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# Critical Reflections on the Western Welfare State, Racial Capitalism, and Migratory Movements

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**Abstract:** This article presents a theoretical reflection on the structural causes that lead people to engage in migration processes from an anti-racist perspective. It looks at the historical context and the present times of neoliberal capitalism as a long term system, with its origins in the colonial enterprise. This is relevant as it gives rise to the asymmetries of power between North and South; to the racial division of labour; to the border control that turns immigrant people into the dangerous other, classifies people according to their origin, and grants them differential rights.

**Keywords:** racial capitalism; neoliberalism; decolonial turn; racism

## 1. Introduction

Since the last century, and particularly in the last two decades of the 21st century, migration flows have been characterised by the diversification of human movements at the global level. While some people migrate by choice, others do it out of necessity. According to [ACNUR \(2020\)](#), currently people migrate because of socio-economic or environmental problems, because they are seeking asylum or fleeing their territories, due to internal or external wars, or because of human rights violations ([Crawley and Skleparis 2017](#); [Fassin 2015](#)). What they all have in common are the severe restrictions on their mobility.

At a global level, more and more governments are applying restrictions on migratory flows; for example, it is difficult to grant visas or asylum and refugee policies are becoming more restrictive ([Fassin 2015](#)). [OIM \(2020\)](#) data show that countries such as Hungary, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have tightened their migration policies and are reluctant to accept especially irregular migration.

Migration management is exercised through bureaucratic control over people who try to cross borders. Measures implemented to restrict the movement of people range from the creation of walls and militarization of borders to the use of anti-immigrant laws. The legal system has developed control devices used to block people from moving, exclude them from social systems, prevent asylum, or to turn them into potentially deportable or criminal subjects for crossing borders ([Riera 2022](#)).

Western societies are the most resistant ones to receiving foreigners and they are the ones with most restrictions, even though statistics indicate that European countries receive the fewest migrants or refugees ([ACNUR 2020](#)). For instance, Sweden has tightened asylum policies and border control since 2016, making family reunification almost impossible ([Arco 2022](#)). The top receiving countries are in Asia and Africa ([ACNUR 2020](#)). Migrant and displaced communities are concentrated in these countries because the West has externalised its national borders to peripheral territories. For example, transit countries such as Morocco and Mexico are now absorbing and managing people's mobilisations towards the Global North.

Anti-foreigner stances are underpinned by the imaginary fear that sees immigrants as intruders who threaten the security and stability of social policies. Fears are appropriated by political parties and the media to spread negative discourses about immigrants and refugees.



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Racist figures such as “extremists”, terrorists, undocumented migrants, or “drug dealers” have been constructed around these people. The figure of the immigrant is nowadays linked to economic dependency and it is the figure that threatens the welfare state and Western culture (Kundnani 2022). This makes it possible to deflect the responsibility of governments and legitimises border control and security regimes (Álvarez 2022). Migration understood in terms of security and order conceals historical structural inequalities and, in particular, the negative impact of neoliberal policies behind migration flows.

Neoliberal capitalism has created new social inequality gaps and has become the excuse used by states to transform immigrants into the cause of welfare crises, job instability, and threats to national identity, based on the imaginary of a homogenous community. Moreover, neoliberalism has created its own structures of racial oppression (Kundnani 2022). In these structures, borders become key tools for reproducing racial and cultural hierarchies, and for setting spatial boundaries between different types of populations (Tuck and Yang 2021).

Certainly, many people flee their homelands because of economic, political, or social violence. However, analyses of migration place too much emphasis on the individual trajectories of migrants or on the pull factors of host societies. In contrast to this idea, this paper focuses on the material structures that fuel migration flows from the Global South to the Global North, two historically interconnected worlds, but with unequal geographical developments. These differences have been accentuated by neoliberalism, which has led to wide belts of impoverishment and surplus labour that is not exploited, but which feeds human displacement. This paper offers a theoretical reflection on the structural causes that force people to migrate, on the historical context in which unequal power relations between the Global North and South emerge, and on the welfare state as another expression of inequalities on a global scale. The reflections that emerge in this text insist that the lack of freedom of movement of people produces much violence and death. In addition, it proposes a modification of the coordinates on which migration studies have focused so far, in order to give priority to the structures that are generating oppressions and inequalities, which respond to public, economic, and national security policies.

## 2. The Welfare State Does Not Produce Immigration

The anti-immigrant population often believes that the development of the economy, the formal labour market, or social benefits are elements of attraction for migrants. As a result, people with a migrant background are often accused of overusing social benefits, weakening or putting the welfare state at risk. However, studies such as those by Muñoz de Bustillo and Grande (2017) deny that migrants overuse social benefits, especially because social protection models are linked to visas, work history, and residence.

“Welfare states” are those states in which more than half of the general budget is devoted to social policy. In the case of the European Union, there are different welfare models; there are the so-called consolidated ones and the less established ones, such as the Spanish one (Gómez and Luis 2014). All models seek to redistribute social risks and protect the population from loss of income due to illness, unemployment, or age (Muñoz de Bustillo and Grande 2017). The welfare state emerged from the need to enable economic growth with a stable political and social environment. In other words, it seeks to ensure that every citizen shares in the benefits of the economy, but with the state as the provider of services (Sánchez Morales and Díaz Moreno 2017).

Welfare states are promoters of rights, but they show a tendency to exclude people who do not meet certain criteria. In the case of Europe, it is often those without citizenship or formal employment, such as immigrants or refugees, who are excluded from benefits. However, the absence of redistribution policies or a welfare state opens up inequality gaps between people and between regions. For example, in the countries of the Global South, the lack of social policies and difficulties in accessing housing, well paid employment, and health care, among other things, can have repercussions on the expulsion of people.

State-provided services such as health, education, and pensions are highly valued by people and central to maintaining reasonable standards of living. However, the welfare state functions because it is linked to a well functioning economy, to social and power relations. This is why the arrival of neoliberalism has reduced the welfare state, because it has curbed state intervention in the economy and imposed limits on economic resources for social policies. The neoliberal order has modified social protection, partially privatized it, and made work more flexible. This has generated a division of the population between employees with stable working careers and self-employed, temporary, or precarious work. Faced with this scenario, the Western population fears a return to work without rights and the welfare state without welfare (De Sousa 2022).

The welfare state is considered a value that should be universalized because it improves people's material living conditions. This is why different countries have sought to imitate it, but this is not possible under the capitalist system. Firstly, because welfare states feed off the dispossession and resources of other territories (Romero 2018). Secondly, social welfare requires the maintenance of inequalities between regions in the North and South, and between people. This has negative effects, for if people in exploited territories are left without food, clothing, or housing, they will inevitably migrate or seek asylum.

Therefore, for the welfare state to be successful in the West, it requires that inequality be maintained in third countries. However, the discourse that has been most widely disseminated in academia is the one that stresses that the welfare state arose with the Fordist–Keynesian model of industrialization, and with the long struggle of the working class to achieve rights, quality employment, and a certain stability (Harvey 2007). Rights are usually read as virtues developed by the Western world, because it has been the one that has perfected the production techniques that have generated the economic wealth that has made it possible to achieve progress, welfare, honesty, rationality, transparency, and civilization (García 2016). These are important elements for achieving collective consciousness. From this perspective, both economic wealth and collective consciousness have not been achieved in other regions, such as those of the South, which have had to deal with a supposed “backwardness” due to their old ways of life, social malfunctioning, and economic stagnation.

Access to welfare creates lines of inequality between those societies that have it and those that do not. People with social protection gain access to rights and privileges, which are visible in improved quality of life, social security, and equity. This creates in people imaginaries of social advancement. The ascent is observed both in the improvement of material living conditions, as well as in the configuration of individual, sexual, women's, and LGBTI+ community freedoms. These freedoms are often assumed as values to be preserved and have allowed the West to represent itself as a paradise for women's equality and the emancipation of sexual diversity (Wekker 2016) or life without constraints. Therefore, in recent years, threats to individual freedoms and values have been arguments used to reject immigrants in Europe.

Governments often argue that the welfare state is an indispensable instrument for achieving social cohesion and economic stability (Gómez and Luis 2014). Therefore, for part of the population, social and material stability is at risk in the face of cultural diversity. The fear of instability leads people to uncritically accept the application of laws that hinder the mobility of migratory flows, without seeing the different forms of violence they produce in the bodies of immigrants.

It has been widely documented that, in recent decades, migration has been criminalised and presented as a problem, crisis, or invasion, which is why walls and migration controls have been built. The impact of these walls can be seen in the images that circulate in the media: bodies floating in the Mediterranean; the persecution of NGO activists working at the borders; the express return of migrants or their conversion into political weapons; refugee camps set up in border areas (Riera 2022).

Riera (2022) argues that Europe is in a fortress and its population is normalising the deaths of thousands of people. These deaths are read as “accidents”. However, they

are part of the necropolitics of the border and its externalisation to peripheral territories. Necropolitics further divides people into those who have the right to life and those who do not, and it gives states the right to “defend” their own borders. The implementation of anti-immigrant laws to defend the Schengen area is not the result of chance; it is the historical continuity of the colonial project and the accumulation of capital resulting from the extractivist industry and the productive processes of relocation (Arco 2022).

It has been documented that former metropolises extract large economic benefits from the Global South through development projects, business, finance, and arms firms. For example, France and Canada are active in the extractivist mining industry, while Sweden, France, and Spain are among the leading arms exporters (Arco 2022). These companies often generate processes of dispossession in Southern communities and deepen inequalities. Not only are people economically impoverished, but they also fuel migration to the Global North, which local people experience as an invasion.

When analyzing migration from the South, research generally tends to separate it from the structures that generate precariousness on a global scale. Migratory flows are approached from a developmentalist productivist viewpoint or focus on identity transformations. Few research studies focus on the processes that drive people out of their communities or how the laws on foreigners affect migrants during transit or once they arrive. In order to analyze how the inequalities that fuel migration have been constructed, we consider it important to begin by characterizing the historical process in which social stratifications emerge, stratifying people by class, gender, and origin.

### 3. The Decolonial Turn: The North Is a Product of the South

Thinkers of the decolonial turn agree that the roots of the inequalities and power relations that divide humanity into a part that has the right to exist and a part that is disposable (Vergès 2022) are rooted in colonialism and slavery. These processes connected the regions of Europe, America, Asia, and Africa through migratory flows and commercial exchange, although initially the links were not systemic and regular.

The colonial enterprise with its different forms of exploitation, which the metropolises exercised over the colonies, created the original accumulation of capital and the constitution of the non-being as a place of enunciation for subjects whose ethno-racial identities have been inferiorised through processes of racialization in all areas of their lives—cultural, religious, and epistemic practices (Dussel 1994; Romero 2018; De Sousa 2022). Colonization laid the foundations for the constitution of the modern colonial world system, a system that functions on the basis of the racial ordering of populations on the planet.

With the hierarchisation of populations, racism has become institutionalised and naturalised, which is why the idea that racism is an individual, ideological, or moral issue must be discarded. It is a structuring system of social relations, which is visible in discourses, practices, and the current world order, as exemplified by Vergès (2022) with the xenophobic and racist French policies that describe Islam as an essentially misogynist religion and culture. Or when the police criminalise racialised people in the Netherlands they are committing racist acts because they assume that they are lower class and unemployed (Wekker 2016), even if it is pointed out that in Dutch and French society everyone has equal opportunities.

For the decolonial turn, labour exploitation by itself did not develop capitalism; it was necessary to invent the category “race” as a principle of classification. As Quijano (2011) explains, race is a structuring principle of the relations of production and the axial division of labour, which is produced in intersection with gender, sexuality, spirituality, and the different forms of labour exploitation. In this new classification, the human condition of some (the colonised) will be denied and the human condition of others (the settlers) will be affirmed. As several authors argue (Dussel 1994; Romero 2018), before America was invented, the world was divided between Christians and non-Christians and the discussion was about who possessed the right religion, not humanity.

[Bautista \(2011\)](#) argues that before colonisation in Europe there was no such thing as “modern society”, but rather medieval villages in which communal relations of life linked to the land developed. Nor was there the individual separated from nature and confronted with another individual who owned and competed with it, as we know today. In fact, pre-capitalist societies by their form of production and reproduction did not produce individual social relations, nor did they seek to dominate human labour or nature, because they were not considered commodities. The surpluses produced were not necessarily accumulated; they were used for rest, festivals, rituals, to be happy, etc. ([Dussel 2013](#)).

Colonial modernity will produce a new economic rationality where surpluses will cease to be produced for the community and will be managed by the ruling class, which will lead to an unequal distribution of the world’s wealth. This inequality has been extensively studied by [Wallerstein \(2005\)](#), who situates capitalism in the 16th century. This date marks the beginning of the gestation of new forms of labour control, nationalism, and states. The unequal distribution of wealth on a global scale, which continues to this day, can be seen in the unequal economic and political development between the countries of the North and the Global South. These inequalities are rooted in the world system, a system that functions on the basis of the international division of labour and the free circulation of capital, concentrated in the Global North.

The world system will be led by Europe and will distinguish three zones: metropolis, semi-periphery, and periphery. In each zone there will be different specialisations and forms of labour control ([Wallerstein 2005](#)). The distribution of occupations was racialised to produce multiple strata of status and different social rewards. Under this scheme, the metropolis extracted all kinds of resources from the peripheries, which made the emergence of the capitalist system possible. It was the racial division of labour that ensured that the metropolises extracted profits from the global chains of commodities, raw materials and wealth ([Quijano 2011](#)). Moreover, it constructed the disparity with the peripheries, which represent social “backwardness”, commercial dependence, and economic vulnerability.

Modernity, with the intervention of the state, artificially created capitalism; historically, however, it is placed in the 19th century as the fruit of social evolution, a far from innocent story. Analyses have sought to leave out slavery, colonialism, and the links of the world system, so that the vital role they played in the constitution of Europe is forgotten ([Vergès 2022](#)). In this sense, [Wekker \(2016\)](#) says that the history of the metropolises is separate from the history of the colonies. She observes this in the surprise she causes in the Dutch when she talks to them about the role of the Netherlands in colonialism. As if colonialism had left no trace, the Netherlands erases it and today defines itself as a just, ethical, and racism-free nation. Racism is displaced to other places such as the United States, or it is understood as belonging to the working classes, or as a characteristic of the extreme right against foreigners.

For the decolonial turn, colonialism placed Europe at the centre of the world, rich and prosperous. From this perspective, the North is a product of the South ([Vergès 2022](#)). It is so because racialised bodies were inferiorised not by divine design, but by their nature, by their organic and psychological characteristics. People are going to be materially dispossessed, their bodies governed and exploited. As [Dussel \(2013\)](#) explains, in feudalism the ruling class steals part of the surplus through labour and tribute, but with colonisation there is pure plunder and the surplus will be collectively extracted from the bodies. For example, the Indians worked the land and in the mines, but they were fed by other Indians, for the colonists it was all profit. The same thing happened with the slaves, everything they produced was the property of the master. The black slave was manufactured with the sole objective of making him produce for the world system. This dispossession favoured the enrichment of some nations to the detriment of others ([Wallerstein 2005](#)), and was justified with the argument that the indigenous people did not know how to use their resources, that they were subhuman and barbaric.

#### 4. Racial Segregation of Labour

With modernity emerges a rationality that reifies, objectifies, and commodifies that which cannot be alienated: labour and land (Dussel 2013; Bautista 2011). Producing for the global system requires forced and free labour. From 1640 onwards, the metropolises combine serfdom with free labour and, with it, new forms of wage labour emerge (Wallerstein 2005). As Federicci (2010) suggests, what the coloniser tried out and practised in distant lands, he would later impose on Europeans with the same objectives.

Colonisation imposed an artificial misery; the compulsory payment of taxes on the indigenous people forced them to sell their labour force. This practice was implemented on the workers of the 18th century, through free labour. Capitalism took hold in Europe with the idea of free but devalued labour. Like the indigenous people, the workers felt degraded by their confinement in the factories and sought to resist. However, the strategy of manufacturing was to underpay and exhaust the worker so that he would renounce association and owners would have access to “voluntary” workers (Polanyi 1989). The strategy of hunger succeeded in domesticating the worker, forcing him to sell his labour power. Wage labour was not universalised, however.

It was the emerging nation states of the 19th century that gave continuity to the colonial project and institutionalised the working class. In the West, the working class was central to the construction of the emerging states; it benefited from the racial division of labour. The world system required strong states. However, strength was granted by national homogeneity, hence the need to create a structure stratified by status, people’s roles, and identities in terms of birth, class, religion, or ways of life (Moreno 2012).

Robinson’s (2019) work shows that labour was born racialised. In Europe, on the basis of fabricated comparisons and hostilities, there was an attempt to identify the working class with national identity and to associate it with the state. For example, Irish labour was cheaper than English labour, and this difference was justified on the grounds that the Irish came from an inferior and deficient “race”. This produced a division of labour and allowed the working class to tolerate the exploitation of altered labour. The Irish were also the main source of forced indentured immigrants and, like the colonised, were accused of being lazy, dirty, and silent.

The racial division of labour fostered individual competition and blocked the consciousness of the worker. For example, in European societies, labour tends to support capitalism because of the rewards it makes available through social mobility, but, above all, because capitalism produces not only commodities but also the subjectivity of the subject (Bautista 2011), so that the worker prefers to be exploited rather than excluded. Although racial differences are structured in terms of gender and class, however, in the analysis of the organised working class, or in labour studies, racialisation has been displaced. This is because, in European societies, there is a conviction that class is more relevant in analyses of inequalities than race/ethnicity (Wekker 2016).

Without denying all the revolts of the Western workforce and their resistance to labour exploitation, however, their strong identification with employment leads them to consider it free of racism. For example, the Spanish working class has created the slogan “native or foreigner, the same working class”. This slogan has been widely criticised by anti-racist collectives, who point out that immigrants have serious limitations in achieving the same social rights as the native. Moreover, the labour demands of the workforce are not necessarily anti-exploitative, but seek to wall off their rights, achieved status, and social security.

The modern racial exploitation of labour under neoliberalism originated from accumulation by dispossession and continues to function in this way (Romero 2018). Today, instead of modernity we say globalisation, and instead of progress we say development. Globalisation has its historical roots in the world system (Moreno 2012), but presents new dimensions such as the technology base of economic productivity, market competition, and military power. Globalisation, together with neoliberalism, has driven the grand narrative

of the market society as a space of freedom, favouring market equality, cultural diversity, and equal opportunities regardless of origin, class, gender, or religion.

For neoliberal scholars, like labour scholars, racialisation is virtually dismissed, because they understand racism as something external to neoliberalism, or they tend to read racist expressions as a cultural reaction against diversity. Even the most committed social justice scholars do not question whether neoliberalism produces its own structures of racial domination. With the exception of critical voices such as [Kundnani \(2022\)](#), who argues that neoliberalism presents a reorganisation and reconstitution of racism, as we shall see below, or [Mills' \(2015\)](#) critique of US racial liberalism. For Mills, race is central to the US social order, as it organises the way in which people's rights, responsibilities, freedoms, opportunities, wages, and life expectations are distributed. However, racial domination does not appear as an issue worthy of being addressed in liberal politics; rather, the nation's self-image is that of being an egalitarian democracy free of hierarchical and exclusionary social structures.

For more than five decades, neoliberalism has been the philosophical approach to economics. [Harvey \(2007\)](#) defines neoliberalism as a theory of political-economic practices that promotes the entrepreneurial freedoms of individuals and capital. It should be recalled that centrally planned economies operate by seeking a balance between the market and the state, where economic growth increased incomes, employment, and welfare. State intervention guarantees the rights of labour vis-à-vis economic power and thus prevents discontent in the population which, according to [Harvey \(2007\)](#), has more to do with material living conditions than with unemployment.

[Harvey \(2007\)](#) defines the neoliberal system as a project to restore the power of the propertied class, a system imposed through the dissemination of two ideologies: one that associates the state with inefficiency and corruption and the market with efficiency and partiality; and the idea of permanent crisis ([De Sousa 2022](#)). Crisis is the mantra repeated by the political class to explain all social problems, without explaining what produces the different crises: migratory, economic, or social.

With the shift towards neoliberal policies, the state stopped promoting the social economy and put an end to the policy of full employment, giving way to unemployment as a structural fact. Work was transformed, creating various forms of employment. Private enterprise, which has become the main engine of growth, and the productive class have succeeded in reducing the power of the labour force, putting it in a position where it is no longer able to resist processes of mass exploitation. With neoliberalism, economic growth is accompanied by unemployment and low incomes, and productivity is increasingly intangible, immaterial, and less associated with industrial labour ([De Giorgio 2006](#)).

The works of [Harvey \(2007\)](#) and [De Giorgio \(2006\)](#) amply document the havoc that neoliberalism has wreaked on the world. The attack on social rights has created conditions that force labour to be available and flexible, and to assume precariousness as a parameter of economic status. The authors emphasise that the neoliberal system affects all regions of the planet, because it has modified the rules of the market and productive relations. Moreover, capital, being global and allied to the state, moves in a space without borders, which allows it to differentiate as well as unify everything.

Because of this borderless mobility, neoliberalism is understood as giving freedom and equal opportunities to all, and therefore does not distinguish between race, gender, class, or origin, but rather seeks integration. However, in this process, the working middle class in the Global North has been among the most weakened by neoliberalism. This has led [De Giorgio \(2006\)](#) to argue that the working class has been transformed into a "multitude", indistinct and available. This mutation apparently homogenises the exploitation of the working class on a global scale. However, this is not the case. The racial classification of labour allows for the existence of borders, prevents the mobilisation of labour ([Tuck and Yang 2021](#)), and prevents the equalisation of wages globally. This division makes possible the continuous circulation of value ([Dussel 2013](#)). In other words, in order for a commodity produced in Morocco to compete with one produced in Spain, Morocco has to increase

labour and decrease employee wages. This asymmetry results in overexploitation of the worker in the Global South, and exploitation or self-exploitation in the Global North, but with better working and living conditions.

Kundnani (2022) argues that neoliberalism is not only the restoration of the ruling class, it is the theoretical proposal of the last century designed to reconstitute racial and colonial domination. With neoliberalism, the redistribution of wealth, proposed by some anti-colonial and anti-racist social movements, was avoided. Robinson (2019) coins the term racial capitalism to underline that each period of the capitalist world system finds a distinctive way of reifying cultural and regional differences in racial terms. It does so in order to structure social divisions between different forms of labour. This is because capitalism reproduces itself by combining wage labour with different forms of labour. Today, for example, it includes undocumented migrant labour, women's reproductive work, slave labour in workshops, or the precarious work of the white population. With regard to the Spanish working population, we cannot deny that it has suffered precariousness. Since 2012, laws have been passed that facilitate precarious hiring conditions and allowed companies to fire workers to replace them with part-time contracts and lower wages. Although, in 2021, a regulation was implemented for companies to make indefinite contracts, unemployment is not decreasing, and according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE 2022) the unemployment rate of the Spanish population is 11.76% and that of the ex-foreign population is 18.40%.

Neoliberalism, by placing competition as the driving force of the economy, intensifies the differentiation of skills, resources, and incentives and leaves out those who do not adapt. Furthermore, the neoliberal productive regime is known for its surplus, in the sense that today it is capital that proves to be incapable of absorbing labour (De Giorgio 2006). Because of this shortage, part of the salaried workforce has become flexible, mobile, and available for casualisation. However, there is another part of the surplus population of neoliberalism that cannot be exploited at all. Kundnani (2022) explains that they are abandoned subjects, who neither serve as a reserve army, nor are they necessary for the functioning of capitalism.

Thus, neoliberalism has created different forms of labour: wage and non-wage earners, haves and have-nots, free citizens with rights and unfree working populations (Kundnani 2022). These categories of labour will be managed through racialisation. The category of race not only divides labour, it will also be used by neoliberal capitalism to codify and manage it. In the metropolis, the surplus populations would be made up of the impoverished, the irregularly employed, the unemployed, and migrants. These groups, moreover, represent the new "dangerous classes" against whom racist state practices of global control are deployed. Racial border regimes and violence are part of the neoliberal political economy.

## 5. Immigration: The Dangerous Other

Migratory flows are generally analysed by governments from a racist point of view, expressed in the laws on foreigners and in the neoliberalism that they defend and disseminate. In particular, governments in the Global North understand that neoliberalism grants equal opportunities, but fails people. They propose to address inequalities in regions where there are fewer rights, where people are unstable, conflictive, or poor. To combat inequalities, they propose security policies, trade agreements, and investment focused on job creation.

Northern governments claim to promote inclusive global trade that combats all forms of discrimination and hatred. In particular, European governments promote gender-sensitive development aid, so that women are empowered and incorporated into the labour market (Arco 2022). However, they fail to mention the negative impacts of capital. For example, investments in the South are unsustainable; they create precarious jobs and wages; they often affect the environment and strip resources from indigenous communities; corporate profits are transferred to the countries of origin. Precisely because there is



a systematic transfer of resources, these policies produce surplus populations that seek alternative livelihoods, such as mobility.

Racial capitalism advocates the free movement of the market as a tool for cultural change. However, it places limits on the mobility of people, especially those who do not obey the principles of freedom and represent a threat to “Western civilisation” (Kundnani 2022). This is the standard argument present in immigration policies in Europe. It is worth noting that since the creation of nation states, migration policies have been codified through a racial classification of populations (Moreno 2012). This is implicit in the invention of the citizen as a subject of rights and the Other outside the nation (Romero 2018); this division grants differentiated rights to people according to their origin.

Migrants are homogenised and attributed cultural differences, and social and economic deprivation. They are also seen as disobedient and reluctant to learn social rules, even though they expect to be treated fairly. For this reason, at home and abroad, they are seen as a threat to the established order. To prevent migrants from arriving, governments have put in place an increasingly extensive and outsourced surveillance system, based on the logic of securitisation and militarisation of borders (Arco 2022; Riera 2022). This globally dispersed national security infrastructure organises and orders mobilities along racial lines.

From this perspective, the border ceases to be a geographical line and becomes a bio- and necropolitical management of the mobility, lives, and bodies of people in migratory transit (Riera 2022). Many of the people who seek to escape impoverishment or violence in their countries of origin travel dangerous routes to reach their destination. In this sense, De Giorgio (2006) speaks of death as a biographical experience of contemporary labour, materialised in the biography of migrants who die on the borders of the European fortress or in the biographies of people in refugee camps. The deaths of migrants and refugee camps are conveniently distanced from the West.

Administrations often treat migrants, particularly irregular migrants, as willing criminals, on the assumption that it is up to them to carry permits (Álvarez 2022; Jubany 2017). However, it is the administration that makes people irregular. Through visas, asylum applications, or residence permits, it classifies those who enter and those who remain outside (Riera 2022). It is also the administrations that classify people in ethnic/racial terms: economic migrant, undocumented, illegal, expellable, refugee, asylum seeker. Therefore, it is foreigners who place people in zones of choice or rejection (Jubany 2017).

Regular migrants and those who manage to circumvent border control mechanisms are considered a threat in the West, mainly because they claim access to health care, the right to housing, and work. Here, the laws on foreigners become relevant, as they are responsible for classifying people into those with full rights and those without rights (Wekker 2016). Social rights are restricted to the subject of the nation. People without papers are penalised for not having obeyed the mobility laws, leaving them out of social assistance and throwing them into a life of material hardship. Again, the strategy of hunger works to turn migrants into available, disposable, and exploitable labour.

We hear about migration crises or the threat posed by migrants, but what are the cultural values of the West that are under threat? As already noted, Europe is a product of colonial modernity, yet it is conceived as the place where freedom, democracy, entrepreneurship, the free subject, emancipation, and tolerance originate (Wekker 2016; Kundnani 2022). These values, turned into horizons, are presumed to be possible for all people and are therefore considered universal.

Seen in this way, the West is the region that progresses and there are other regions that do not progress, or do so by imitation. From this position of power, humanity is divided into two large groups, one universalist and progressive, the other particularist and primitive (Kundnani 2022). Thus, Western culture is presented as open, entrepreneurial, and individualistic. It is the standard culture by which other cultures are judged as inadequate. An example of incompatibility, being described as violent, uncivilised, rejecting democracy and human rights, would be Muslims, economic migrants, and immigrants from former colonies (Wekker 2016).

The West seeks to expand its values through the global market and also seeks to have them assimilated and internalised by immigrants. Ministries will be tasked with guiding immigrants along the path to modernity. Women's equality, the end of forced marriages, and LGBTI+ represent the normative and non-negotiable values for foreigners. [Gutiérrez \(2018\)](#) reminds us that, in Germany, in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, Muslim and North African men were accused of sexual attacks and assaults against white German women at a train station. Discussions revolved around the fact that these men did not conform to the "normative gender order" and posed a threat to Western civilization.

Without denying violence against women, what lies behind the salvationist rhetoric is the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, which constructs racialized masculinities as pre-modern, misogynist, and patriarchal ([Gutiérrez 2018](#)), while immigrant and racialized women's sexualities are represented as backward and oppressed. [Wekker \(2016\)](#) explains that in Dutch society, Asian women are constructed as submissive and ultra-feminine, and black women as hypersexualised. In contrast, Western women are portrayed as emancipated. Moreover, Islam is seen by society as incompatible with the emancipation of women and homosexuals.

The immigrant represents by opposition and contrast everything that citizenship is not: he or she is the opposite of civility ([Romero 2018](#)). Because of their pre-modern ways of life, immigrants represent a dangerous class. In the Us/Them construction, it is Them who have to change. Because Western society is not willing to have its everyday order disturbed, it is therefore hostile towards those who are not productive or read as economic parasites, and there is a certain contempt for poverty ([De Giorgio 2006](#)).

Being constructed as a dangerous class, migrants are examined, with the aim of disciplining and controlling them. For example, public policies directed towards migrants include courses on gender emancipation. In particular, the trainings are aimed at migrant women, who are linked to issues such as gender-based violence, unemployment and economic dependency ([Wekker 2016](#)). These courses often fail to mention the multiple forms of violence created by the laws on foreigners that affect women, putting them at a disadvantage compared to men and local women.

In the case of immigrant and racialised men, they are constantly associated with criminality and violence. Young people in particular are harassed by the police on suspicion of not having legal documents or of carrying drugs. The state deploys surveillance, prevention, and control mechanisms on them and in their neighbourhoods under the discourse of "security". [Douhaibi and Amzian \(2019\)](#) explain that the Generalitat de Catalunya has an educational programme aimed at monitoring Muslim students in order to prevent their "radicalisation". Compulsory training is provided by the regional police. The supposed risk factors that "produce" "potential terrorists" would be marginalisation, family breakdown, school failure, and migratory itinerary. Under this profile, any immigrant is a potential terrorist.

For [Douhaibi and Amzian \(2019\)](#), behind these indicators is the rejection and criminalisation of religious practices. The state implements extensive surveillance of the family and social environment of students who are "suspicious" because they do not conform to the modern Western way of life. The authors give examples of the activation of these surveillance protocols, pointing to the case of a pupil who decided to wear a hijab or the case of a pupil who said "Allah u Akbar" ("God is great"). This triggered the protocol and the police launched an investigation which, in reality, does not target the individual, but the community as a whole in order to stigmatise it.

## 6. Final Reflections

When analyzing migration flows and the market, we cannot only focus on the trajectories of migrants and their narratives; we must also pay attention to the structures that drive them to leave their territories. We know that globalisation and neoliberalism have boosted and diversified migration and that it mainly takes place from the Global South to the Global North. Although this orientation of South–North flows may seem novel, it is not.

As pointed out throughout this paper, it is a response to the asymmetries in the regions, the result of historical processes such as colonialism, and the expansion of racial capitalism. These processes have engendered a cartography of power and global inequality, where the regions of the South recurrently present economic and political instability, rising violence, internal displacement, and job insecurity.

The above elements are all factors that make people vulnerable, and generate movements to the Global North. What is new is the way in which migration is sought to be contained and controlled. Reaching the metropolis is a difficult undertaking for people, particularly those without mobility permits. This is not only because the journeys are made via dangerous routes that put people's lives at risk. It is also because governments have border and migration control mechanisms that operate to prevent or restrict migration from the South. These mechanisms are supported by part of the population in the receiving countries, who see the foreigner as a figure who breaks with the established social order, who seeks access to or abuses social support.

Critical perspectives such as the decolonial turn help us to understand that border regimes, neoliberal economics, and otherness are directly linked to colonial modernity and racial capitalism. By relocating the origin of modernity in the colonial enterprise, the decolonial turn allows us to see that it is racism that allows capitalism to become a hegemonic system, as it maintains different specialisations by region, different forms of control, and labour exploitation.

It is racism that prevails in the logic of the neoliberal market, even though it considers itself meritocratic. Racial classification divides the labour force into waged and precarious, which justifies underpaying layers of the population. Racism is the line that divides citizens and non-citizens. It is the line that regulates relations between people, that marks the place people occupy in society and spaces, or the type of work to be done. It is the historical and structural line, which we see materialised in the discourses of differentiation, in state policies, and in the laws on foreigners.

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