

Fire Under Plastic: immigration, or the open wounds of late capitalism

PARVATI NAIR¹

1. El Ejido, Almería. In many ways, the name speaks for itself. The Spanish word *ejido* is derived from the Latin *exitus*, or exit. It denotes a bare stretch of no—man's land on the outskirts of a village, left uncultivated and unclaimed. The word evokes a place on the edge, nameless and devoid of importance. Indeed, this hot, dry stretch of Andalusian land we know as El Ejido outside the town of Dalías in Almería, is a place on the edge, a place of exit, perhaps, but one that leads to nowhere in particular for many who work there. El Ejido, however, has long ceased to be uncultivated and is now a hot house of commodification, surprisingly fecund in its ability to generate wealth. Occupied by numerous large, medium and small—sized agricultural producers, its cracked earth is forced to yield by an interminable covering of plastic sheeting that turns the landscape into a space of synthetic fertility². In the asphyxiating heat of these greenhouses, the immigrants work. They are responsible for the day—to—day care of the tons of tomatoes and other plants that grow here, tending the green vegetables until they ripen enough to be plucked and packed, before being sent on to international markets abroad. Thanks to the hectares upon hectares of plastic that shimmers in the Mediterranean sun and the thirsting workforce beneath that tends the plants, El Ejido has now become one of the most prosperous areas in the whole of Spain.

2. El Ejido's location near the Mediterranean makes it an early point of entry into Europe for many North African immigrants. Furthermore, the availability of employment is high, because there is a constant need for workers in these parts to take on those jobs that must be carried out under such harsh conditions. The locals are not prepared to endure such hardship and are usually engaged in more managerial or proprietorial positions. On the employers' parts, this immigrant workforce is useful. Immigrants without papers are cheap to employ, they demand little, having only the questionable rights afforded to them by the *ley de extranjería*³, and are willing to continue working in the face of sub—standard working and living conditions. Moreover, for every undocumented labourer who is employed, there are inevitably many more seeking employment. While some have found accommodation in and around the town centre, many find it extremely difficult to rent flats or to find adequate housing. Numerous immigrants therefore occupy empty granaries and sheds in the area. Large numbers simply live out in the fields. Thus, to be found under the plastic sheeting are not merely tomato plants: the immigrant workers themselves often live under the same sheeting in flimsy and improvised tent—like accommodation, their share of

1 Parvati Nair: Queen Mary, University of London

2 While in 1968, there were 30 hectares of greenhouses, in the mid 1980s, these had risen to 14,000 hectares and at present, the area covered by such plastic sheeting stands at approximately 30,000 hectares. (Checa, 2001: 23)

³ The *Ley de Extranjería* denotes the rights of immigrants who have yet to be legalized in Spain (2001). It has been the target of much protest from immigrant groups and NGOs working with immigrants. The accusation is that its wording ensures that over 70% of immigrants are maintained in an illegal status. Furthermore, this lack of recognition translates into a total lack of basic rights with regard to all aspects of their employment, including the conditions in which they must work.

the plots no different in appearance or comfort from those of the tomatoes they tend. Without running water nearby, the workers, mainly men who often share tents, have to walk several kilometres to fill up containers. There is no electricity either, removing from inhabitants the possibility of enjoying any leisure time they have. Sanitary facilities are likewise largely lacking. The sharp antagonisms which exist between the local population and the sizeable immigrant presence is lived out in terms that are at once racial and cultural. In the words of the mayor of El Ejido, Juan Enciso, 'A las ocho de la mañana, todos los inmigrantes son pocos. A las ocho de la tarde, sobran todos.' (S.O.S. Racismo, 2001). For the 20,000 or more immigrants workers who live and work under the plastic sheeting, therefore, El Ejido is a place marked by labour exploitation and ethnic segregation.

3. This tension exploded three years ago, when, on 5 February, 2000, Encarnación López Valverde, a resident of a village near El Ejido, was stabbed to death while doing her weekly shopping by a twenty—two year old Moroccan immigrant, who had been receiving medical treatment for mental illness. An immense wave of hatred swept the region as soon as the police had arrested and identified the murderer as an immigrant. This unexpected and irrational attack by the young Moroccan unleashed a fearsome reprisal that spread across the region over the 6th, 7th and 8th of February. The violence first erupted when truckloads of local residents drove to the main supermarket of the area, *El Copo*, where immigrants go every week—end to stock up on food and other necessities. The immigrants were barricaded inside the shop as the premises were set on fire. Local residents joined forces to cut off main roads, set fire to the dwellings of the immigrants and to the offices of those NGOs and other organizations that had been working in the area to establish immigrants' rights. A local *halal* meat shop was burnt. Before long, the local mosque, other meat shops, cars belonging to immigrants, the telephone booths they used for ringing home, the plastic tents in which they lived, all objects and places associated with immigrant presence were burnt down in an insane display of violence. Numerous reports point to the passivity of the police, and indeed, accusations were later made of their collaboration with the rioters. The worst incidents took place near the mosque, where the acts of destruction took place in close proximity of the local police station. Anti—Islamic, anti—Moroccan and racist slogans appeared overnight on walls. Throughout the area, immigrants dispersed among the fields in an attempt to save their own lives, as locals hurled bricks and stones at them. Numerous Moroccan immigrants suffered substantial burns and other injuries in the course of these three days. Medical reports give testimony to singed hair, burns, broken bones and severe bruising. Some immigrants had to be treated for severe dehydration as they had spent between 48 and 72 hours hiding inside the greenhouses without access to water. With their tents burnt down, many were forced to sleep in the open. Furthermore, immigrant workers suffered substantial material losses, as their few possessions were lost or ruined in the fires. Most importantly, many lost their passports, statements of money transfers made to their families at home (proof of financial viability which is required as part of the process of regularizing themselves in Spain) and wads of cash that they had stored inside mattresses or inside their tents. This prolonged incidence of violence has since been labelled one of the most significant infringements of human rights to have taken place in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

4. The events of El Ejido over those three days were not an isolated and spontaneous eruption of violence. While they were triggered by the fatal stabbing by a mentally ill

person, they nevertheless epitomize in a dramatic way key facets of the socio—economic configurations that determine global labour migration in late capitalism. By highlighting the riots of El Ejido, this paper aims to examine the inequalities and injustices inherent in those contexts which shape and direct current flows of migration. It is important to note at this point that the focus of this paper is the situation of those who, for economic reasons, are forced into migration. Thus, forced migrants are those who experience displacement due to large—scale economic currents over which they as individuals have little or no control.

5. Migration from the Moroccan mainland to southern Spain, itself often termed the 'Cinderella' of Europe, is indicative of such economic currents that have altered the social landscape of southern Europe, with subsequent effects on the southern Mediterranean. The paradox, of course, lies in the fact that while the immigrants are necessary for the prosperity of the region of El Ejido, they are nevertheless the victims of racial abuse. Thus, as the mayor indicated in his statement, immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented, become the receptors of an ingrained and unthinking resentment that seeks to dehumanize them. Thus they become doubly devoid of recognition: lacking papers and hence a legal status in Spain, they are useful for enriching Spanish producers; furthermore, the objectification that they suffer paves the way for acts of violence through which the many hatreds of Spanish—Moroccan history and cultural inter—relation can be enacted⁴. As the work done by the organization S.O.S Racism demonstrates, racist acts of violence are inevitably targeted at those whose physicality and visually evident economic marginality provide evidence of their immigrant status⁵. The vivid eruption of violence in El Ejido forces a rethinking of the contemporary phenomenon of migration, a one—way flow of humans to the coveted West that actively reinforces the hegemonic divisions of the world. It thereby foregrounds the violence of exploitation and raises the issue of why Moroccans, in this case, would be willing to endure the hardships and alienation of El Ejido, if this is all the migratory effort has to offer?

6. In the same year as the riots of El Ejido took place, an important evaluation of late capitalism was published by Hardt and Negri (2000), one that provided a new dimension to the politics of the Left. In this work, they announced that Empire was materializing 'before our very eyes.' Empire, a decentred and deterritorializing apparatus of regulation expands over the globe and marks the end of the possibility of imperialism in the form of domination by any single nation—state. For Hardt and Negri, Empire is a global network without a centre, in which social production has become flexible in the use of workers and technology to meet fluxes in consumer demand. In the face of this new world order, the importance of the nation—state diminishes and, with it, the concept of a centre and periphery, for Empire itself is in constant expansion and set to take over the globe in a modulating panoply of networks. The spatial totality of Empire translates into a suspension of history and occupies all aspects of social processes. This includes the realm of theory, whereby the politics of difference finds itself subsumed and overtaken. 'Power has

⁴ In his excellent study *La imagen del magrebí en España* (2002), Eloy Martín Corrales traces representations of Moorish identity in the course of Spanish history, marking the violence that has often accompanied such representations.

⁵ Thus, similar conditions of racism are suffered by Turks and Kurds in Germany, Algerians in France, Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans in Spain. In the words of the raï singer Chab Samir, 'para ellos todos nosotros somos "aras", es decir cabezas negras.'

evacuated the bastion [the theorists] are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference' (2000: 138). Thus, they suggest, we should instead pay heed to specificities of global relations in terms of Empire, because, while oppression and destruction loom large in Empire, so do new, hitherto unexperienced, possibilities for liberation. Empire as globalization is a network of difference and hence not univocal. It is composed of a plural multitude, 'the productive, creative subjectivities of globalization that have learned to sail on this enormous sea' (2000: 60). Indeed, it is, according to the authors, the multitude that produces globalization, so that Empire exists and expands through and because of the multitude. Thus, the multitude functions both within Empire and against it, developing their own projects through creative forces that at once construct a counter—Empire and so sustain Empire. Hardt and Negri make a persuasive case that the truly transformational change in our world is the phenomenon of unprecedented mobility. 'A spectre haunts the world', they say in an echo of Marx's famous words, and this spectre is migration. Empire is sustained through the universal and global nomadism of the multitude, engaged in 'alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges.' (2000: xv)

7. While Empire is notable for its hopeful reading from the Left of late capitalism, the notion of a global economy that deconstructs the imbalances of centre and periphery is not new. Some ten years prior to the publication of Empire, Arjun Appadurai wrote a seminal essay on cultural identity envisaged in terms of movement in the new global economy.⁶ Here he argues against what he saw as a reductive centre—periphery model, stressing instead a new global cultural economy that was imaginatively constructed in terms of web—like networks that traversed the borders of the nation—state. For Appadurai, this global economy consisted of the movement of people between nations, as immigrants, exiles, tourists, refugees, technological connections between nations that facilitated communications and exchanges, global currency markets and capital and cross—national alliances of state and counter—state ideologies. While Appadurai refers to cultural identity, Hardt and Negri examine issues of production. Both arguments, however, construct a flexible and shifting pattern of networks on a global scale that dissolve the importance of nation—states. In the global economy, cultural or otherwise, capitalism results in the decline of the nation—state in favour of globalization. Thus for the fluid mobilities of people and products to take place in the way that these theorists imagine, there must exist an ease of passage across territories. This, for Hardt and Negri, is rendered possible through a mode of production that results from immaterial labour, or the on—going exchange of information and knowledges. Production itself, for them, is not centred upon material goods, but on services and communication.

8. The reality of the globe as we know it from cases such as that of El Ejido is, of course, far from this. Indeed, it would be fair to say that while the views put forward by Hardt and Negri as well as Appadurai are intellectually novel, they depend upon a deterritorialized and immaterial global economy where the multitude finds its resistance through its very participation in the economy. Revolutionary action, described as a 'being—against', is described as possible from every place, today's 'against—men', like the first anti—fascist partisans of Europe. Thus, in light of Empire's envisioned global domination, they make no

⁶ See Appadurai in Braziel and Mannur (2003: 25-48)

allowance for those who are without recourse to accessing networks, nor does this relate to those whose lives are tied to processes of material production. The notion of Empire cannot address the displacement and disjuncture experienced by migrants who struggle in the awkward cross—overs of non—Western and Western realities, inevitably the combined result of histories of domination and prevalent mechanisms of capitalism. If the spectre of migration haunts the decentred and deterritorialized rule of Empire, then the very nature of such migration is different from the forced migratory experiences of today's late capitalism. In a world where globalization is extending but as yet incomplete, undocumented migrants are not members of any polity; as such, and unlike the anti—fascists of yesteryear, they cannot provide resistance or engage in the resistance of the multitude. They are, in fact, the 'singularities', the necessary dregs of capitalism, who lack access to networks of communication and passage. Without membership of the multitude, the undocumented migrant worker must remain forever at the gates of Empire. Late capitalism continues to operate through the conflicting demarcations of loci of power, in a world where histories are lived out through the contradictions of modernity and postmodernity. Globalization continues to be largely focused on the West. Investment in the countries of the 'south' is minimal in comparison to the investment that takes place amongst western nations. A hugely predominant amount of global production and consumption takes place within the boundaries of advanced capitalist nations. Jobs offered to skilled workers in developing nations are increasingly of a contractual nature as part of current trends to privatize and de—unionize and are not focused on investment in those parts of the globe where these workers are located. Far from constructing an even, smooth global economy, late capitalism continues to expand the gap between the richer and the poorer. The gaze of the hopeful and needy of the globe is unmistakably westward. In contrast to the notion of a decentred and deterritorialized flow of power that can be subverted by all those at any point in the globe who place themselves against the going current, it is fair to say that perhaps the greatest injustice of this age is, in fact, the existence of this freedom for a chosen minority and not for the vast majority, whose lives have been displaced and scattered in the margins of the West.

9. In tandem with the dissemination of theories of globalization is the construction of the concept of Fortress Europe. At once accessible by various means to migrants from the southern shores of the Mediterranean and from Eastern Europe, it is also a body of land fenced off to the poor of the world. For all undocumented immigrants and for many of the legalized ones, the passage into Europe has been a crossing through barbed wire. In the case of Moroccan immigration to Spain, the troubled historical connotations of colonization (the long, medieval presence of Moorish kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula as well as more recent colonization by Spain of parts of Morocco and the Western Sahara) and long—standing religious as well as racial antipathy combine with the expansion of Spain's involvement in large—scale capitalist networks to mark, on the one hand, structures of economic, historical and political relation, and, on the other, unmistakable differentiations of power between the two shores of the straits of Gibraltar. Some twenty years ago, Spain itself shifted from being one of the poorer nations of Europe and a country of economic emigration to the position long occupied by the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia, as hosts to immigrants from different points of the globe. The result is a sharply defined cartography of power that translates into a clear—cut location for Spain within a

global hegemony, where alliances are made to ensure that a network of power and wealth both safeguards self—interest for those in power and maintains a system of inequality that is self—reinforcing.

10. Thus, while Spain's economic prosperity has increased over the last twenty years, together with a sizeable fall in its population, Morocco has experienced both a great increase in its population and an alarming fall in its economic development. In this inverse relation, complicated by a semi—feudal monarchy in Morocco that has failed to lay social infrastructures in the country, migration becomes an inevitable solution to the crisis faced by many young Moroccans. Spain's response to the influx of Moroccan and other workers⁷ has been a redesigned *ley de extranjería* which both ensures the continuous hopeful presence of immigrants in the country and, at the same time, their demarcation in the eyes of the law as aliens to Spain. Thus illegal immigrants in Spain can be expelled at will. Those seeking to obtain a permanent residence permit will need to have obtained a temporary work permit for five years. There is no right of appeal for those seeking permits once these have been refused. A key issue in this context is that of *reagrupamiento familiar*, or the ability of an immigrant to bring their family to Spain. The difficulties of having access to family life for immigrants have obvious psychological, social and economic consequences with respect to their well—being. In the year 2000, when this law was revised in line with directives from the European Union, it was estimated that there were approximately a quarter of a million applicants for regularization. The number of undocumented workers in Spain is, of course, hard to accurately estimate. Their contributions to Spanish prosperity, however, are evident from numerous analyses; so also the fact that there are few allowances made for their presence in Spain.

11. A visit to the province of El Ejido lays bare to the human eye the sharp contradictions of capitalism. The success story of El Ejido began as recently as in the 1980s, when Dutch and Belgian multi—nationals struck deals with local farmers, who then launched into intensive production. Thanks to the heat of the region, sophisticated irrigation systems, genetic engineering and plastic sheeting, productivity very quickly outstripped the capacities of local families. Given the refusal by Spanish workers to endure the oppressive heat of the hothouses, the near—by location of Morocco was fortuitous. In and around El Ejido, there are approximately 25,000 immigrant workers, some 75% of them undocumented. Approximately 80% of these immigrant workers are unaccompanied males. Over 8,000 hothouses under plastic sheeting are currently used as homes to these workers. The immigrants have been instrumental in making the miracle of production possible in Almería, yet no provisions have been made by the authorities to facilitate their presence. A new worker coming to the area must either count on a 'friend' to stay with, squat in a store—house amongst tools and fertilizers, build himself a shack or else sleep under plastic sheeting in a hothouse. Alongside major economic gain, the flow of currency and produce across national boundaries and between multi—nationals dealing in seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, the web—like connections between producers and consumers in the countries of the 'north' is an underground economy of human beings struggling in sub—standard

⁷ While Moroccans form the largest community of immigrants in Spain, there are also sizeable Latin American communities and less organized but equally prevalent sub-Saharan Africans who come from diverse ethnic and linguistic groups.

conditions that have worsened in inverse ratio to the growth of the region's prosperity. The plastic ghettos of El Ejido proliferate alongside the new money and the many banks.⁸

12. Spain's economic acceleration since the transition to democracy makes it a particularly potent example of the dangerous paradoxes of late capitalism. In particular, and in the context of immigration, it both depends upon and rejects the immigrant presence. The riots of El Ejido, therefore, come as small surprise when considered in terms of the rapid shifts in Spain's own global position. The sudden acceleration of its economy has clearly not been matched by an ethical or cultural awareness that allows Spaniards to take stock of their own new position or even to recognize their need for the immigrant. A provincial xenophobia endures despite globalization. This, in turn, translates into sporadic violence, as in the case of the riots, or into more habitual forms of racism, ranging from the difficulty that immigrants have to rent accommodation or be served in bars to the banal statement by a local from the region of El Ejido that:

Los moros viven en cortijos porque no quieren gastar una peseta,
Han venido a ahorrar par mandar dinero a sus casas, y porque son
unos guarros y están acostumbrados a vivir así...
(S.O.S Racismo, 2000: 27)

13. It becomes clear from the above that the differentiation of power and the maintenance of hegemony is achieved in late capitalism precisely through the expanding grip of globalization from richer countries, Spain in this case, to poorer ones. The lure for the immigrants, is the capitalist dream, the price for which is often paid with their lives. This global control of capitalism creates sharp differentiations between these two countries separated only by a few kilometers of sea; it also forecloses any possibilities of independent economic advancement for Morocco. Thus, to analyze migration in late capitalism is also to take stock of the means by which globalization facilitates the reification of capitalist networks of power. A paradoxical contrast between center and periphery emerges, therefore: on the one hand, one-way economic implication is supported by better communications and other networks — a case in point is the recent foray of the Spanish telecommunications company *Telefónica* into Morocco, controlling the expansion of the mobile phone industry — and, on the other hand, the gap in economic and political might becomes increasingly wider.

14. Thus, it is important to recognize that, contrary to how it is usually perceived, economic labour migration is not a *consequence* of late capitalism. Rather, it is a determining feature of capitalism in the era of globalization, as it ensures the status quo of dominant powers, precisely because these latter sustain themselves on the substantial imbalance between the western hegemony and developing nations. Nor does globalization translate into the erosion of national borders. On the contrary, it leads to the policing of borders, whereby questions of citizenship, recognition and legitimacy rise to paramount importance. At the same time, and as the case of El Ejido shows, a neat geopolitical differentiation of the locus of power is complicated in late capitalism by these migratory flows, which present pockets of deprivation as part and parcel of the hegemonic spaces of the West. The violence of capitalism may, therefore, explode sporadically in the immigrant ghettos of the West, but

⁸ The writer Juan Goytisolo was made *persona non grata* by the municipality of El Ejido when in 1998, he visited the region and wrote about the inequalities in a national newspaper (Goytisolo and Nair, 2000)

its roots lie in the ruthless expansion of capitalist control and the subsequent exploitation suffered by the immigrants' both through the ransacking of their places of origin and by the objectification that capitalism imposes upon them in the process of relocation.

15. The situation of the immigrant workers in El Ejido lays open to view the human condition of the migrants who are forced to move from their places of origin because of alterations to their own environments brought upon by the increased intensity of globalization. Inherent in postmodern theorizations of late capitalism is the notion that the leveling practices of capital and exchange are directly reflected in and determine the place of the individual in a larger, deterritorialized 'multitude'. Such attempts to theorize the social, mobile nature of capital give insufficient weight to those processes of social life which remain subject to the contradictions between two very different phases of modernity. The forced migrant, above all others, is the one who experiences this contradiction first—hand. The tendency to dissolve relations of domination and inequality into the 'frictionless space' of the global market not only denies the migrant any recognition per se, but also denies him or her recognition at the level of human suffering. The forced migrant is doubly challenged. Swept, on the one hand, into the migratory process by the force of globalization typical of postmodernity, migrants are then confronted, on the other, by the borders and barriers of modernity in the form of the nation—state, with its policed borders and its unflinching laws, that they attempt to enter. Theories that aim to downplay the role of nation—states in late capitalism cannot ignore the persistence of, and indeed, reinforcement of borders that takes place in today's globalized West precisely in order to safeguard the circulatory freedoms of those whom the West deems worthy of recognition. It is the economically deprived immigrant who remains to face the challenges of the border and thus experience both the displacements of globalized postmodernity and the exclusionary practices of the modern nation—state.

16. It is precisely within this contradiction that the migrant worker becomes emblematic of a large—scale and worrying phenomenon. As we know, Karl Marx, in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, stated that individuals are forced to enter, 'independent of their will', relations of production 'appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production... At a certain stage of development, the material forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.' The figure of the migrant worker in today's global scenario is located at the contradictory peripheries of global networks of power and capital. In contemporary contexts, we can conceive of Marx's warning as correctly portraying the plight of millions worldwide, such as the workers of El Ejido, who, 'independent of their will', are, subjected through displacement to a mode of production that globally occupies and confines them to the no—man's strip of the border.

I. REFERENCES

- Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (ed.), *Theorizing Diaspora*, 2003: 25—48 (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Francisco Checa, *El Ejido: la ciudad—cortijo*, 2001 (Barcelona: Icaria)
- Juan Goytisolo y Sami Nair, *El peaje de la vida*, 2000 (Madrid: Aguilar)
- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 2000 (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press)
- Ley de extranjería*, 2001 (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva)
- Eloy Martín Corrales, *La imagen del magrebí en España*, 2002 (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra)
- S.O.S Racismo, *El Ejido: racismo y explotación laboral*, 2001 (Barcelona: Icaria)