunding a new human nature.

According to Figueira (2002), individuals need to know that they cannot exist in any way but in a socially determined way. In this way, education and culture are not more or less valuable appendices but rather visceral aspects of current social relations. Therefore, the learning process fundamentally means living and surviving in a given social relationship.

Free men, created by the process Marx called “Primitive Accumulation,” were not absorbed by manufacturing with the same speed with which they were torn from their lands. First, they became masses of robbers, beggars, and vagabonds, generating, between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 18th century, bloodthirsty legislation against vagrancy. In 1530, Henry VIII declared:

Old and unfit beggars are given a license to beg. In contradistinction, whipping and imprisonment for valid vagabonds. They must be tied behind a cart and whipped until the blood runs from their body, then they must take an oath to return to their homeland or the place where they have lived for the last three years and “get down to work” [...] Whoever gets caught a second time for vagrancy shall be whipped again and have half of his ear cut off; in the third recurrence, however, the person affected, as a severe criminal and enemy of the community, must be executed (Marx, 2013, p. 265).

The citation illustrates how peasants, expelled from their lands by the enclosure process to raise sheep (intended for the production of wool for the incipient manufacture of English fabrics), were framed by laws and disciplines necessary for the generalization of the salaried work system. This process was fundamental for developing a class of workers

who, through “education, tradition, custom, recognize the demands of the nascent mode of production as natural and evident” (Marx, 2013, p. 267).

The large emerging factory faced problems with the lack of discipline, submission, Methodism, attention, scruples, and obedience of employees. The main difficulty of the factory system was “to enable human beings to renounce their undisciplined habits at work [...]” Soon, it was necessary to create a successful form of discipline in the factories, as it was “practically impossible to convert workers from agricultural occupations into useful workers after puberty.” (Thompson, 2002b, p.237).

In the same direction as Thompson’s thought (2002b), Manacorda (2006) reflects on the interweaving between the birth of the school for the working class and the transformations in the mode of production of existence:

Factory and school are born together: The laws that create State schools come together with the laws that suppress corporate learning (and the Jesuit order). Philosophers and enlightened sovereigns had nothing new about their own brains. They were just the interpreters and executors of this changing reality (Manacorda, 2006, P. 249).

From the factory legislation, schools become necessary for teaching generalities to working-class children, in addition to acting in favor of discipline and aversion to laziness. As the focus of capitalist social relations is the production of capital and not the humanization of the social being, the advantages of collective work and technological advances are not used to constitute a culture that values the virtues of study, play, art, music, and laziness.

Child Labor in Brazilian Tobacco Farming

Brazil is the largest producer of tobacco in the world, and Brazilian tobacco is recognized for its superior quality. Only 15% of production is destined for domestic consumption, and the remaining 85% is exported, mainly to Europe. Work in tobacco farming generally takes place on small family farms. It is characterized by exhausting hours during the harvest period, technical control of the quality and quantity of production (by the company that purchases the product), and constant contact with pesticides and nicotine absorbed by the skin. Direct contact with tobacco leaves causes a disease called “green tobacco sickness.” Hiring the workforce is the most expensive part of production; therefore, capitalist business management opts for integrated production. Large families are the industry’s favorite targets. The contractual negotiation is conducted between adults. Still, the work is conducted within the family environment, and, therefore, many production rules follow what is agreed upon in the private sphere, such as, for example, the submission of the youngest (generally children, adolescents, and young people) to the elderly. When harvesting the tobacco plant, the worker must collect the leaves, trim them, and hang them in the greenhouses to dry, separate, and roll up the shackle. In the greenhouse, it is necessary to control the leaves’ temperature and humidity strictly to guarantee the product’s quality. Families work in the morning, afternoon, and even during

the night. If the tobacco company decided to hire workers paid by the workday, following the legal labor provisions, the cost of production would be extremely high. The worker (or his family) has to reach the quotas with the quality determined by the company. When pressed concerning the constant denunciations of exploitation of child labor, tobacco companies claim that the problem of child labor is cultural in the countryside and must be solved in the particularity of each family.

According to Francisco de Oliveira (2003), the exploitation of child labor reflects the way capitalism reproduces itself in its periphery. Since the beginning of the capital relationship, craft forms are combined with cutting-edge technology. For the author, work in agriculture plays a fundamental role in industrialization and in the constitution of national capitalism, where peculiar and primitive forms of subsistence persist as part of modern development, with lowering the cost of labor power, the basis of accumulation. This situation is part of an accelerated development process where children working in the tobacco harvest are not signs of backwardness and underdevelopment in the countryside, but an atrocious form of modernization.

Among the 1080 children (between 9 and 16 years old) who participated in our research on tobacco farming, we noticed that they develop diverse types of activities in other relationships that make up how the commodity child labor force is exploited within the rural family from Santa Catarina. We noticed that a group of 76% develop some form of work, namely: 32% of the children and adolescents surveyed develop rural work activities; 16% carry out domestic work activities; 12% help with tasks to organize family life; 7.5% combine daily domestic work with rural work; 5% develop work in unfamiliar places; 2% develop non-family rural work; 1.3% combine family work with non-family work; 0.6% non-family domestic work. This diversity of forms makes up the totality of the child labor force merchandise, which is illustrated by the statement below:

1) I always get up around 6 am, take off my pajamas, and go to the bathroom. I help my mother treat the animals, chickens, pigs, turkeys, and rabbits. I have my breakfast, and I treat the cows. Then I go to the tobacco to weed and do other things that need to be done. At 11:30 am, I go home for lunch, collect things from the table and get some sleep. At 2 pm, we returned to the plantation. After 4 pm, I come home, take care of the flowers, take a bath, have coffee, and go to school. [...] On vacation... I cannot even call it a vacation... because I work all day breaking tobacco leaves. My vacation sucks! Sometimes I keep throwing up because I get drunk on tobacco. For me, vacations are during school classes, as I work less than the so-called "vacation."

As we can see, the 10-year-old child above works in the fields daily from 6:00 am to 4:00 pm, with a break for lunch between 11:30 am and 2:00 pm, totaling 7:30 hours of the daily workday. After this exhausting journey, which involves everything from caring for animals to weeding tobacco, she goes home, takes care of the flowers, and goes to school at night to use up the little energy she has left after a day at work. The daily workday is even more intense during school holidays since there are no classes and tobacco farming is in the harvest season.

The Work of Migrant Children in North American Tobacco Farming

Margareth Wurth, a Human Rights Watch researcher whom we interviewed in August 2020, says that the situation of immigrant child labor has worsened during the Pandemic, as it affected many jobs and schools were closed:

“The issue of children working on tobacco plantations in the US is a big problem because they work 10 to 12 hours a day coming into contact with and absorbing nicotine, which makes them sick. Therefore, it is necessary to change the tobacco law and the culture of exploitation of migrant children in the USA. In the past, Black children worked with their parents in the fields. Now there are migrant children in this position [...]. The worst thing, in my opinion, is the tobacco culture because children are in contact with nicotine, which is considered a toxic exposure. In addition, children and families are also exposed to pesticides, which is a seriously complicated issue [...]. Covid-19 and conservative politics are undermining years of progress against child labor in the US. Since 2017, we can see the dismantling of these rules. The difference in Brazil is the regulation. Brazil has solid regulations for children. Although some children can be found working, it is considered entirely illegal. Furthermore, rural workers in the US do not have unions to discuss their struggles and organize movements for better working conditions. Furthermore, it is difficult to find families and people willing to think and talk about these issues because the illegal situation and the violence against Latino migrants frighten rural workers. This is such a sensitive subject.” (Wurth, M. Interviewed on 08/25/2020 apud Conde 2020) ⁶

For the researcher, among the problems involving rural child labor is the absence of prohibitive legislation that supports the claims of social movements and trade unions.

⁶ Our translation. Original: “The issue involving children who work in Tobacco fields in the USA is a big problem because they work 10-12 hours per day contacting and absorbing nicotine, which makes them ill. Because of that, it is necessary to change the tobacco law and the exploration culture regarding migrant kids in the USA. In the past, there were black children working with parents on the fields. Now there are migrant kids in that position. The American legislation allows children working at early ages if their parents agree with it. In North Carolina and Virginia, there are children working on tobacco culture, but in Tennessee, we have many children working on vegetables growing: sweet potatoes, pumpkins, berries, corn. The same situation takes place in different parts of the country. The worst one, in my opinion, is the tobacco culture because children are in contact with nicotine, considered a toxic exposure. Besides, the kids and the families are also exposed to pesticides and this is a seriously complicated matter. Pesticides are spread on the farms next to places where the children are, and they may cause terrible health consequences. We haven’t estimated exactly how many children have been working on the crops. Right now, considering COVID-19 and the schools being shut, we can imagine the families’ economic situation is worse than before. The economy is going down, people have lost their jobs. The covid-19 and the conservative politics are affecting years of progress against child work in the USA. Since 2017, we can see the dismount of those rules. The difference in Brazil is the regulation. Brazil has a strong regulation for children. Although, in reality, some kids can be found working, it is considered totally illegal. Besides, farmworkers in the USA don’t have Unions to discuss their struggles and organize movements for better job conditions. Plus, it is so hard to find families and people who are willing to think and talk about these topics, because both the illegal situation and the violence against Latin migrants scares the farmworkers. This is such a delicate matter.” (WURTH, M. Interviewed in August/25th/2020 apud Conde, 2020)

Furthermore, the risk of deportation, imprisonment, and separation frightens and intimidates migrant workers. In the absence of restrictions and legal parameters, working and living conditions deteriorate a lot. In cities, there are regulations for work, such as minimum age. In the countryside, however, such limitations do not exist, and children are, therefore, more exposed to early work's physical, mental, and emotional risks.



Figure 2: Migrant child working in the potato harvest, Human Rights Watch File (Conde, 2020)

As we can see, the laws of the second most prosperous country in the world violate international conventions on children's rights concerning early work. The problem is worse on tobacco plantations, where families and children have direct contact with pesticides and nicotine, and children commonly complain of nausea, dizziness, vomiting, and skin diseases. Although tobacco plantations use harvesting machines, the essential part of the work is manual. The photos below, taken during our field research, show the workers sitting on the first floor of the tractor (which passes through the middle of the plantations) but performing the harvest manually.



Figure 4: North Carolina Tobacco Harvest in September 2020 (Conde, 2020)

Tobacco in the US has been grown for centuries, and its trade has been a central part of the economy since the 1600s. The country is the fourth largest tobacco producer in the

world, after China, Brazil, and India. Production is distributed among four American states: Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (HRW, 2015).

According to the owner of a rural property with 250 Mexican workers that we visited during our field research in North Carolina (Conde, 2020), “hiring migrant workers is a solution to the problem of competition because they accept to work more for less. American workers want to earn more and do not have the same disposition.” Thus, the cheaper work of immigrants and even children is fundamental for lowering the tobacco product’s price and its competitive sale in the international market (Conde, 2020).

Conclusion

The tragic situation between the high number of migrant children working in Brazil and in the United States highlights how capitalism reproduces itself both in its center and periphery. Regardless of residing in the country of origin or on US soil, Latino children and those born in countries of the Global South (and their families) are exploited, which expresses a current form of neo-colonialism (N’krumah, 1967).

In this sense, our research denounces the persistence of child labor among migrant children and adolescents born in Latin America as a current expression of cheap labor. If, on the one hand, child labor in Brazil and the US appears in an extreme context of the family struggle for survival, at the same time, it constitutes a solution for the capitalist economy, which needs to pay workers less to obtain greater profits. Therefore, every apology for early work is necessary to dignify the character through the socialized culture of school, family, religion, and legislation.

Paul Lafargue (2003), still in the 19th century, denounced that the working class was dominated by a strange madness that began to sacrosanct what had been a real torture for centuries: work. The author uncompromisingly defends the need to free the working class from the apologetic cultivation of work. It is necessary to remember that work is *tripalium* and that the human being is only physically and intellectually realized when this alienated activity aimed at producing more value for others ends. Thus, the claim of the working class must be for the right to laziness, wealth, a good bed, a rich table, art, literature, politics, science, leisure, and free time:

“In a lazy regime, to kill the time that kills us second by second, there will be shows and theatrical representations (...) If the working class were to rise with all its strength, not to claim human rights, which are nothing but the right to capitalist exploitation, not to claim the right to work, which is nothing but the right to poverty, but to forge a bronze law that prohibited all men from working more than three hours a day, the Earth, trembling with joy, would feel a new universe emerging” (Lafargue, 2003, p. 75-77)

For Thompson (1988), the preservation or alteration of culture understood as a system of shared values and customs, always occurs in a field of conflicts and contradictions, where the relationship between production and reproduction is capable of altering traditions, bringing something new under the “wings” of the old man. In this sense, capitalism recreated customs and reinvented work’s human (un)nature. Another system will also

recreate, based on another materiality, other modes, and customs, refunding a new and, perhaps, freer human nature.

In this sense, the denouncements that make up this text only make sense if accompanied by practical actions and commitments aimed at liberating the maddened culture of work. Change is in our hands, and reality (as well as a new and revolutionary culture of laziness) is open and in constant movement and contradiction (Marx, 1989). “We may live in dark times, but history is open, and the space of the possible is greater than what is on display” (Giroux, 2013, P. 22).

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