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Manchester Papers in Political Economy are published online at http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/cspe/publications/wp/index.html

ISSN 1756-0837
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Temporality, migration and unfree labour: 
migrant garment workers

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Abstract: This paper engages with current debates on unfree labour, migration and development through the experiences of Bolivian migrant workers in the garment sectors in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. We find evidence of unfreedoms some of which may be classified as trafficking or ‘modern slavery’. However, we suggest that such descriptions overlook temporality. We find that workers suffer a time-delimited period of unfreedom. Some are able to accomplish their goals, their accomplishments serving as an example for others in unfree labour. We therefore suggest that temporality sheds light on the resolutions of cases of unfreedom as well as why workers accept exploitative working conditions. We also consider migrant workers’ negotiations over acceptable and fair conditions, particularly over food.
1) Introduction

Contemporary forms of unfree labour such as debt bondage and trafficking are often framed as new forms of slavery or as slave labour (for example Bales, 1999; Rezende Figueira 2004; Van Den Anker, 2004; Esterci 2008). However, contemporary and historical forms of more and less free labour relations are diverse (Quirk, 2006). There is significant variation in the experience of unfreedom not only across historical periods but also within the same employment and across a person’s lifetime. In this article we explore the issue of unfreedom in migrant garment workers’ accounts of their employment experiences. We find some evidence of different forms of unfreedom. However, most of these were experienced at the beginning of the migrant workers’ first employment. Through an evaluation of these experiences we propose that unfreedom is associated with both the point in time within the worker’s migration trajectory at which the employment relationship is established, their migration status as well as migrant worker’s medium- to long-term aspirations of social mobility.

An appreciation of these different elements of temporality in the employment relationship as well as in workers’ aspirations allows us to shift the emphasis to the reasons why workers might accept some forms of unfree and degrading working conditions, their resistance strategies and how these instances of unfreedom are resolved. By doing this, we do not wish in any way to condone these conditions. We recognise that many instances of unfreedom do not get resolved. Both authors have addressed unfreedom and exploitation in more depth elsewhere (references omitted for anonymity) and in this paper extend their arguments by focusing on temporality.

Here we consider two case studies: Bolivian garment workers in Buenos Aires, Argentina and in São Paulo, Brazil. Bolivia is one of the poorest counties in Latin America with high levels of income poverty and a history of political instability. The country shares a land border with the middle-income countries of Argentina and Brazil, both of which have a history of Bolivian migration. In both countries the garment sector represents a significant employer of Bolivian
migrant workers. Buechler (2004) fleshes out in more detail how these particular streams of migration were established, with Korean immigrants serving as pioneers in establishing a niche in the garment industry in both Buenos Aires and São Paulo and Bolivians taking over the lower levels of the production chain more recently. The Bolivian migrants interviewed for this study worked for both Bolivian and Korean employers and experienced very similar working conditions in both cities. The main difference between the two contexts is related to the institutional framework, which is stronger in Brazil, particularly the legislation surrounding slavery. However, in both Buenos Aires and São Paulo the media and some civil society organisations have used the labels of ‘contemporary slavery’ and ‘slave labour’ to describe the conditions under which some garment workshops operate, particularly those employing migrant labour.

The terms ‘contemporary slavery’ or ‘slave labour’ may be taken to indicate a resort to force and coercion used against unwilling workers. However, we find that the general outline of the relationship between employees and those running the workshops (in São Paulo these are called oficinistas) goes relatively uncontested by workers. One area of negotiation and contestation that does emerge from workers’ accounts is the issue of food – which typically forms part of the compensation package – and to a lesser extent, housing. Within the initial period of employment, then, it is the short-term biological needs of the workers which provide a terrain for struggle.

Fieldwork in Brazil, including semi-structured interviews and a focus group with Bolivian migrants working in and running garment workshops, was carried out in 2008. Fieldwork in Argentina included semi-structured, in-depth life story interviews with Bolivian garment workers carried out in Buenos Aires in 2003 and 2008 and with returnees in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2002 and 2008. We also draw on a survey carried out in Bolivia in 2008 in a community with a high incidence of migration.
The current literature on migration suggests that mobility and unfreedom are closely connected (Cohen, 2006; Shelley, 2007; see also Anderson and Rogaly, 2005). As workers leave their places of origin, they find themselves in new surroundings, whether they move internally or across national borders. Being newcomers, they are less familiar than native workers with prevailing work practices and employment legislation. These difficulties are sometimes compounded by language and cultural differences, which put migrant workers at a disadvantage when it comes to seeking recourse to justice (Crush, 2000; Piper, 2004). This is particularly the case for migrants who cross international borders, given that they are typically non-citizens subject to immigration legislation. In some places this means that unlike workers who hold citizenship rights, they are unable to benefit from the protection afforded by national employment legislation (UNDP, 2009), especially if they are undocumented or if they migrate into low paid jobs, which are often un- or semi-regulated.

Social networks play a key role in migration (Massey et al., 1987), channelling information about potential destinations, often providing financial resources in the form of loans and information about prospective job opportunities. However, migrants’ reliance on social networks sometimes increases their vulnerability to exploitation as social networks include new as well as traditional forms of patronage, which, as we discuss below, sometimes constrict migrants’ freedoms and increase their vulnerability to exploitation.

It is significant that under international legislation the combination of mobility across national borders and exploitation has been classified as trafficking. Trafficking is here defined as:

‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or
receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs’ (UN, 2000: 2).

Practices similar to those described in the international protocol were not uncommon in the garment workshops in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. Retaining migrants’ documents, false promises and the use of threat of deportation were all commonly practiced to retain migrant workers, particularly when they first arrived to Brazil or Argentina. One problem with the language of ‘trafficking’ regards its common use as primarily referring to sex work (see Anderson and Davidson, 2002; Ditmore, 2002; Doezema, 2002; Dottridge, 2007; Jana et al., 2002). We also find that the trafficking language fails to shed light on temporal aspects of unfreedom and relatedly, does not reflect migrant workers’ own understandings of these experiences.

The language adopted in the literature on trafficking is generally one of victimhood. This makes it difficult to integrate workers’ agency and their everyday acts of resistance. By marking off a special category of deserving ‘victims,’ it also risks normalising exploitation and abuse experienced by those falling outside this category. This is especially problematic when those not considered ‘victims’ are irregular migrants categorised as criminal, illegal or clandestine (Anderson, 2008; see also O’Connell Davidson, 2010). Given these issues, we tend to avoid using the term trafficking but rather focus on instances of unfreedom.

Similar concerns about the potential harm which could result from creating strict distinctions between trafficked and non-trafficked has more recently been raised with regards to distinctions such as forced and non-forced, as well as bonded and non-bonded labour (Lerche, 2007; Rogaly, 2008; Guérin et. al., 2009). Forced labour may include a variety of labour relations including trafficking, bonded labour, slavery and slavery-like practices, and some forms of labour imposed
by the state. The International Labour Organisation’s Convention No. 29 (1930) defines forced labour as: ‘all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.’

The concept of unfree labour is more prominent in academic literature than in the policy realm. In particular it is used especially by economists and Marxian scholars (for example Miles, 1987; Breman, 1990; Brass and Van der Linden, 1997). A key theme in this literature is the seeming paradox of unfree labour relations which exist within capitalist societies or form part of a wider set of capitalist relations. Some Marxian authors distinguish free from unfree labour based on the use of extra-economic coercion, especially physical violence (Brass, 1999: 10). The Brazilian scholar Sakamoto (2007) analyses ‘slave labour’ from a Marxian perspective through the distinction between contractual and non-contractual employment relations. Unfree labour has also been defined in Marxist theory as the inability of workers to personally commodify their own labour power (Brass, 1999: 28). The emphasis in this work is on understanding the labour relations and how they facilitate (or fail to facilitate) exploitation and accumulation (see Da Corta, 2008). To some extent, this literature has also been characterised by a strict divisions between free and unfree, with the attendant problems.

Most of the terms above (for example trafficking, forced labour, unfree labour and ‘contemporary slavery’) may be applied to a variety of situations which encompass different time-scales of unfreedom. This is not to say that no attention is paid to temporality. For example, the notion of ‘disposable people’ (Bales, 1999) is used to argue that ‘slavery’ may be temporary as opposed to lifelong and inherited. Bales goes further to argue that this ‘disposability’ may be even more harmful for those subject to ‘slavery’ compared to regimes in which slaves are treated as property and therefore an investment to be taken care of. Similarly, debates around ‘neo-bondage’ have considered whether briefer and more contractual forms of bondage may mean a loss of some beneficial elements of patronage for workers (for example
Breman, 1994 and De Neve, 1999; Guérin et al. 2009; see also Mishra, 2009 on indentured labour).

Nonetheless, there is inadequate attention in much of this literature to workers’ understandings of these time-scales and what they hope to achieve. Most of the literature focuses on how workers enter relationships of unfreedom, but pays insufficient attention to the resolution of unfree labour and trafficking, that is, how workers exit unfreedom. Here we therefore focus the temporal dimensions of unfreedom and how they interact with workers’ temporal strategies.

The literature on migration similarly emphasises movement across space to the relative detriment of developing an understanding of how migration is also a temporal strategy, involving an evaluation of past experience and a desire to achieve some improvement for the future. The spatial strategy of moving and seeking an improvement ‘somewhere else’ is clearly also related to temporality. It is not only that the future is somewhere else, but that a better future where one is (prior to migration) necessarily involves a spatial movement. In this context, the present becomes only the means to acquire and achieve a better future and as such, is relatively less important than the future, or is only as important to the extent that it provides the means for the realisation of one’s aspirations (or those of future generations). In our context, it is the present that involves the experiences of unfreedom.

Temporality, then, is critical to debates around trafficking, forced labour, new slavery and migration. Yet, temporality is seldom taken into account, the preference being for snapshot analysis focusing on conditions of extreme exploitation. There is no doubt that the terms draw attention to the ethical and moral problem represented by real cases of extreme exploitation. However, it is equally important to broaden our temporal lens and include the resolution, or otherwise, of these cases in our analysis. In this paper we use the strategy of analysing migrant workers’ experiences, particularly within their initial period of employment, given that this is the time during which they are most vulnerable and therefore most likely to experience different
types of unfreedoms and degrading conditions. We address the temporal dimension (i) by analysing how instances of unfreedom have been resolved by migrant workers as well as (ii) by taking into account the hopes, dreams and aspirations that encourage migrant workers to accept degrading and unfree working conditions. We therefore aim to also broaden our temporal framework by including a longer term view within our analysis, by talking to those who now run garment workshops as well as returnees’.

3) Evidence of Unfreedom in the Garment Sector

Today, in and around São Paulo and Buenos Aires, hundreds of small-scale garment workshops exist in varying degrees of formality. Typically, the workshops sew pre-cut garments for contractors which are then returned to these contractors for finishing and pressing. Most sewing workers work on a piece rate and usually live in the workshops, where housing and meals forms part of their compensation.

There have been numerous cases in which poor conditions have been identified in these workshops including health and safety problems and long hours, with typical workdays at least 12 hours long and sometimes extending to 18 hours a day\(^1\). Such cases have led the media, local elected officials and others in both São Paulo and Buenos Aires to complain that Latin American migrant workers, and in particular Bolivian migrants, are subject to ‘slave labour’ in these workshops (for example Los Tiempos, 2001). The term ‘slave labour’ suggests that workers are not just exploited, but unfree. This terminology coincides with the emergence of ‘new slavery’ debates, in which a slave is defined as ‘a person held by violence or the threat of violence for economic exploitation’ (Bales, 1999: 280). According to Bales, those in slavery suffer a ‘loss of free will’ (Bales, 2005: 91), a phrase which triggers the above-mentioned concern over recognition of workers’ agency.
Unfreedom in labour relations exists along a continuum from more to less severe (see, for example, Lerche, 2007) and can take a variety of forms. Rather than rely on a binary opposition of freedom or slavery to determine whether particular workers are ‘free’ or not (see O’Connell Davidson, 2010) we will examine here the ways in which workers’ freedoms might be restricted in these cases. The unfreedoms we explore are complex rather than absolute. Some of the key issues were highlighted by one participant Gabriel, whose story will be examined in further detail below. He indicated the following about his initial experience at a garment workshop in São Paulo:

- the doors were locked and it was prohibited to go outside or even look outside;
- his identity documents were held by the oficinistas;
- he was told that he needed to work off his debt;
- the oficinistas attempted to instil fear over workers’ immigration status; and
- wage payments were sometimes delayed.

Each of these issues was mentioned by at least one other participant in São Paulo. They were also common among Bolivian migrant workers in Buenos Aires. Workshop owners sometimes use the informal status of the garment workshops as justification for keeping workers indoors. Danila, a Bolivian who set up her own garment workshop in Buenos Aires after 18 months of working for others, explained that she works under ‘closed doors’, opening them only to load and unload garments, which is usually done in less than 10 minutes at night. The issue is more prominent in formal neighbourhoods given that police are less likely to intervene if workshops are located in informal settlements.

Further, windows are seldom opened and curtains usually drawn to conceal the nature of the activities carried out. As a result, there is often insufficient and artificial lighting which in the long term cause eye strain. Lack of ventilation increases respiratory problems associated with
dust and fluff. Many of those who have worked in garment work for any period of time complained of eye and respiratory problems. *Amanda*, who used to work for twelve hours from seven in the evening, complained that the work had ruined her eyes because she was working at night.

Workers’ movements within the workshop are also controlled. *Danila* described how she got watery blisters on her bottom from working long hours. But now it is different, being a workshop owner: ‘Here when I am working, if there’s nothing to do, I go and check what’s cooking in the kitchen. I get up. But when you’re working somewhere else you can’t get up. [You have to stay seated] the whole day, until they tell you to have lunch.’ She explains that you have to keep the pace, given the assembly line work and pressure from being paid piece rate.

On the issue of retention of documents and debt, *Javier* also stated that the friend’s aunt he initially worked for in São Paulo retained his documents until after his ‘debt’ was paid. ‘When I arrived,’ he said, ‘I worked a lot, from 6 until midnight or 1am. They paid very little; I even paid them, eh? ‘It took *Petrona* three months to pay off her initial debt. In Buenos Aires direct recruitment from Bolivia by employers or intermediaries was not the case for most workers interviewed, but was closely correlated with increased vulnerability to debt-bondage and retention of documents. For two women who had been recruited in Bolivia by a lady ‘who came looking for young girls to work in a workshop’, this resulted in their documents being retained and them having to escape from the workshop. However, even in these cases, the unfreedoms they experienced were temporary. Both managed to overcome their initial ordeal.

*Petrona* and *Teófila* mentioned threats related to deportation, which were used extensively in Buenos Aires as well as São Paulo to control workers’ movements. *Danilo*, for example, mentioned that on Saturdays he would go out with co-workers to play football to a nearby *cancha* [football pitch]. However, on Sundays: ‘I stayed in. I didn’t know the place. It’s a big country.
No, I couldn’t go out. Besides, you had to have your documents [residency and work permit] and I didn’t have them\textsuperscript{viii}. Workers in both cities also feared assaults and robbery on the streets.

The first three months of work in garment workshops in Buenos Aires were generally associated with very low wages. Maria’s salary for the first three months was 200 pesos (in 1993), which was then equivalent to US dollars: ‘Low, very low. We didn’t know because for here [Bolivia] it was 200 dollars; it was a lot of money. But for there [Buenos Aires] I only realised later on, after many years, that it was the bare minimum.’ Danila was paid even less: 80 pesos per month for the first three months in 1990-1991, working from 6 in the morning until 3 in the morning. As for Carlos, he did not get paid at all. He worked as an apprentice for three months, receiving only ten pesos from time to time to cover his bus fares. His compadre\textsuperscript{ix}, who introduced him to the workshop owner, had warned him: ‘You want to learn how to sew? But they won’t pay you. You’ll learn, but they won’t pay you. That’s the problem. But you’ll learn and then you can go and work for a Korean employer.’ Initially he was even finding it difficult to learn given that there were no available sewing machines he could practice on. However, he started practicing after three months and then earned some 900 pesos by working piece rate in the following three months. But still, he did not get paid and left the workshop to look for a Korean employer, as his friend had suggested. In 2008 he was still working for the same Korean employer, overseeing a whole workshop.

Some workers described leaving work without payment for all the wages they had earned, highlighting the difficulties involved in obtaining these payments. Adalberto, for example, said that he left one workshop without payment of all wages earned and only managed to get paid later by embarrassing his former (Bolivian) employer in front of the latter’s colleagues. Isabela, who described her ‘escape’ via a window when she needed to travel to Bolivia, said that she thought she would get paid later. Upon return, however, she was told by her former employers that they did not know who she was and that she had never worked for them. Teófila described
following up with her former boss repeatedly for four months before receiving the 200 reais in wages that she was owed. It is likely, therefore, that some workers stay in particular workshops longer than they might like to because they are waiting for payment of wages owed to them.

In Buenos Aires many Bolivian migrant workers were owed wages, particularly for their initial period of ‘training’. María, who initially owed her employers 360 pesos for the travel and document expenses incurred, left the workshop after three months. By that time she had earned 600 pesos but did not get paid the remaining 240 pesos. She had to visit the employers’ house repeatedly and eventually received the outstanding figure, but in small amounts.

Non payment of wages was associated with Bolivian employers. Many interviewees expressed a preference for working for Korean employers because they were deemed more ‘trustworthy’ and honest; non-payment of wages not being a particular problem with them. In São Paulo, workers’ preferences varied; many referred to the generally better wages and working conditions offered by ‘Koreans’ who ran the small factories subcontracting to the workshops.

In many of these cases the restrictions were only imposed by one employer and this was often the participant’s first employer. One reason for this is the ability to impose debt bondage based on the (real or inflated) expenses of transport from Bolivia. But it also points to specific vulnerabilities of newer migrants discussed above: less knowledge of their rights and concern over their status, sometimes reinforced by employers who instil fear of the police in their employees. They may be unsure of how to find their way around and in São Paulo concerned about language issues. They may also have a fear of being assaulted on the street, an issue repeatedly brought up by Bolivian participants in both cities. Finally, they may have less of a network to draw upon in finding other jobs. Petrona points out that freedom of movement may be restricted by oficinistas specifically to prevent workers from participating in a job market in the weekly open-air Kantuta market held in São Paulo.
Beyond this period, however, the combination of working space with living space continues to be a powerful restriction on workers’ freedoms, even when viewed by both parties as a mutually beneficial arrangement. The use of the workshop as housing is often seen by both workers and oficinistas as a way to save money. For workers, it is also attractive because of legal barriers faced by migrants who wish to rent or purchase property, particularly in São Paulo. For employers, the combined living-working spaces of the workshops are functional for the rhythms of the garment industry. They provide the flexibility to increase or decrease workloads and the length of the workday in order to meet the variable orders and tight deadlines so typical of the contemporary garment industry (see Hurley, 2005).

Yet workers’ freedoms, in terms of both physical movement and participation in the labour market, become restricted in this space. To lose one’s job is to lose one’s home. The comment by a Brazilian oficina (Laura) who employs Bolivians is illuminating. She stated that she calculates the workers’ piece-rate as 50% of what she receives for each piece, and was then asked whether the workers lived in the workshop. She replied, ‘I don’t let them live there. Because they might call it “slave labour.”’

This dynamic occurs in other contexts as well, as noted by Anderson and Rogaly in their report Forced Labour and Migration to the UK. The power of employers is increased through the dependency relationship created by such an arrangement (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005). The temporal and spatial solution to the ‘price of time’ for the garment industry (Harvey 1990: 227-229) has been one in which the compensation for sewing workers consists of housing, meals, and piece rates. Living in the workshops, workers are at the ready when the orders come in. The resulting time-space of the workshop is one in which migrant workers’ freedoms are diminished in that they are made less mobile and the power dynamics of the employment relation are shifted in favour of the employers.
Through a range of measures, then, garment workers are partially prevented in exercising freedom of movement and labour market mobility. These are more common upon migrants’ arrival but they are not restricted to this period. As long as garment workers live in the same space that they work in, even when the workers view this as an advantage, workers’ freedoms continue to be restricted. While this leads some to use the label of ‘slave labour,’ we will argue below that this description does not take into account the aspirations and temporal strategies workers have in choosing employment in these workshops and in the negotiations and resistance which they undertake with regards to their conditions of employment.

4) STRUGGLES OVER FOOD AND HOUSING

Rather than wages per se or the form of the employment relationship, it is food and housing conditions which tend to trigger concern and intervention by advocates, the media, and government officials, and negotiation and resistance by workers. Here it is important to recognise acts of negotiation and resistance within their context, particularly given the fact that the ‘new slavery’ literature is largely silent on resistance (Quirk, 2008: 70). Rowbotham writes of the way that homeworkers in Britain were often prepared to articulate ‘specific grievances’ based on ‘intricate differences of circumstances’ which reformers failed to appreciate, thus painting a picture of these workers as passive and unorganisable (1994: 188). This resonates strongly with at least some versions of the ‘slave labour’ discourse used in reference to the garment case. Rogaly makes this point as well, that these ‘apparently small but often meaningful ways in which workplace arrangements may be subject to continual (re)negotiation by workers’ are often obscured in discussion of forced labour (2008: 1432). Immigrant garment workers tend to have strong negative reactions to the term ‘slavery’ because of its connotations with regards to their own choices (see also Da Silva, 1997 and Buechler, 2004).
Esterci, writing of ‘slave labour’ in rural and agricultural work in Brazil, includes a discussion of mutual obligations in the context of ‘slave labour’ (2008: 5) which is relevant to our discussion. Workers in the garment workshops may earn less than the minimum negotiated by the Union of Seamstresses and be required to work more hours than allowed under Brazilian labour law, but this does not mean that there are no negotiations or mutually agreed upon standards. Twelve hour days, for example, are normal, but eighteen to twenty hour days are not considered acceptable over a long period of time.

Within the Brazilian context, accusations that migrant garment workers are subject to ‘slave labour’ implicitly or explicitly reference efforts to combat ‘slave labour’ in rural and agricultural work. These efforts rely largely on Article 149 of the Brazilian penal code which has outlawed ‘reducing someone to a condition analogous to slavery’ since 1940; they have had enough success that some view Brazil as a model in combating forced labour (see Costa, 2009). Where conditions in tied accommodation are unsafe or unhygienic, this can be part of the evidence base for labelling an employment situation as constitutive of ‘slave labour’ in rural and agricultural work. This is particularly true since 2003, when Article 149 was modified to stipulate ways in which ‘reducing someone to a condition analogous to slavery’ can be accomplished, including ‘submitting the worker to … an exhaustive workday, by submitting him/her to degrading conditions.’ Definitions of degrading conditions themselves are not well codified, but De Brito Filho is a good starting point. He states that ‘work in degrading conditions’ is characterised by a lack of guarantees around standards for health and safety and for conditions of work, housing, hygiene, respect and nutrition (De Brito Filho, 2006: 13).

Where wages earned by migrant workers are considered low, this can sometimes be justified in public discourse by comparison with the lack of opportunities in the workers’ home regions. But degrading conditions in the combined living and working spaces for garment workers are harder to justify, and these enter into accusations of ‘slave labour’ in the garment workshops. The São
Paulo City Council’s enquiry into ‘labour analogous to slavery’ in the garment workshops, for example, emphasises ‘precarious’ housing conditions in addition to debt bondage mechanisms. It mentions exposed electrical wires, flammable materials, the increased risk of accidents due to exhaustion after working long hours, poor hygiene conditions, lack of adequate hygiene facilities, closed and sometimes boarded-up windows, increased incidence of tuberculosis due to lack of ventilation and lack of nutrition in the meals provided (Câmara Municipal de São Paulo, 2006: 25). Media reports and advocacy groups also highlight these conditions.

Food and meals are central issues to workers’ evaluations of the conditions in which they have been employed. Danilo, for example, when asked if the owners of one workshop he was employed in were ‘good people,’ responded ‘… not everybody is good in all things. I used to work in Vila Guilherme;’ (a São Paulo neighbourhood) ‘there the food was very good; there was plenty, it was very good, there was fruit, everything.’ From the perspective of someone running workshop, Elías stated that he treats people well and mentioned that he doesn’t give them ‘just any food, no. The best food, that I like, for everybody … rice, beans, sausage every day, or eggs, I make a really good meal! Everybody eats the same food that I do, that I like.’ Zoraida, who had travelled from Bolivia with María and worked in the same workshop, from where they both later escaped, evaluated her treatment on the basis of the food received:

‘She [María] ran away first, then I ran away with my sister, because she [the woman who brought them to Buenos Aires] was treating us badly, because the food wasn’t what it was supposed to be. The food was very heavy, like here in Bolivia, pasta, an egg, something like that. But meat is much cheaper over there [in Buenos Aires] so they were lying to us. They were saying that things were more expensive. But it wasn’t true. For that reason we ran away’.

In the context of a focus group discussion, Gabriel explained his perspective as he transitioned from employment in a workshop to running his own workshop. Food again is central to the
understanding of the oficinista’s responsibility in treating workers well. He stated, ‘…many times if you were treated like that … I wouldn’t want them to go through what I did.’ By ‘what he went through,’ he was referring to his initial harsh employment experience during which he sometimes had to mix sugar or salt with water as a means of battling hunger and dehydration. Now an employer, he stated, ‘I have one employee – I have a wife and one employee (working with me). They have every freedom, eat when they want, make juice, eat fruit, they have everything…’

Where the evaluation of the meals provided is negative, this is often because of health problems associated with the food. Teófila, for example, stated that she left one workshop she used to be employed in because she was unhappy. She said that they served, ‘rice, salad, a bit of potato…’ Asked if she meant that the amount of food was insufficient, she stated, ‘It was enough, but at this other job, there is bread, vegetables, stews with meat, a balanced diet. You need to eat vegetables, fibre, carbohydrates, all of this is necessary.’ Later in the interview, she stated that shortly after leaving that workshop, she sought medical treatment and discovered that she was anaemic. Similarly, Isabela associates health problems experienced by herself (gastritis) and her husband (intestinal problems requiring surgery) with the food served by the Korean employers she worked with in the first years after arriving in São Paulo.

Food and housing then are emblematic of the treatment received by workers. The sensitivity around this issue was brought out by the comment of one oficinista in São Paulo who offered to show one of the authors his workshop, giving permission to take photos. When she took a photograph of the bathroom, he stated, ‘We are humble but we try to keep things clean’ (see Picture 1).

Picture One.
While the initial period of employment involves a range of sacrifices, workers feel justified in demanding respect for their well-being. Complaints around food and housing therefore have more validity within this construction of the labour relationship. For example, Teófila had quit her previous job after failing to negotiate a high enough wage, given her desire to send remittances to Bolivia to support her son. She explained that after leaving and finding a new job she encountered her former employers on the street, who raised their wage offer in a bid to get her to return. Instead of responding to the offer of increased wages, she told them that she was happier in the new workshop where there were ‘no fights about the bathroom, the bathrooms are good. Your door was broken, there’s no hot water, it’s cold…’ In her telling of this interaction, complaints about conditions seem to trump any issues related to wage levels. Food and housing conditions, then, are open for discussion in a way that wages, hours and the employment relation itself are not.

This is not to say that migrant garment workers never employ a language of slavery. Tomás, for example, whose experience was introduced in the previous section, explicitly used the label of slavery to describe working conditions in some of the workshops. When describing feeling lost at his first job, being given an old sewing machine and not knowing how to operate it, he said: ‘You have to work day and night, a mess, the people themselves enslave you. Sometimes, the same people enslave you, like Sabina was telling you. A Bolivian enslaves another Bolivian, or
anyone else for that matter.’ He went on to mention that it was those who came first who are to blame. Others used a language of slavery to describe their experience as migrant workers more generally. Gabriel, who had initially experienced a situation that could be described as trafficking and then worked at a series of garment workshops in São Paulo before setting up his own workshop, considered the phrase carefully. He stated, ‘Being a slave of the boss is different than being a slave to work … the Koreans (contractors) pay very little, and we, to get a little more, have to push a little harder, so that we are slaves to work.’ Jaime in Buenos Aires said: ‘Here we work like dogs, worse than slaves’.

However, as stated above, the label of slavery is also strongly resisted, particularly when migrants feel that this is imposed by organisations advocating for workers’ rights. This became particularly clear in the 2006 incidents when six Bolivians, four of them children, lost their lives when their garment workshop in Buenos Aires caught fire. The police inspections that followed resulted in the closure of at least 41 garment workshops (Clarín, 2006a). Mobilisations highlighted two main points: (i) the pressure further up the production chain for tighter production scales; and (ii) rejection of the ‘slave worker’ label (Clarín, 2006b). Of paramount importance to those who mobilised was the protection of their source of employment as well as the regularisation of their migration status (Clarín, 2006b), which, as discussed in previous sections, is often used by employers to exploit recently arrived garment workers. The term ‘slavery’ was perceived to justify the closing of the workshops, which for the workers meant a loss of their source of income as well as housing. As of 2008, when labour inspectors in São Paulo found conditions they deemed to be constitutive of ‘slave labour’ in the workshops, the most likely outcome for undocumented workers was receiving an order of deportations. Sara, who had pooled resources with her siblings to open a workshop outside the city, therefore linked a story about the emotional toll of her uncle’s deportation from Brazil with her complaints about how Bolivians are referred to as "slaves."
As stated above, these initial periods of employment are conceived of as time-delimited. This was illustrated by the reaction from members of a focus group to one participant’s description of her income and working hours. Petrona stated that she had been in Brazil for three years and was earning R$400 per month (roughly the monthly minimum wage). Asked a follow-up question about her schedule, she added that she worked from 7am until midnight (more than the legally allowed hours under Brazilian law). Other participants in the focus group simultaneously responded, ‘Still?’ After a further interaction with Petrona, participants were asked a question about income and Beatriz discussed the issue at length before stating, ‘but I see that she is earning very little, very little,’ and Elías added, ‘Me too.’ Both Beatriz and Elías are oficinistas previously employed in workshops.

Her fellow Bolivian migrants working in or running sewing workshops were intimating that she should no longer be working so hard for such a low income, given that she has been working in São Paulo for three years already. It is only considered acceptable to work long hours for others earning minimum wage plus room and board during an initial period, an idea which can be reinforced if this initial period is undertaken at a younger age. Some oficinistas who participated in the focus group expressed a preference for younger workers. The conversation soon turned to the relation between age and productivity; a number of those in their thirties expressed the feeling that they were already ‘old,’ no longer able to keep up the same pace of work they had in their twenties.

Gabriel’s story illustrates another aspect of how unfree forms of labour become embedded in workers’ relationships with their employers. Finding it difficult to work as a barber in La Paz, he responded to an ad on the radio announcing opportunities to work as a sewing machine operator in Brazil. He travelled with approximately 30 people, who would work in two sewing workshops when they arrived in São Paulo; the two Bolivian oficinistas travelled with them. Before leaving
Bolivia, they were told a story about an undocumented Bolivian being killed by a Brazilian police officer. The oficinistas kept his identity documents, which prevented him and many of his colleagues from leaving. When his request for his documents was refused, he decided to ‘escape’ without his documents. A year later he returned to demand his identity documents back. He threatened to make a complaint against the oficinista if she did not give him back the documents:

‘And she said to me, ‘No, you need to recognise what I did for you. You have to be grateful.’ I said, ‘No, you exploited me.’ There was a discussion and then she cried. And it was a woman, not a man, and she lived with a guy who was not her husband and had five kids. She said she had brothers, a mother (to help support). So I became a little sad too because she was crying, maybe out of necessity also. She showed me that thanks to her I am here. So then I gave her 150 or 100 reais to give me back my documents.’

When he was asked to clarify, or expand on, this point during the focus group, Elias then offered to explain the issue. He stated that Gabriel’s former employer was telling him that ‘he had to “recognise that I brought you from there, that I paid for your trip, that I taught you to sew, I gave you food,” all of this.’ This incident and its interpretation illustrate the complex relations structured by perceptions of loyalty and obligations through which seemingly voluntary transactions take place. These combine with the expected payoffs to the investment made while young, here constructed as a ‘learning’ period.

The temporality of migrant garment workers’ view of their stay is critical for understanding why they continue to accept working conditions which they themselves identify as exploiting. As long as they see their work in garment workshops as temporary, they are prepared to put up with very long working hours, below average pay and uncomfortable living accommodation. Their attitude towards working conditions often changes when their migration objective shifts towards accepting at least a medium-term stay in the destination country, that is, a few years as opposed
to a few months. As some of the experiences outlined above suggest, their attitude also changes once they become aware of the prevailing working conditions for other migrants locally.

Here it is important to point out that even when migrant garment workers become aware of the host country work legislation, such as legal working hours, minimum or collectively bargained pay and holiday entitlement, they generally do not expect to enjoy these benefits and protection under national legislation. In 2008 many newcomers in Buenos Aires were still expected to work 18 hours a day.

A small number of interviewees (three) mentioned the existence of emerging unions for informal garment workers. Armando, who had been to Buenos Aires at least three times since the 1990s, mentioned that he began meeting with other garment workers on a regular basis to improve working conditions in garment workshops. However, he did not see the project to the end given that he returned to Bolivia. Pablo, who arrived in Buenos Aires in 2000 and eight years later continued to work in garment work as a formal worker, was affiliated to a garment workers’ union. However, his experience of the union was negative. He claimed that if an employee lodged a complaint, for example, about his pay, he or she would be automatically downgraded to a worse post. He pointed out that this was only the case for migrant workers and seldom the case for Argentinean employees. José was also automatically affiliated to the union after three months of finding legal work in a garment workshop. He stated that most Bolivian workers did not take advantage of the benefits offered by union affiliation, such as free school material for their children. Maira on the other hand stated that she did not know of any unions who protect migrant garment workers.

The overall structure enabling those practices, described above as restricting workers’ freedoms, is the combination of living and working space (including provision of meals) that typifies the employment arrangements in these workshops. The fact that workers are far from 'home' and are consequently housed in a workspace creates an arrangement enables a specific time regime: a
standard workday of twelve hours or more. These long working hours are problematic in terms of workers’ well-being and in terms of workers’ ability to transcend the vulnerabilities associated with their status as newcomers, which they might do by finding time to learn about local laws and local organisations and to form relationships outside the workshop.

We can see that there is a particular time-space constructed in these workshops (Massey 1992; May and Thrift, 2001). This is a result in part of workers’ status as newcomers as well as the idea that they are acquiring critical skills that will enable them to progress to better jobs, both in terms of their payment as well as work conditions. Mobility is not just inherently spatial but inherently temporal as well (Urry, 1999). The time-space of the workshops also results from the interaction of these with other timescapes, such as the demands faced by employers and contractors in regards to production deadlines and flexibility, demands characteristic of the garment industry.

6) Mobility, Unfreedom and Development

Besides enabling the incorporation of everyday acts into our analysis, a broader temporal lens and a long-term view therefore allows us to comment on the relationship between mobility, unfreedom and development. This is particularly relevant given that migrants’ initial justifications for seeking work abroad are generally related to improving their own and their families’ wellbeing as well as aspirations of upward social mobility (Appadurai, 2004; Kothari, 2008) in the country of origin or at destination. As in some of the examples above, many garment workers who stay in the host country for a number of years are able to open their own workshops, earning sustainable incomes and in some cases purchasing their own homes. These oficinistas can be seen as an example which newer workers aspire to emulate.

As the multi-sited nature of the research with migrants in Buenos Aires reveals, many migrants are able to invest the income earned in their home communities. Fieldwork included interviews
in Buenos Aires and with members of the same community in the place of origin, a
neighbourhood on the outskirts of Cochabamba, the fourth largest city in Bolivia. In a few cases,
the same person was interviewed in both places at different points in time but this was not the
case for most interviewees. Fieldwork also included a statistically representative survey of the
neighbourhood carried out in 2002 and again in 2008.

Although most interviewees gave the impression that most households in Barrio Grande in
Cochabamba had somebody abroad, this was not the case. By 2008 the incidence of migration
among women was 20 percent while for men it was slightly higher at 24 percent. Survey data
indicates that for most their main reason for migration was work: this was the case for 88
percent of all women and 84 percent of all men who had migrated. Most fulfilled their objective,
given that 86 percent of all women and 87 percent of all men worked while abroad\textsuperscript{iii}.

Migrants in part endure difficult and exploitative working conditions because of their aspiration
to improve their material conditions. There is significant evidence of migration being linked to
higher incomes. In 2008 households that have ever had a migrant abroad (either currently or in
the past) had more than double the income of those that never had migrants ($648 vs. $304 US
dollars). The average monthly income mentioned by those who had been to Argentina was $607
US dollars, much higher than the wages earned by those in Buenos Aires during their first job in
the garment sector. In fact, some managed to earn well over $1000 US dollars per month,
particularly those who had time to become established in the garment sector before the 2001
economic crisis. The relatively high wages earned on average by migrants in Argentina are a
further incentive for workers to remain in employment, despite difficult and often exploitative
working conditions.

Savings were also significant, with returnees mentioning the average amount saved in the region
of $14,319 US dollars, over stays of various durations -- a significant amount of savings, given
the average monthly household income of $304. Remittances\textsuperscript{xiv} and savings are used to cover
everyday consumption, for example, by improving the household’s diet. Migrants and their relatives who remain in Bolivia also invest in housing. Some have been able to turn their single storey, two room adobe houses into multiple storeys, brick houses. Of those who had been to Argentina, over half invested their remittances and savings into building a house with a further 11 percent investing in a house and a car; 14 percent bought a plot; 7 percent improved their house. Investment choices were very similar for men and women, except that none of the women invested in a computer and a car only while a few men did.

These figures do not convey the full extent of the significance of housing. The house plays a very important symbolic role in not only encouraging emigration but also discouraging return until a certain level of savings has been achieved. Picture Two below shows the type of house that has benefitted from a small amount of investment from remittances, having a brick wall and an expanded section at the front. However, it is still mainly built of adobe, the roof is corrugated iron and the toilet outside the main house. Picture Three shows the type of house that has benefitted from some more investment from remittances and migrants’ savings. Its main construction material is bricks. Yet, it is single storey and the toilet is outside. Picture Four shows the type of houses that are now being built typically with remittances from Spain – multi storey brick houses with tiled roofs, balconies and modern facilities, such as internal bathrooms and kitchens.

Picture Two. Picture Three.
These figures and examples are only indicative of the amount of money and savings achieved by those who migrate to Argentina. However, they give an indication of some of the incentives and reasons for migrants seeking work in garment workshops and then staying on, despite the types of unfreedoms they experience. They clearly see these experiences of unfreedom as temporary, as situations to be endured in their attempts to achieve the kinds of ‘development’ described above.
In this paper we highlight the importance of bringing temporality into the analysis of unfree labour relations. This includes considering how these relations change over time as well as taking seriously migrant workers’ dreams and aspirations for a better future. This analysis allows for workers’ own understandings of their experiences to come into view in a way that terms such as ‘slave labour’ may fail to do.

The temporary nature of the worst conditions and most extreme unfreedoms is not just better because it eventually comes to an end; nor worse because workers are treated as ‘disposable.’ Rather, some workers are able to achieve goals which might otherwise be unattainable through enduring a period of sacrifice. This is a double-edged sword, however. The achievements of this group serve to sustain the difficult and even degrading conditions prevalent in the garment workshops, as some degree of consent is obtained from other workers who seek to emulate their example. The risks are great, given that economic success is far from guaranteed.

However, migrant garment workers’ experiences are far from being related solely to powerlessness and resignation. In fact, we find instances of resistance and contestation, particularly around the immediate biological needs of garment workers, in relation to food and to a lesser extent housing. While most of our interviewees accepted long working hours, limited local mobility and low pay because they saw these as being part of that initial sacrifice required to get entry in this sector, they contested poor and insufficient food, which was being offered as part of their remuneration. In some instances it was food, rather than retention of passports or extremely long working hours, which led to the garment worker fleeing the workshop.

Migration status is also significant and our analysis shows that mobility must also be thought of in its temporal dimensions as well as its spatial ones. The interviewees’ status as migrants and therefore non-citizens significantly increased their vulnerability to experiences of unfreedom and
facilitated the combination of living and working space which exacerbates this vulnerability further. This was particularly the case when they first arrived in São Paulo and Buenos Aires. As newcomers, they were less aware of the national legislation or existing work practices. Garment workshop owners used their undocumented status as a means to control their movements by instilling fear of deportation. In addition, the wages at destination, even when extremely low for local standards, generally compared favourably with those in places of origin, increasing migrants’ willingness to accept low pay and poor working conditions.

We therefore find complexity and a variety of experiences in what are generally termed by the media and some civil society organisations in both cities as well as some academic writing as conditions of ‘slavery’ or ‘slave labour.’ These labels might imply the need to immediately remove workers from the situation. And in fact, the response to unfreedom experienced by migrant workers often leads to the expulsion of non-citizens from the national state territory and deportation to their home country. But removing the exploited subject from a particular scene is only a 'solution' to a time- and space- delimited problem of 'slavery.' But unless alternative livelihoods and opportunities are created in the process, this fails to address the longer-term view of the issues which migrant workers are, within the context of structural constraints, attempting to resolve. Our analysis suggests that attention to temporality allows insight into workers’ own understanding of their employment experiences, including those of unfree labour, which in turn might allow the construction of a more representative and more effective platform for action.

8) REFERENCES


Clarín (2006a) Cerraron otros 11 talleres y 3000 bolivianos marchan en protesta [11 garment workshops were closed and 3000 Bolivians marched in protest], *Clarín*, 6 April, (Buenos Aires: Clarín).

Clarín (2006b) Los trabajadores bolivianos entregaron un petitorio a los enviados de Evo Morales [Bolivian workers deliver a petition to representatives of Evo Morales] *Clarín*, 8 April, (Buenos Aires: Clarín).


Acknowledgements omitted for anonymity.

We should clarify that in Brazil when the Federal Government talks about ‘slavery’, it generally refers to internal migrants, while the São Paulo City Government recently set up a commission inquiry into conditions analogous to slavery. Argentina lacks similar initiatives into slavery or conditions analogous to slavery, save for civil society mobilization, which we discuss later on in the article.

Migrants’ reliance on social networks also facilitates trafficking but social networks are not essential for trafficking to take place. It is also important to acknowledge that most of the research on trafficking deals with trafficking across national borders, due to the focus of the UN Protocol on Trafficking. However, similar practices take place within national borders, but are often under-researched, or referred to by labels other than ‘trafficking.’

It should be noted that the definition has been (re)interpreted by the ILO’s supervisory bodies to counter the importance seemingly given to initial consent. It is now understood ‘that the consent of workers is irrelevant when there has been deception or fraud, or the retention of identity documents in order to achieve this consent’ (Belser, 2005: 2-3).

In neither case did we seek to limit participants to those who were experiencing or had experienced conditions that amounted to trafficking, forced labour or ‘slavery.’ We were therefore not likely to identify participants still employed under extreme forms of unfreedom, although as indicated some participants had experienced this at earlier points.

One Bolivian worker in Buenos Aires mentioned a working day of 21 hours, and another mentioned working 20 to 22 hours per day at his first job in São Paulo, but these were exceptions. These cases are discussed in more detail below.

This was a reference to inflated debt payments. In Portuguese: ‘…eu cheguei a pagar a eles, né?’

It is also indicative that many stories of deportation were circulating among Bolivian migrant workers but none were actually found to have been deported.

Fictive kin.

He was automatically signed up to the garment workers’ union once he was given a legal contract to work.

We do not wish to imply that all workers achieve these objectives. Some workers may put up with degrading conditions and unfreedoms in trying to emulate the example of successful migrants and then fail. Workers also face the real possibility of encountering illness, violence and not being able to achieve their aims and aspirations. Moreover, we do not wish to imply that nothing should be done about these conditions.

The difference between the stated reason for migration and what they did while abroad relates to a small number of women who were unable to find work and some men who said they migrated for a reason other than work (for example study, to join their spouse or out of curiosity) but then worked while abroad.

Of the income earned, on average migrants sent $106 back to their relatives in the neighbourhood on a monthly basis.

If women invested in a car, they combined it with investing in a house.