

SERVITUDE AND SLAVE TRADE: THE CASE OF BOLIVIAN
IMMIGRANTS WHO WORK IN CLANDESTINE TEXTILE WORKSHOPS
OF THE BUENOS AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA

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Abstract:

Part of the Bolivian immigrant workforce in Argentina was recruited in their country of origin through local agents that belong to an organized network of human traffickers. They arrive to Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (BAMA) where they are submitted to exploitation of manpower in semi-slavery conditions in clandestine textile workshops. This process implies three different types of crimes: 1) human trafficking; 2) human slave trafficking (“trata”) and 3) slavery. Our general hypothesis is that the trafficking networks are articulated through “migratory paths” that are used for two purposes: for gathering workers, and for their later retention in the clandestine textile workshops. These migratory paths expose migrants to certain structural processes and life experiences. This paper focuses on those pains and diseases suffered by this group of migrants that are linked to their work and their way of life in our society – among which tuberculosis stands out as a disease with a growing incidence.

KEY WORDS: Bolivian Migration, Human Slave Trafficking networks, Clandestine textile workshops, Work and Living conditions, Tuberculosis

Introduction:

Theoretical and methodological approach to the studied subjects and matter.

The studies on Bolivian immigrants in Argentina are not scarce. On the contrary, it is possible to document a significant proportion of work done on this group in comparison to other collective immigrant groups in the country, produced by authors of the different disciplines of Social Sciences.¹

The research that I have been conducting address the complexity of the health/disease/care processes of Bolivian immigrants in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (BAMA) focusing on the sufferings, diseases, pains and ailments – amongst which Tuberculosis stands out as a disease with a growing incidence in this group-, linked to their way of life² / work in our society.

The path of analysis developed in my works recovers the perspective of the actor inside a relational and process oriented approach that includes, not only the whole set of the social actors, their structure of what is meaningful and of interest, but also considers the asymmetric relationships – in terms of dominance/subordination – and the context in which the subjects are embedded.

In this sense, a key starting point is that the inequality and the precarious social and work environment that characterize the way of life of the Bolivian immigrants that work – and in many cases live, together with their children – in clandestine textile workshops of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (BAMA) are, at the same time, a structural process and a life experience in their migratory paths. As such, these processes are embedded in the bodies – they are bodified (Csordas, 1994) – deploying themselves in a variety of ways of social sufferings, as also in ways of interpreting, acting and responding to them.

¹ However, research published from a sociocultural analysis perspective of the phenomenon are not abundant. This relative deficit in the anthropological production of the subject is greater still in the health field, it being a not very developed area in our country.

² Thru the ways of life category it is possible to rebuild migratory paths and life contexts from the perspective of the actual subjects-actors, establishing the links and the articulations between the macro-social processes and the individual stories. (Grimberg, 2004)

Parting from a historical-structural approach that allows to relate contextual material variables with experiences, perceptions and representations of the actual subjects, I center on the specific field of occupational health, recognizing the living conditions and the characteristics of the work process as fundamental in the wearing down of health, as sources of diseases and as important agents of influence in the morbidity of workers (Laurell, 1986, Goldberg, 2009)

With respect to the methodological perspective adopted, it is considered in the canons of contemporary ethnographic studies (Atkinson y Hamersley, 1994) as a privileged research strategy for approaching the complexity of the social processes and the everyday life experiences, retrieving the knowledge and practices, the experiences and the strategies developed by the subjects in a rational approach that accounts for, both the articulation of the phenomena's in the global context of the practices as much as for the functioning of social-cultural and political processes. So that, both the structural factors as much as the micro-social factors, are considered during the moment of collecting and analyzing the data.

The ethnographic fieldwork carried out combines the participant observation, the in depth interviews and the analysis of narratives, together with the compilation and bibliographic analysis and the use of secondary sources. In this way, the information gathered through the interviews is confronted with those registered from observations and informal conversations, with the objective of identifying the contradictions and the commonalities, and as a control technique of the fieldwork instruments.

Regarding the subjects of analysis sampled, I have covered Bolivian immigrants of both genders, of working age, that have worked or work in the field of the black economy, mainly in the textile industry in BAMA.

With regards to the observation fields sampled, fieldwork observations have been done in the following environments of the everyday life of the study subject:

- The working environment: administrative-migratory situation; working and contracting conditions; main health risks; exposure factors linked to the infection and the development of tuberculosis in clandestine textile workshops.
- The domestic environment: location, housing type and conditions, considering that it can be located in the same space as the working-productive environment (for example, textile workshops); composition and dynamics of the domestic-family group.
- The health services environment: hospital and primary care units.
- That of the social organizations and immigrant groups: Cooperativa La Alameda (made up in large part by former workers of clandestine textile workshops, mainly of Bolivian origin); agrupación Simbiosis Cultural (made up of young Bolivians that live in Argentina) and the Movimiento de Costureros de Inmigrantes Bolivianos (MCIBOL), social movement made up of textile workers of BAMA that have the objective of reflecting, spreading word and acting upon the working problems of the Bolivian textile workers.

Socio-cultural relevance of the phenomenon.

From the 1990's decade onwards, a strong increase in the population of Bolivian origin is observed with respect to other groups, representing for the year 2001 26% of the total immigrants from neighboring countries that live in the country and the second nationality after the Paraguayan. This, according to official estimates from the last census, since the non official information managed by the General Consulate of the Republic of Bolivia in Argentina give the number of 2.000.000 Bolivians living in our country. Of these, approximately between 700.000 and 1.000.000 are said to be illegal residents.³ But not only in quantitative terms does this immigrant group acquire relevance. From the perspective of socio-cultural analysis, the Bolivian represents one of the immigrant groups with the largest stigma (according to Goffman, 1980) in the Argentine society in terms of "negative visibility". This, considering the practices and arguments of discriminatory type of which they are subject to commonly, both for their

³ Beyond the statistics, it is important to point out the fact that it results very difficult to establish reliable figures of the true volume of said population, considering that, on one hand, the official data does not contemplate those immigrants that find themselves in an "irregular" migratory-administrative condition, without their documentation in order. And, on the other hand, that the Bolivian migratory process is characterized by a constant movement of the subjects between Bolivia and Argentina, a factor that obstacles even more the possibility of obtaining precise data. (Goldberg, 2010b: 5)

general condition of “immigrants” or “foreigners” and for the simple fact being “Bolivians”.⁴ (Goldberg, 2010b: 6)

On the other hand, as other migratory flows that intensified in the main cities of Argentina especially in the 1990’s decade, like those of the Paraguayans and the Peruvian, those of the Bolivians to our country suggest an eminently work sourced migration. Attracted fundamentally by the exchange rate peso-dollar parity of the so called Convertibility, these immigrants, in most cases, entered the country illegally and inserted themselves into the flexible labor market, taking up in many cases precarious jobs in the informal or black economic field. (Goldberg, 2008)

With respect to this, Grimson (1999) points out that within this group there are no high unemployment rates detected, since in the case that insertion into the labor market is not achieved they tend to return to their country of origin. Nonetheless, what is easily verified amongst them is the high level of precariousness that determines their working and living conditions in our society. As a direct consequence of the above, we must mention the health problems and the risks involved many times when working in these conditions.

Bolivian immigrant workers in clandestine textile workshops: capitalism recreates slavery.

A part of the Bolivian immigrants that live in Argentina were recruited in their country of origin thru local agents that belong to an organized network of human traffickers, which’s finality is the exploitation of manpower in semi-slavery conditions in clandestine textile workshops in BAMA. It is worth pointing out that we are in the

⁴ The Bolivian immigrants constitute a social group of the Argentine society that is especially vulnerable, subject to a triple process of stigmatization: because of their phenotypic features (“Indians”); because of their condition of a low class in the structure of the destination host country (“poor”); and because of the derogatory meaning attributed to “being Bolivian”, with their implicit social and cultural connotations (“bolitas”). Additionally, a fourth source of stereotyping appears as a result of the combination of all the above, feasible to be identified in some environments of the public and private health services, including the cleaning personnel of these: the one of the “tuberculosis infected Bolivian patient”; linked, to the labor in the clandestine textile workshops of BAMA.

presence of three different types of crimes: 1) human trafficking; 2) human slaved trafficking (“trata”) and 3) slavery.⁵



Our general hypothesis is that the trafficking networks are articulated based on the migratory paths that are used for two purposes: both for gathering workers and for the later retention of these in the clandestine textile workshops. Unlike other migratory processes in which the “migratory chains” contribute to the insertion of the immigrants in the destiny country (Goldberg, 2007) in this case these are used to develop a recruitment and exploitation system of workers whose objective is to provide manpower to the clandestine textile workshops. In many of the cases studied from interviews with study subjects, these networks rely on recruitment and exploitation of family members,

⁵ The traffic refers to the transportation of people from their place of origin to one of destiny, in which he will be exploited. In this case, those that are recruited in Bolivia and cross the border illegally, for their own benefit or for that of others. On the other hand, “trata” (human slaved trafficking) consists of recruiting people in their place of origin through deception, including a verbal contract to be paid at year end thru the employer (also Bolivian), that covers the costs living and travelling retaining their documentation thru coercion. Last, the crime of slavery is stated in the Penal Code: under the Vth Title (crimes against freedom), Chapter 1 (Crimes against the Freedom of an Individual) of the Penal Code. In the same way it is found in the Supplementary convention for the Abolition of Slavery of 1956 (ONU), ratified by the Argentine State thru the law No. 11.925 that condemns any form of slavery. To this is added: The Palermo Protocol (ONU) to “prevent, suppress and punish the human slave trafficking (trata), especially women and children” that Argentina ratified in 2002 thru the law No. 25.632; and the 2008 Law No. 26.364 for the prevention of slave trafficking of humans and assistance to the victims, from the moment the person arrives from Bolivia, starts working in a workshop and is deprived of their freedom, since exiting this is prevented by force.

in which a close relative or a good friend "tricks" the person to travel and submits him or her to work in the workshops.

The mechanism works in the following way: at the moment of hiring them in Bolivia, the local agents of the workshop owners –relatives or not- make copies of the personal documents of all the members of the family of the worker. In this way, once they are installed in the workshops, the owners threaten the workers telling them that if they rebel, escape or act against their interests, the family members left in Bolivia “will pay” the consequences.

This way, the incorporation of Bolivian immigrant workers to these workshops through human trafficking must be understood as the retention of the worker to a circuit in which each and every one of the productive units, that is each of the workshops, are integrating parts of a same network. On one of the extremes are the members of the community in charge of the caption of the worker in Bolivia; on the other the entrepreneurs of the industry that posses the money necessary to, thru their middlemen, outsource the work in the workshops. This production environment requires intense manpower and possesses two special attributes that facilitate the clandestine practices in the industry: it only requires a small-scale capital investment and is a trade that is relatively easy to learn (Lieutier, 2010). Also, other factors that are determinant in the productive process coexist to highlight: the degree of flexibility, that allow a productive unit to be assembled, disassembled and transferred easily from one site to another; the fact of it being subject to the fluctuations in the demand, that is, that it is “pro-cyclical”; the seasonality of the production, that accelerates when starting the summer and winter seasons; and the displacement and outsourcing of the industry, that allows the production to be done in different places with a constant replacement of primary materials and products, that way maintaining the rest of the productive stages without having the quality of the product altered. The factors listed make it possible to, amongst other things, combine within the value adding process legal stages with other illegal-clandestine stages.

Regarding to this, it is important to note that, unlike what happens with the maquilas of Southeast Asia, Central-America and the Caribbean, in which the large firms “legally”

outsource their production, the Argentine labor law, on the contrary, does not allow for forced labor or piecework. Not only that, but according to the Labor Law 12.713, the entrepreneurs are responsible for the conditions in which their products are produced. The clandestine workshop arises then, not as an effect of poverty, but as a key piece in the value adding chain of the clothing industry.

It's worth pointing out that the existence of clandestine workshops in the city of Buenos Aires comes to light upon the fire in the workshop of Luis Viale, an event that exposed a reality that up until then was ignored by public opinion.⁶ The mass media deployed on that opportunity a speech centered on the nationality of the victims and their condition as irregular immigrants. So being that way at first the establishments – the clandestine textile workshops – were linked with the informal or black commerce: both with the counterfeiting of brands and with the production of lower quality clothing, stigmatizing in this way the groups of lower resources that participate in markets in which the products are commercialized.

However, it was rapidly put to evidence that these workshops did not produce for these markets, but rather, very on the contrary, their production was oriented to the large brands. In this way the real meaning of the deregulation of the labor markets and the intensification of the illegal exploitation of manpower was trying to be hidden.

Although capitalism has been identified with the “salaried labor, located away from the family unit”, it is possible to detect throughout its history the way in which this system, in its own reproduction and expansion dynamics, has created and recreated various forms of production according to the circumstances and the particular economic needs, including those already thought to be extinct. In this context, the apparition and disappearance of different forms of production like the domestic-family economy or slavery, must be interpreted as the capability of the capital to develop different strategies according to its accumulative logic. (Goldberg, 2010b)

⁶ On the 30th of March 2006 a fire is produced in a clothing confectioning workshop located on the street Luis Viale 1269, City of Buenos Aires, in which 6 people lost their lives, all of Bolivian nationality: amongst them, four children.

In this way, in the clothing confection industry case covered, the decentralization and outsourcing of the production previously detailed is what leads the workshops to produce in those conditions of clandestinity and of overexploitation of the manpower.⁷



Occupational health as a social relation.

To consider the occupational health as a social relation from a holistic-relational perspective, supposes to cover different aspects (Goldberg, 2007; 2009). First of all, it results necessary to focus the work-health relation from the political dimension: for the case addressed, it is necessary to account for the whole process whereby these immigrants are recruited at origin, up to the way in which they are confined in the workshops and the conditions in which they work and live.

In this sense, the way of life of Bolivian immigrants of the BAMA that work in clandestine textile workshops is marked by conditions that in some cases come close to slavery: no contractual agreement, in an unhealthy and cramped, overcrowded

⁷ Lieutier (2010) points out that for each item of clothing that is sold in the market for \$100, the worker receives as payment \$1.8, whilst the workshop owner obtains \$1.30. The rest is distributed in the following way: 64% stays in the commercialization circuit, 11% represents the costs of the primary materials and 22% corresponds to taxes. On the other hand, it is estimated that 80% of the confectioning of clothing items outsourced to workshops is done under informal conditions or violating the basic human rights. The textile industry represents 25% of the non registered labor in the country with labor exploitation involved, whilst 3 of every 4 workers in the industry are not registered (Source: Fundación El Otro: www.elotro.org.ar). At the same time, there are around 3.000 clandestine textile workshops in the City of Buenos Aires, concentrated in the neighbourhoods of the south east of the city, whilst in the Buenos Aires suburbs the number would reach 15.000 workshops. Last, it is calculated that they are approximately 250.000 bolivian immigrant workers that work in different clandestine textile workshops in the country. (Source: Interview with Gustavo Vera, President of the Cooperativa La Alameda: Clarín, 12/4/09). (Goldberg, 2010b: 12)

environment, through intensive work days, of work overload with no breaks at all, and without having the corresponding occupational health check of the people that work and often live in the workshops, in some cases with their children. The workers keep their few belongings and sleep in bunk beds or hammocks in minimum sized bedrooms, overcrowded. These beds are known as “hot beds”, metaphor that refers to the permanent and continuous use that they are given aligned with the intense and uninterrupted work pace in the workshop: the bed does not ever have time to cool down, since when a worker gets up to commence a working shift, another one that has just finished his lies down in it. This is a bed that does not have an owner and that “functions” 24hs a day, 365 days a year.

Falling ill in the described living and working conditions is a frequent and recurrent event for these workers, men and women, and their children:

- Work is carried out in rooms that are crowded, cluttered and unventilated. The air is contaminated with particles of cloth, thread and dust, as well as the fluff produced by the machines.

- The number of hours and these circumstances provoke serious postural, respiratory and vision problems.

- For pregnant women the intensity of the work, exacerbated by dietary deficiencies, produces life-threatening risks to the mother and the baby. These include chronic anemia and a lowering of defenses that can lead to illnesses such as tuberculosis.

- In addition to the risk factors for tuberculosis that already have been mentioned -contaminants, crowding, fatigue, dietary deficiencies- the Bolivian workers develop the anxiety and depression associated with the “sufferings of migration” in a new environment. In most cases, the personal, family, residential, dietary and other cultural changes are experienced in clandestine workshops, and there are high rates of alcohol consumption.

From an epidemiological-social dimension, the relational approach adopted for an analysis of the occupational health of these immigrant workers refers to the work process in these clandestine textile workshops as the cornerstone of their ways of life in

the particular context of the destination host society, at the same time constituting a permanent destructive/deteriorating process for their physical, mental and psychic health; that may lead them to work accidents, to death due to infectious diseases like tuberculosis or to what happened in 2006 with the two Bolivian workers and the four Bolivian children deceased in the fire quoted beforehand. (Goldberg, 2008; 2010a)

In our case study, obtaining knowledge of the ways of life of the Bolivian immigrants that worked and lived in clandestine textile workshops thru their stories, the following of their therapeutical itineraries, accompanying them in their collective strategies of organization and demands, allows to confirm that their lives were, at one point in time, reduced to labor; a semi-slaved labor.

Therefore, the way Bolivian immigrants in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area suffer and die from tuberculosis is rooted in specific modes of life and work, constituted by their migratory process and the conditions under which their labour is integrated in our society.

Simbiosis Cultural organization members (young Bolivian immigrants) inquired Bolivian immigrant people that work in clandestine textile workshops:

- What do you do after work?
- How many clothes does your beer cost?
- Do your dreams fit in the textile workshop?
- Do they promise to repatriate exploitation?
- If this is your free time, the other is condenated time?
- Is this what you wanted to be when you were a child?
- How much more time will it take?

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