Argentina and Brazil: the clothing sector and the Bolivian migration

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This paper intends to present a research issue relating to the emergence of a “new pattern” of immigration of Latin American immigrants and their connections with informal work. The paper observes that the migration processes, in Latin America went from integration and absorption, rising and consolidation of immigrants to the confinement of some immigrant categories in productive “restricted sectors” in difficult living conditions with very few possibilities of a way out and little public action or visibility. Extending the scope of the research outside Brazil – combining different types of views, it may be possible to see some of the Brazilian specificities resulting from the Bolivian presence in Latin American countries.
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- From an internal migrating movement in Bolivia mainly from rural areas to the cities (La Paz and Cochabamba), historic immigration of Bolivians to Argentina since the beginning of the last century and to Brazil since the 1950’s had the purpose of higher education and access to the labour market by some professionals such as medical doctors or for political motives.
As from the 1980’s, the focus of Bolivian immigration changed, as a result of internal reasons such as the crisis of the mining sector and land reform. Immigration then became widespread, growing about 24% from 1980 to 1990 and affecting the less qualified and lower income classes. Another striking change is the concentration of Bolivian immigration in São Paulo and Buenos Aires; in Argentina, the largest concentration of Bolivians is in Buenos Aires; in Brazil, in São Paulo (in 2000, 44% of Bolivian immigrants are living in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo). They are a low qualified population of young adults. The success of their migration depends on professional inclusion.
In São Paulo, they have settled in the historic districts of Bom Retiro, Pari, Belém and Brás; and, in small numbers in the northern, eastern and southern regions of the city even if their presence is more significant in the districts of Lajeado and Cidade Tiradentes, where they seem to form new borders in international immigration areas.
The clothing sector is one of the economic areas that can be seen as an example of the global neoliberal policies of the 1990’s, which the so-called “labour market crisis”. A new informality seems to change the main element of enterprises/companies’ competitive strategies. This informality is different “old” informality, conceived in Latin America as a place of archaic non capitalistic work relations. In spite of national differences, the analysis of recent changes of production and work relations in the clothing sector – such as for example the emergence of the “Chinese cost/price” – would lead to a mix between poor working conditions and informal work relations as well as flexible diversified production processes on a larger scale.
This new pattern has became widespread with the introduction of outsourcing both for the contracting and risk processes in the production chain: entrepreneurs who control the outsourcing production to cheaper labour, in many cases employing immigrants such as Bolivians in Brazil and in Argentina, often illegal immigrants;

the illegal workers’ situation is essential to define their work and living condition. Edna Bonachich, based on the clothing manufacturing industry in Los Angeles in the early 1990’s, analysed this process that she called “ethnical economy” which was formed by workers in their majority Latin, hired by Asian owners, who became their immediate “exploiters”. Her analysis observed the systemic nature of illegalities and corruption.
• There is therefore a significant relationship between an informal employment and clandestine immigration in metropolitan regions, especially in the United States and Europe that can also be seen in the Latin American countries. This increasing informal employment relations seems to constitute one of the systemic conditions that leads to greater circulation of immigrant labour. According to some authors, (Souchaud, 2009) this new production model has led to a significant growth of these migratory flows.
The existence of new “sweat-shops” around the world, both in Los Angeles and in São Paulo or Buenos Aires follows a global dynamic, with the same results for the working conditions, in spite of different migration histories. However, the issue of compatibility of certain economic sectors and migrant workers is clear. This compatibility can explain the new national migratory patterns, connected with the productive reorganization in and out of each one of these countries who provide and accept workers.

In the case of the clothing industry in São Paulo, the productive restructuring process seems to have contributed to boosting this migratory flow to the city. It is one of the most traditional branches of São Paulo’s industry which, in spite of the decreasing number of formal jobs from 180,000 in 1981 to 80,000 in 2000, is still one of the sectors which creates more jobs in São Paulo. Bonachich, 1989, Freire da Silva, 2008; Kontic, 2001; Georges e Freire da Silva, 2007
In this restructuring process, production was fragmented. Formal and large companies concentrate on creation, styling, fabric cutting and marketing of end products. Sewing, the most labour intensive stage, was outsourced using a number of subcontracted sweatshops, with mainly informal work. Outsourcing was a labour management strategy to address this diversified production in small scale series. Sweat shops sprawled in districts where former factory workers lived.
The clothing manufacturing sector has traditionally welcomed many immigrants. The Koreans stand out as main players particularly in the 1990’s in restructuring the sector which had already been going through changes due to the 1980’s economic slowdown. The group’s success in the sector was very expressive because it counted on its own financing system – called Kye system - and on privileged relations with South Korean’s businessmen in the textile sector, later acting also as importers of synthetic fabrics. Furthermore, they used irregular labour employing other Korean people who arrived in the city. Argentina was also a place of arrival for Korean immigrants and many have become established in the country likewise in clothing production. The Brazilian government imposed restrictions on Korean migration in the 1970’s. Many of them entered the country clandestinely crossing the Bolivian border. They spent some time in that country, and some of them settled down there in the clothing sector before they travelled clandestinely to Brazil. There were even some Korean agents who guaranteed travel conditions and above all the passage through the border Bolivia-Brazil. Brazil, in turn, also served as a stop for many Koreans who had the USA as a final destination.
• The Korean and Bolivian immigration circuits in the city of São Paulo are coincident with the development of the clothing industry. At first, this Korean migration circuit was used for migration of the Bolivians themselves despite each group taking up a distinct place in the production chain. It is then possible to see immigrants who crossed borders settling in the city and creating dynamics articulated around the production sector.

• Further, there is in the case of Bolivians a specific dimension: that is, a close relationship between irregular immigration, informal work and housing. They live and work in the same places.
The working conditions of Bolivians in the clothing sector changed between the years 1990 and 2000 because there has been an increasing immigration, with bad working conditions and generalized corruption at all levels (human trafficking, relations of the latter with the traffic of drugs and body organs, connections between clandestine sweat shops and cocaine production). In the 1990’s, immigration of Bolivians to Argentina and mainly to Buenos Aires was often associated with family relations with the arrival of about 100 people a month, coming from urban areas (La Paz, Cochabamba), to work in the clothing sector through family connections in clandestine sweat shops of other Bolivians, in a system of “exchange of favours” as occurred in Brazil in the years 2000. In the last 10 years we have seen the development of the so-called “rubbish work” “trabajo-basura”, resulting from economic growth and the increasing Bolivian immigration due to the worse Bolivian conditions (lack of potable water, lack of minimum basic infrastructure) and rationalization of migration processes, involving the Bolivian media offering jobs in Argentina in different local languages (in Spanish, but also in Aimara and Quéchua) and in remote regions of El Alto, such as Oruro and Sucre.
In the clothing sector, in Argentina, about 90% of the work is informal, which represents about 3,000 clandestine sweat shops in the city of Buenos Aires, where 40,000 people would be working in conditions close to “slavery”, to which we would add about 15,000 in the outer areas of the city, and almost 250,000 in the interior of the country (textile industry, clothing, footwear, agriculture, civil construction). In all, “illegal and/or informal” labour in Argentina accounts for about 500,000 immigrants in all sectors. We have problems to call these cases of ethnic economy as slavery. But we understand the political use of the term in the mobilisation for human and labour rights.
In our field research, carried out in 2008/2009, from what remained of the popular district meetings, social movements, popular organizations, we could see the organizational and contentious side of some of the Bolivians migrants. We point out the “Yanapacuna” Bolivians’ Association for the protection of human rights. (“Yanapacuna” in Aymara means self-help). We also saw “La Alameda” Cooperative, which employs Bolivians in an attempt to form self-managed cooperatives. Other initiatives of the Bolivian population have an important role such as a collective action organized by a local radio station directed and by Bolivians with the intent to press one of the employers to correctly pay his employees.
• In the interviews conducted in Brazil and in Argentina, we saw that Bolivian workers seem to follow a pattern where migrations in Bolivia, from Bolivia abroad and in this case between Argentina and Brazil (sometimes passing through Paraguay) as well as temporary returns to their country, according to the employment opportunities in Bolivia, Argentina or Brazil.
The first story

• The first one is the story of a young Bolivian girl interviewed while waiting in a queue at one of the offices for foreigners’ regularization in São Paulo in August 2009. Even after returning to Cochabamba, where she left on her own and still a minor, she quickly returned to São Paulo, where job opportunities seemed to be better. Her story is typical: first joining the clothing sector as an illegal and informal worker with her family (this was the destination of migration) to pay for her fares; then working in a Brazilian company, with better conditions and rights. As she was single, this type of more regular occupational inclusion, allowed her to dream about the access to education, which seemed more attractive than hypothetical inclusion in Argentina, where part of her family is living.
The second story - Angelica

- Angélica, an experienced seamstress, arrived in São Paulo through an aunt who brought her from La Paz to work in her clandestine sweat shop. Angélica was running away from domestic violence. She arrived here in early 2000 and was over 30. At that time and in more restricted situations, the only alternative to clothing jobs was at a first rubbish collection and recycling, before starting sewing at home and selling her products – handbags - in one of the night street markets. Today she has her own sewing machine, and her 16-year-old daughter also works as a seamstress in a clandestine sweat shop in the eastern zone of São Paulo. Angélica belongs to an NGO/cooperative that employs women who are victims of domestic violence.
Alonso – 40 years old - arrived in São Paulo when he was young with his wife and when he was able to save some money working in different areas (he as mechanic and she as a maid), which was possible because of their quick legalization in the country because their children were born in Brazil. Alonso was once the owner of a car repair service. In the early 1990’s, he moved to Argentina where the economic situation was better and used to send money to his wife in Brazil. The Brazilian sweat shop that he owned with his wife failed in the late 1990’s because of a problem of adjustment between huge demand and his lack of ability to mobilize workers to meet this demand. He incurred debts with suppliers and defaulted, which, by the way, was emblematic of outsourced (and sub-contracted) companies supporting the risk of the so-called production flexibilization.
Of the many trajectories seen in major metropolitan economic centres in Brazil and in Argentina some questions stand out. The first refers to an important difference between forms of urban and in labour market inclusion in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. In Buenos Aires, there are many doors to enter the city and the labour market – domestic jobs, work in the green belt, in the production of fruit and vegetables, and in the clothing “industry”; in the case of Brazil, it seems to be limited to one single sector of activity, although we can also find some of these immigrants working as street vendors and in other activities. We can also say that in Argentina public presence, local associations working on employment issues, illegality and unsatisfactory inclusion of Bolivians in the capital city seem to be more significant than the associations for protection and/or mobilization seen in São Paulo.