

Logistics of unfreedom: The labour trafficking of Venezuelan truck drivers in Brazil

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Abstract

This article examines the trafficking of Venezuelan truck drivers for labour exploitation in Brazil. The remilitarisation of politics is increasingly a hallmark of elite-driven strategies to manage the circulation of labour and goods from extractive zones. This article introduces the notion of *logistics of unfreedom* to explain the growing imbrication between techniques of control by the state and corporations that confine the reproduction of migrants within the realm of logistics processes. The analysis focuses on data from participatory observations and the narratives of 22 Venezuelan refugees who were trafficked from a militarised humanitarian zone in Brazil's Amazon to work for a freight road transport company in Southern Brazil. Findings show that a concerted logistic approach to refugee employment channelled mobility, constrained statutory protection and shaped the ethno-political differentiation of Venezuelans in the labour market. This forced Venezuelans to live in trucks where both productive and socially reproductive aspects of their daily lives were overdetermined by the rhythms of goods distribution. The article concludes that this logistic rationale has converged towards a self-contained regime of labour unfreedom that facilitates the labour trafficking of Venezuelan refugees.

Keywords

Labour unfreedom, Human trafficking, humanitarianism, transport, truck drivers and logistics

Introduction

Road freight transportation is vital to the distribution of goods in logistical systems worldwide. In recent years, the rising transportation costs, increasing working class organisation and relative shortage of labour (Hopkins, 2022; Levy, 2023; Nowak, 2022) has increased the recruitment of

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migrants in the sector, which has been followed by reports of extreme labour exploitation and rights violations. In Brazil's Amazon, an elite-driven militarisation has shaped the experiences of displacement and employment pathways of Venezuelan refugees in the logistics sector. The National Army was mobilised to coordinate the logistics of an unprecedented humanitarian operation, including activities related to the recruitment and resettlement of Venezuelans through employment opportunities in road freight transportation companies. In Southern Brazil, there is growing evidence of labour market abuse, slave labour and human trafficking that is linked to this military led intermediation.

The logistic rationale is a paradigm for space making practices which have structured the circulation of value in the global trade (Cowen, 2014; Ziadah, 2018). They have secured space-time streamflow of distribution from extractive zones to geographically disaggregated networks on the premise of limiting deviation and reducing inefficiency, uncertainty and disruptions which can deteriorate the conditions of exchange in global labour-value chains (Smith, 2016; Suwandi, 2019). Recent scholarship highlights that this logistic rationale has expanded towards the governance of migration (Khalili, 2023; Peano, 2021; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020). This is visible in the way the logics of supply chains have proliferated in humanitarian spaces (Attewell, 2018; Cowen, 2014), shaping national security strategies for the containment and supply of super-exploited labour (Portes Virginio et al., 2023; Selwyn, 2018; Smith, 2016). However, our argument is that the existing literature does not give adequate attention to the way the logistic rationale has not only made humanitarian migration more marketized but has also subsumed the social reproduction of migrants into the circuit of logistic control. This greater integration of logistical systems has enabled forms of labour process control in which extreme exploitation has flourished and evolved.

To investigate these relationships within and beyond the humanitarian zone, a case study approach focuses on the Venezuelan truck drivers who were trafficked for labour exploitation in São Paulo. The case study addresses the following questions: to what extent has the militarised border management and intermediation of labour led to the labour trafficking of Venezuelan refugees in Brazil? Secondly, in accounting for the degree of coercion within logistic regimes in Brazil: how does the concerted state-corporate coordination facilitate the unfreedom of Venezuelans within and beyond the workplace?

Findings show that this logistical rationale entangle economic and extra-economic forces to create a self-contained regime of labour unfreedom. This is coordinated between the National Army and companies to subordinate Venezuelans to live in trucks where both productive and socially reproductive aspects of their daily lives are overdetermined by the managerial logistics of goods distribution or what can better be understood as *logistics of unfreedom*. This concept offers a deeper understanding of structured political mediations which have recast state responsibilities of social reproduction to match the logistical needs for capitalist valorisation. This is functional to the strategies of labour control implemented by the road freight transportation companies in Brazil which thus entraps Venezuelan refugees within the logistic realm.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical framework in this paper builds on, and extends the analysis of trafficking by looking at recent scholarship on labour unfreedom and how it links with the ongoing security approach to humanitarian migration. Secondly, the particular context of labour trafficking of Venezuelan refugees is provided before the methods by which secondary and primary data was collected in São Paulo and the Amazonian region. Finally, the analysis of primary research and conclusion discusses the labour of unfreedom within logistic systems and their relationship with emerging cases of labour trafficking in the road freight transportation sector.

Situating the logistics of unfreedom

In recent years, rising competition and declines in profit rates accentuated accumulation pressures on labour in the logistic sector. In addition to further control in the factory (Suwandi, 2019), managerial techniques have intertwined with each other to orchestrate the subordination of labour within broader logistics systems – that is, transportation, warehousing, distribution, planning and management of goods, materials, and information (Cowen, 2014; Danyluk, 2018; Tsing, 2009). The labour process of truck drivers exemplifies how this has entangled in forms of spatio-temporal control to ‘maintain the illusion of smooth logistical flow at local and global scale’ (Hopkins, 2022: 52). For example, the advancement of digital surveillance technologies and automation to control drivers in real-time and to meet the principles of lean management, just-in-time manufacturing and physical distribution of outsourced production on a global scale (Levy, 2023; Newsome et al., 2015; Smith, 2016; Toscano, 2014) has been observed.

The rhetoric and practices of security are increasingly important for states to implement logistic systems (Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; Peano, 2021). The state implements policies and policing activities premised on attracting, securing and co-orchestrating circuits of value extraction (Ziadah, 2018). While this strategy assumes different forms, the re-militarisation of the state is a method whereby capital has organised these circuits. From a historical perspective, this resonates with the origin of the field of logistics to facilitate the militarised expansion of empires (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Cowen, 2014; Khalili, 2023). Military logistics focused primarily on activities that related to the reproduction and mobility of military contingents for the sake of warfare, particularly in the context of colonial extraction of resources and the cross Atlantic slave trade. This is accompanied by the political expropriation of indigenous communities by promoting and legitimising the distinct configuration of the super-exploited subject from the periphery, facilitating dispossession and enslavement (Dines, 2018; Fraser, 2016; Latimer, 2016).

After the second world war, the emergence of business logistic became a productive lens to conceptualise the restructuring of production towards peripheral countries and its epistemic association with this militarised spectrum of control. Logistics became central to organising the spatial disaggregation of production and distribution into several components, creating a greater demand for optimization models that maximise the extraction of value from geographically dispersed processes (Danyluk, 2018). In Brazil, for example, this spectrum intersects with lingering forms of state authority after the formal end of colonial rule and legal slavery in 1888, facilitating the reproduction of racial inequality in the country. This includes two decades of a military dictatorship (1964–1985) that was characterised by the repression of social unrest and the implementation of structural adjustments, wage devaluation, mechanisation of production and boosting of road infrastructures in agricultural frontiers. Over time, this consolidated the National Army as a distinct political actor to implement the vested interest of political-economic elites in Brazil.

The contemporary revitalisation of military power provides analytical insights into the type of control logistic system have acquired. Here the recourse to military power aims to secure, subsidise and protect a global circulatory system which is increasingly contested at the local level (Khalili, 2023; Nowak, 2022). This ‘security shift,’ extends beyond operational security of business units on the ground and involves a move towards institutionalised political forms of civilian control, dismantling existing systems of liberal protection at the expense of local populations and due diligence. As Chuet et al. (2018: 622) affirm “nations and cities now compete on the basis of strategies to optimise logistics and transportation performance, frequently subordinating democratic principles and the welfare of populations to the needs of supply-chain expansion.” As will be shown, this re-alignment coincides with the process of militarisation that unfolded in Brazil in the past decade, providing continuous integration of extractive systems for capitalist valorisation.

This use of military operational capacity relates to the deepening of labour unfreedom (Brass, 2021; LeBaron, 2015; McGrath, 2016; Strauss, 2017). Unfreedom that, for the purpose of this article, is defined as various forms and degrees of coercion and compulsion (McGrath, 2016) from which workers cannot extricate themselves (...) ‘despite their desire to do so’ (Yea, 2017: 180). Logistic companies rely on labour-intensive services and hyperflexibility to respond to demand fluctuations, and the increasing unfreedom can generate additional control over the systemic organisation of labour processes (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Peano, 2021). At the same time, as Tsing (2009: 150) remind us, heterogeneity is becoming more and more appealing for value chains because they ‘don’t merely use preexisting diversity; they also revitalize and create niche segregation.’ Therefore, while flexible production regimes have moved sites to improve profitability (Suwandi, 2019), logistic labour regimes have improved systems to control how labour move.

These developments are especially pronounced in the logistics of migration control where security approaches have not only restricted labour mobility across borders, but also increased racialized and gendered divisions in the labour market (Anderson, 2010; Davidson, 2015; Khalili, 2023; Strauss, 2017). In examining the micro dynamics of migrant unfreedom, more recent theorising has also highlighted how these developments allowed for labour intermediaries (Yea, 2017) and accommodation systems (Pun and Smith, 2007; Schling, 2017) to shape interlocking forms of dependence of migrants on employers (Anderson, 2010; Briken and Taylor, 2018; Mezzadri, 2016, 2019). Thus, these forms of labour unfreedom increasingly encapsulate the daily reproduction of workers to deepen labour control in both wage and non-wage time.

This understanding of unfreedom presents a fruitful avenue for our analysis of the labour trafficking of Venezuelan truck drivers in Brazil, retaining the conceptual structure that engages with the concrete process of logistic control and the regulatory context of migration in which extreme forms of labour exploitation have flourished and evolved. However, the continuous encroachment of militarisation into civilian space has key implications for the protection of the social reproduction of the migrant worker, meaning this needs to be better understood. This is because logistic regimes have interacted with high levels of informality, humanitarian networks and the co-optation of state departments that all further entangle dependencies across productive and reproductive dimensions (Ferguson and McNally, 2015; LeBaron, 2015; Mezzadri, 2016, 2019; Strauss, 2017). To further analyse how this logistical rationale has shaped the trafficking of migrants, a turn to the critical literature on humanitarian migration and antitrafficking is instructive.

Migration logistics and the humanitarian-security nexus

The last decade witnessed an increased interest in the relationship between the militarisation of migration control and human trafficking (Davidson, 2015; Mahajan, 2022; Strauss, 2017; Walters, 2020; Yea, 2020). Securitisation is a process in which liberal states frame migration as a security issue and establish functional relationships with military and police forces to control migration in the name of national sovereignty (De Genova, 2013). Through politics of care and control, these forces co-opt or weaken state departments and their regulation of statutory rights by framing those migrants as threats to economic development rather than to those people who should receive protection. Consequently, this ties together with the expansion of zones of humanitarian migration (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2018) and the contemporary rhetoric of humanitarian protection has a logistic function to govern the mobility of migrants. This posits zones of humanitarian containment not as spaces of exception and immobility per se, but rather of historically structured political mediations and mobilizations (Huysmans, 2008: p. 166) that serves to coordinate responses, disrupt and channel mobilities (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020) while surpassing systems of human protection. Considering that this space is simultaneously economic and political, it is characterized by distinct layers of unfreedom and control (Kelly, 2002) that, produce

differentiation and facilitate the exploitation of migrant labour within and beyond humanitarian zones (Khalili, 2023).

Trafficking in the humanitarian-security nexus

In recent years, research indicates that the humanitarian-security rationale expands into contemporary abolitionism, that is, the field of policy and interventions around slave labour, human trafficking and forced labour (McGrath and Mieres, 2022). The instrumentalization of humanitarian-security paradigm here is characterised by the rhetoric of exceptionalism and urgency, which results in decreased protection measures and promotes market-centric responses and paternalistic narratives of rescue (Davidson, 2015; Molland, 2019; Walters, 2020). With the deepening dissolution of liberal imaginaries of freedom in ‘normal’ labour markets (Fudge, 2018; McGrath, 2016), the securitised state claims its ‘inability’ to reverse processes of social inequality and takes on a particular kind of urgency to sustain and coordinate unequal economic expansion. As will be shown, this reorientation has increasingly created conditions for logistical sectors to integrate migrant labour into its conceptual scope, that is, into a system based on extraction and rationalisation that orchestrates labour subordination to the particular way in which value circulates.

Raging across debates over juridical exceptionalism (Strauss, 2017; Yea, 2020), incarceration (Bagelman, 2016; Mahajan, 2022) and paternalism (Kempadoo, 2005; Walters, 2020), there is emerging literature that shows the extent to which the humanitarian-security paradigm shapes human trafficking (TIP) in migrant pathways. The increasing criminalization of trafficking activity exists alongside the strengthening of border controls and the combatting of the ‘unscrupulous middlemen’ (Chuang, 2014). The rationale results not only in the interception of migrant flows, but it also affects the expansion of traffickers and smugglers in informal network relationships, expanding the association of irregular migration with a criminal act, as Ausserer (2007) explains:

The association of trafficking with forms of undocumented migration led to a connection with illegality and criminality. In this regard, the image of trafficking as a threat to national security is reinforced, and the deportation of the victim of trafficking along with stricter migration policies are considered solutions to this problem (Ausserer, 2007: 114).

Molland (2019: 777) affirms that framing anti-trafficking as a humanitarian emergency stands at a politic of rescue, - that is valorised in terms of immediateness and morality – and tends to overlook the degree of unfreedom, the inhumane treatment, the objectification, the commodification of people or the meaning that they give to their situation (Walters, 2020; Yea, 2017). Central to this, the inclusion of humanitarian agencies that act as formal and informal labour intermediaries and their different responsibilities and business agendas create pressures that further expand market-related immediacy (Dines, 2018; McGrath and Mieres, 2022). The lack of strict regulation and further social protection leaves a margin for organisations to operate, often at the expense of national anti-trafficking efforts, with little accountability since humanitarian action is framed with logic that supersedes legal and political principles.

Beyond its contemporary significance, this echoes a longstanding critique that conventional approaches in antitrafficking literature embeds *white saviour* mentality (Kempadoo, 2005) and their intrinsic link to colonial-typical ideals for economic development (Maldonado-Torres, 2012; McGrath and Watson, 2018). This can be traced, for example, to the mutual composition of liberalism and imperialism, anchored in discourses of equality, human liberation and civilisation of colonial subjects to ensure military authority and in concertation with national bourgeoisie’s primary interests (Galeano, 1999). The professed freedom of individuals was confined to liberal ideas of the colonised other, including the reproduction of racialised and patriarchal governance that

exist within and across developing countries (Davidson, 2015). While the transition to ‘free wage’ was celebrated, former colonial subjects remained not necessarily seen as workers with agency, full dignity and collective rights (Fraser, 2016). This resonates with contemporary narratives of trafficking in which “the rescue of ‘pathetic’ victims or ‘trafficking survivors’ gains greater sympathy” (Ditmore, 2011: 110), with women, for example, tied primarily to sexual exploitation as an outcome of deviant individual action (Chuang, 2014; Kempadoo, 2005; Walters, 2020).

This paradigm implies that human trafficking is not the result of capitalism’s particular exploitative relationships, but rather the result of individuals’ lack of awareness, unregulated labour recruitment or legislative oversight. While these elements may contribute to unfreedom, the resulting disconnect between labour trafficking and capital is a common occurrence: with contemporary humanitarianism reaffirming an *individualistic, victim-centered approach that treats trafficking as an exceptional crime* (Shamir, 2012: 80). It characterises particular sets of juridical political constructions in which issues such as TIP and slave labour are seen in isolation (Bignami, 2020; Fudge, 2018) while the link between the state and corporate capital is downplayed or obscured to support aspirations for capitalist growth and expansion (Kempadoo, 2005; McGrath and Watson, 2018). On the contrary, labour trafficking, it is posited here, needs to be understood as an outcome of unfreedom in these exploitative relationships.

One important distinction, however, is that logistic systems in countries like Brazil are premised upon conditions in which the acute unfreedom is vital to attracting transnational capital and, therefore, is systematically and structurally organised as a rule not as an exception. This means that the formal submission of labour is one of the components of the labour unfreedom (Portes Virginio et al., 2023) and this is increasingly tailored through the logistics of migration management (Peano, 2021) to shape a distinct ‘compulsion to work’ (Briken and Taylor, 2018). Within this hegemonic structure, as will be shown, the labour trafficking of migrant workers is based then on the subordinated inclusion rather than on exclusion as commonly discussed in the literature with a focus on the legacies of welfare system of Western Europe and the United States (Andrijasevic, 2009; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; Neergaard, 2015; Stewart and Garvey, 2015). Thus, the opportunities and experiences available to Venezuelan workers in the logistical sectors are substantially constrained and overdetermined by the managerial logistics of goods distribution. In the following section, these cases of labour trafficking are placed within the context of the humanitarian operation and the corridor of Venezuelan migration between São Paulo and the Amazonian region.

Labour trafficking and the ‘informed job vacancy’ in context

Brazil’s anti-trafficking policy has existed since 2006, and started 2 years after the Palermo Protocol came into force in the country. From then, the identification of labour exploitation and slave labour among immigrants has dramatically increased, and a total of hundreds immigrants were ‘rescued’ by the state. Until recently, both public policies on slave labour and anti-trafficking, were developed with separate multi-institutional committees for each theme’s discussions. In 2018, the third plan to combat human trafficking in Brazil was approved with the aims of being integrated into the national programme to eradicate slave labour in Brazil – that has existed since 1994 and has earned international recognition after the rescue of 61.711 workers in the past two decades (SIT, 2022). However, human trafficking remains underestimated in Brazil due to the methodological limitations of data-gathering and incident identification, particularly in relation to migrants who are incorporated into the labour market through informal labour intermediation (Ferreira, 2022).

São Paulo has the largest labour market in the country and absorbs the majority of immigrants, whom accounting for approximately 3% of the city’s population (Escudero, 2022) and also make up 43% of the foreign workers rescued in Brazil (SIT, 2022). In particular, São Paulo registered 58 out of 70 Venezuelans workers who were rescued in Brazil since 2017. Despite these indicators, the

coverage of the state's policy regarding 'rescued workers,' such as their access to unemployment insurance, was only extended to immigrants on an equal basis to nationals after 2010 (Ferreira, 2022) – in a context of wage-valorisation policy, boost of domestic market and broader social reforms under Workers' Party governments (2003–2016) (Antunes, 2019; Portes Virginio et al., 2023). Until 2017, migrants were legally framed as a security concern in the national migration bill, which was introduced during the military dictatorship under the Brazilian Foreigner Statute (1980–2017) and imposed several restrictions that included the inability to join political protest, trade unions, political parties or work as civil servants.

In the 2010s, as Brazil gradually shifted from economic growth to recession, the state increasingly relied on military forces to implement public security and capitalist expansion (Antunes, 2019; Viana, 2021). Following Rousseff's (2011–2016) controversial impeachment in 2016, conservative alliances introduced elite-driven reforms in the country. The National Army played a central role in guaranteeing and promoting this process while seeking to increase its political power. The rise in the number of military personnel in civil positions, from approximately 1427 in 2010 to over 6000 in 2020, illustrates this distinct presence across state apparatuses (Schmidt, 2022). It facilitated the implementation of austerity measures and the dismantlement of socio, environmental and labour protection. This included the change of more than 100 articles in the labour law and the authorisation for companies to outsource all their activities (Portes Virginio et al., 2022).

The Amazonian region emerges as an extractive zone marked by forced displacement, extreme exploitation and territorial conflicts in this context. The exponential rise in trafficking relates to the dismantling of public policies and the subsequent escalation of land grabbing, drug trafficking, illegal logging, mining and deforestation in the region (Da Silva and Ferreira, 2019; Portes Virginio et al., 2022). In 2018, the Welcome Operation was created to provide humanitarian relief to the 350,000 Venezuelans who had entered Brazil since 2015, primarily through the border state of Roraima, in Brazil's Amazonian region (Almeida et al., 2022; *Operação Acolhida*, 2022). This was triggered by the refugee crisis in Roraima and framed as an exceptional federal response to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. The Welcome Operation also served as political differentiation toward the exclusion of other migrants who, despite holding the same or similar legal status in Brazil, were not allowed to access the humanitarian provisions.

The National Army coordinated the humanitarian operation that counted with the participation of UN agencies and more than 40 philanthropic organisations within the humanitarian complex. The involvement of UN agencies was due to Venezuelans being considered in a refugee-like situation and the military leadership was justified based on its logistical capabilities to optimise security and the provision of 'temporary services' with limited financial resource and social services (Almeida et al., 2022). This logistic focus resulted in market-based interventions for refugee inclusion and self-reliance. In 2019, the operation and the militarisation of the state gained further strength with the rise of far-right former Army captain Jair Bolsonaro who was elected Brazil's president (2019–2022) and constantly used the Venezuelan migration crisis to criticise the ties of the Workers' Party with the Venezuelan government. Both leaderships were targeted as being left-wing governments who were allegedly responsible for 'acute moral and socioeconomic crises' in their countries.

Brazil has granted refugee status to Venezuelans alongside the right to work and to move freely within the country. However, Roraima's remote location and limited transportation connectivity has made the state of Roraima the most geographically isolated in Brazil's continental dimensions. Air travel is the primary means of transport for most of those travelling to and from the state and this logistical configuration created a distinct concentration of refugees in the region. The state of Roraima is one of the poorest in Brazil, 15.2% of workers are unemployed while a further 45.4% of workers are in informal employment (IBGE, 2020). The Venezuelan population in the state has been self-employed almost entirely in the informal labour market. The lack of long-term solutions and social protection contributed to the increasing anti-migration rhetoric from the local government,

attempting to remove Venezuelans from informal housing and to accessing the limited public services in the region.

The Welcome Operation created a programme called '*Informed Job Vacancy*.'¹ It was aimed at relieving the situation in Roraima and to provide employment opportunities for Venezuelans in other regions of Brazil, by facilitating the recruitment and transportation of refugees. By Oct 2021, approximately 6,000 migrants reallocated through the Informed Job Vacancy programme (*Operação Acolhida*, 2022) despite the severe economic crisis and high unemployment rate in Brazil that had existed since 2014. The military-led operation counted on the support of UN agencies and international philanthropic organisations to analyse job offers, negotiate employment terms and organise seminars to attract employers from across the country. The Welcome Operation matched demand-side requirements for the workforce such as skills, age, gender, family status and fitness level. The Brazilian government also took responsibility for the costs, and the military (mostly the Brazilian Air Force) coordinated transportation logistics.

The rhetoric of *exceptionalism* allowed the Welcome Operation to keep labour experts, anti-trafficking committees and national agencies for labour rights outside the design, implementation and monitoring of the relocation programme. The operation framed the programme as a strategy for voluntary resettlement rather than labour intermediation and it also stressed the individual consent of refugees to participate in the programme. The efforts to combat slave labour and antitrafficking within the Welcome Operation, mostly undertaken by religious groups and international organisations, were limited from a comprehensive right-based perspective. They focused on moral humanitarian values and awareness raising activities in relation to the broader context in Roraima, particularly targeting the sexual exploitation and prostitution of migrant women, children and LGBTI individuals in the region. As follows, the narratives of Venezuelans contrast this individualistic framework and show the complexity of coercive circumstances under which they have engaged in the structurally precarious Brazilian labour market.

Methodology

The analysis focuses on 23 open-ended interviews conducted with Venezuelan men who were trafficked for labour exploitation and slave labour in São Paulo. The interviews were conducted in two discrete periods between February and June 2021 and between March and May 2022. In the first place, interviews were conducted with workers during the labour inspection. Due to the number of severe violations, workers were immediately 'rescued' and the employment relationship was terminated. Interviews followed official safety protocols and the labour inspection set the payment of fines, compensation and unpaid wages, while also ensuring workers had access to proper housing, food and hygiene items until they received all their labour rights. For safety purposes, workers were accompanied by the inspectors and police officers until the end of inspection and then relocated to their desired destination with the promised financial support to reunite with their families.

In the second stage, follow-up interviews and informal discussions were conducted in an online format or in a location chosen by participants. The strategy aimed to have a more comprehensive view of unfreedom while addressing elements that were potentially conducive to influencing workers' behaviours or responses during the labour inspection in the workplace. This approach built on our previous study (2018–2021) that involved 82 semi-structured interviews and 300 migrant workers in workshops in the border zones in the Amazonian region. These participants pointed out that the conditions of labour intermediation should be further investigated. Research included fieldwork visits, participatory observation in emergency shelters, sites of accommodation and freight transportation companies and parking sites of truck drivers, at breweries companies, as well as sites where the labour intermediation was led by the Welcome Operation. Informal meetings and interviews were held with public persecutors, labour inspectors, antitrafficking coordinators,

international organisations and NGO practitioners. Secondary data includes policy briefings, employment contracts, as well as reports of labour inspection operations in which freight companies and Venezuelan workers were involved. Sector-related data was collected from the logistics of brewery companies, the National Confederation of Transports, the State Transport Department and São Paulo's Institute for Freight Transportation. This was supplemented with a plethora of official reports from the Welcome Operation, including the analysis of relocation plans and resettlement programmes. Finally, data from official sources, such as antislavery programmes, demographics, national migration observatory, and labour market statistics were also used. The study received ethical approval from The Ethics Committee of University of Strathclyde in the United Kingdom. For the purposes of this article, participants were provided pseudonyms and anonymity.

Recruitment within the humanitarian zone

In 2021, labour inspectors fined two brewery companies for the labour trafficking and slave labour of 23 male Venezuelan workers who were subcontracted as truck drivers for freight road transportation. The two multinationals are among the five largest breweries companies in the world, and in 2019, they controlled an approximately 80% share of Brazil's beer market, and together have over 130 distribution centres in the country.

The on-site inspection identified multiple violations in the recruitment process and working conditions, in particularly pertaining to extenuating journeys, wage manipulation, degrading working conditions and unfulfilled dignity. Not long after this operation, several reports on labour rights' violations of Venezuelan truck drivers emerged in southern Brazil. In addition to the sector, the common ground in these cases was that the majority of workers were recruited through the programme of *Informed Job Vacancy* from the Welcome Operation.

The recruitment of Venezuelans occurred during a relative shortage of labour in the sector. Brazilian freight logistics are heavily dependent on roads, accounting for approximately 70% of all freight transported in the country (Nowak, 2022). This is central to understanding the structure, low efficiency and high circulation costs of logistic systems in Brazil. Road freight companies rely on having a wider scale of just in time control over labour processes, including the tracking and planning of routes across thousands of retailers and distribution centres. In the past decade, the shift towards the self-employment of truck drives and rampant exploitation of these workers have progressively reduced the workforce available to freight companies. Since 2015, the number of licensed drivers has consistently fallen by 6% per year, while in São Paulo this number is 8.9% (Zingler, 2020), despite the unemployment rate rising to 13,5% and the underemployment² rate to 30% in Brazil (IBGE, 2020). Drivers are increasingly experiencing accidents and health issues due to pressure and armed robbery. In 2018, truck drivers were responsible for Brazil's largest sector-led protests of the past two decades, blocking roads which paralysed the country for over 10 days. This mobilisation was in response to the ongoing deterioration of working conditions, low freight prices and foremostly the increase in oil prices (Nowak, 2022).

Venezuelans indicated that the job offer they received as part of the Welcome Operation in Roraima was different to the actual working conditions. In addition, the transition from precontract to contract stage also changed the terms of employment. The job offer included illegal elements under the Brazilian law such as the informal payment for overtime hours and for the 'purchase' of days off, and the excess of working hours per week. The army negotiated the terms of employment and attended the meeting between the employers and workers. It also signed the Declaration of Intent as one of the parties to the employment relationship. As Lucas Navarro, a Venezuelan driver, explains. He had been living in the streets of Boa Vista when he was approached by an army general, who promised to find him a job. To date, he does not know the conditions of employment:

They (Operation Welcome) signed all the documents, but I don't know exactly what they signed, and what was actually agreed with the company until today; if there was some payment involved in this. The contract was signed in Portuguese, but we don't know it. They said they would help to pay for our rent and to bring our family to São Paulo.

Lucas Navarro

The company assured workers that it would consent and provide conditions for them to bring their family members to São Paulo. However, in the formal offer, accommodation would be provided 'only for single/unaccompanied people.' The promises of family reunification were vital to the immediate acceptance of the job offer and for the moving of over 4000 km from the border region. Most workers left their families behind, including pregnant partners and little children. As the narratives of Juan Carlos illustrates:

I left in Caracas my wife, who was two months pregnant, and my three children. I lived in the streets of Boa Vista for eight months, eating from food bins and looking for a job. (...) I used to spend 100 reais to eat and send 300 reais to my family in Venezuela.

Juan Carlos

The offered support with visa application and travel costs was also important for those who wanted to bring their families from Venezuela. Workers avoided asking for further details and transparency in the hiring process in Roraima due to their concern over losing the job opportunity. Workers also stated that they knew refugees wait several months or a year to have a chance of formal employment in the programme and had little chance of leaving Roraima on their own. Venezuelans highlighted the penurious living conditions and sense of insecurity in Roraima to justify any further action at that moment.

Hyper-flexibility and logistics trap

Once we started the work, the employer began to deduct from our pay. We were really unhappy with his attitude but the need to provide for our families in Venezuela forced us to stay in the company.

Julio Otero

The working conditions did not correspond to those workers agreed in Roraima. Venezuelans had no access to accommodation, and they lived in the cab of their trucks; cooked and washed themselves in parking areas or on the street. To meet the demands in the physical distribution of goods, the employer made the truck drivers to work overtime hours, with no compensation and severe deprivation of their right to mandatory rest between shifts and a life outside work. Workers also suffered massive deductions in their pay for work-related damage to the companies' vehicle. All these were not disclosed by the employer beforehand and negatively impacted on workers' pay. While this is the norm in the business model, the distinction in the case of Venezuelans was how employers articulated the exploitation with the logistics of the migration regime and the local political economy.

The low wage for Venezuelans became a means for employers to gain flexibility. While the salary of R\$ 1980 was above the national minimum wage, the local living wage was R\$ 5330,69 (Dieese, 2022). Rampant levels of economic inflation and economic stagnation of the country created a 30% loss in the purchasing power of workers over 5 years (Dieese, 2022). This was exacerbated by the need to send remittances to family members from whom workers were deliberately separated. As a

coping mechanism, drivers lived in the cab of their trucks to save more money and to reunite with their families since they soon realised that the company would not support this process. Having recently arrived in Brazil and with no relationships in São Paulo, the dynamics of work-family across the space became their only interactions and initially hindered meaningful forms of collective organisation.

This configuration also encouraged workers to accept longer hours. The payment of informal bonuses, as highlighted in the job offer in Roraima, created a binding effect whereby workers became more flexible and willing to bypass their rights, including resting time and holidays. As Pedro Nunez explains, he did not take a day off in over a year on the job as he sold his 'days off' to the company to save more money and bring his family to São Paulo. These payments were based on travel time and were made on a regular basis but remain informal, allowing further flexibility and lower labour costs as employers could bypass mandatory contributions and indemnities related to workers' rights (e.g. compulsory payment of unemployment assistance and pension contributions).

The blurred line between work and 'home' rendered workers 'available' at all times for their employer. Workers did not have fixed working hours nor regular sleeping patterns, their working routines were subordinated to the logistics of the breweries' production and distribution. The management articulated matching journey to increase productivity, so that the inbound journeys would have loads from the same company or business partners. As a result, workers were either pushed towards prolonged waiting times to load/unload or to immediate returns without a lawful rest period.

As Pedro describes, after travelling 800 km to arrive in Rio de Janeiro, he was asked to travel immediately another 1100 km to another site in São Paulo. These combined journeys pressured workers to meeting multiple deadlines wherever the supply chain directed them. Because of these long journeys, Pedro came to realise, that life in the cab of the truck was not simply an individual need of Venezuelans but rather a 'requirement' in the sector. The inability of Venezuelans to predict their schedule was a constant and compromised the sense of liberty they experienced in their job, especially regarding to predictability of resting time. Similarly, Erick highlights the issue:

Another bad thing is how they schedule our journey because you can barely finish unloading your truck then you have to go on another delivery. This pressures us to arrive on time without having rest breaks.

Erick Guerrero

This was intrinsically linked to the further deregulation of employment over the past decade in Brazil. This includes reforms in the 'Truck Driver Act,' which partially deregulated the trucking industry and resulted in lower protection and bargaining power for truck drivers. For Venezuelans, this became vividly evident when employers framed '*resting time*' to be the same as the 'waiting time' to justify the non-payment of overtime hours and violation of limits to daily, weekly and monthly working hours.³ Venezuelan workers were given pagers and told to wait in the parking lot until they were informed of which area to drive and receive cargo. Workers waited on standby for up to 12 h without any compensation payment. This coordination also constrained the social reproduction of workers '*in the same conditions as regards to health and strength*' (Marx, 2011: 190). Sleep and any other activity was regularly disrupted at any time and workers were kept under a state of alertness in their trucks so they could manoeuvre their vehicle in queues and respond in real-time to cargo loading/unloading. The combination of extended journeys and control led to stress-related injuries, as Lucas illustrates:

I feel pain in my bones and my back due to long shifts. I haven't looked for a doctor to solve the illnesses and have not taken any psychotropic when I feel tired of driving. But I've dozed off a few times while

driving (...) when I had to stop the truck because I was feeling sleepy, the alarm of the truck went off. There were colleagues who fell asleep and ended up crashing the truck on a bridge.

Lucas Navarro

Displaced autonomy and span of labour control

The ‘alarm’ referred in Lucas’ quote above is an example of how employers diffused control and exerted further discipline in real-time. The managerial control is strategic to breweries companies for the just-in-time delivery in the sector. The trucks in which Venezuelans lived were equipped with location trackers that allowed managerial control and kept workers under surveillance 24 h a day. Managers used this to not only control routes and speed but also to interrupt resting times and lunch breaks. The cab of the truck was also equipped with a ring warning alarm that was activated by the employer if workers were behind the schedule or inaccessible.

Venezuelans were constantly harassed and experienced verbal threats and patronage in narratives of aid and emotional debt, so workers were expected to fully ‘repay’ the job opportunities they were offered by accepting abuse, further exploitation, and multiple violations of their rights. With easy access to a pool of workers in Roraima from the Welcome Operation, employers constantly threatened to replace the Venezuelan drivers and use this pool to keep the system of oppression invisible to the public (Yea, 2017). Thus, the same logistics that shaped the incorporation of Venezuelans into the labour market have also served to constrain workers on a daily basis. For many workers, this was blatantly illustrated when a Venezuelan driver lost a finger while unloading his truck. The employer sent the worker to the hospital and immediately returned him to Roraima so that the case would not become public knowledge, says Lucas Navarro.

I didn’t even have the time for my personal hygiene. I couldn’t take it anymore and I had to look for a way to get me fired from the job, because it was too humiliating, and I was getting sick.

Jesus Victor

As Jesus Victor indicates, Venezuelan workers were far from passive in this process and devised creative strategies for coping with the situation. Individual strategies varied from the sabotaging of a truck’s communication system to the withdrawal of their labour. In the case of Jesus, he preferred to create conditions to be sacked so he would attempt to receive indemnity protections. Whereas Pedro Nunes described that he could ‘no longer stand working at the place.’ He was becoming sick and was suffering, in his words, a ‘huge deal of humiliation,’ including episodes of xenophobia. Pedro said his manager mentioned that the company hired immigrants so they should accept the poor working conditions imposed and be grateful, because ‘they were starving in Venezuela.’ This also illustrates how the employer appropriated the hegemonic narrative about Venezuela migration crisis to normalise exploitation.

Miguel Alejandro, in turn, says that this was a 24/7 business and so was the intense control, with his manager pushing him to continue to travel without any rest period. He used to cut wires of alarms and disconnect the communication system of his truck so he could sleep and rest for a while. In addition, workers used mobile apps on their phones to communicate and collectively organised themselves remotely. This collective forum was what led them to contact labour inspectors following the increase in managerial abuse and overdue payment of overtime hours. It is worth noting that workers were not looking to be ‘rescued’ as they could have left the job at any time, but they contacted the labour inspection department to pressure their employers into compensating them for the exploitation and abuses they were experiencing. Thus, the sense of internal solidarity within their network of drivers emerged from their experience of common exploitation and remained

central to articulate the resources they had in this given context. Interactions with other truck drivers in Brazil have expanded, but the collective organisation remains concentrated within groups of Venezuelan drivers.

In Brazil, the labour trafficking of Venezuelans was perceived as an exceptional occurrence. The Welcome Operation continues to facilitate the recruitment of Venezuelans and no substantial changes have been made. Further evidence of labour abuses, slave labour of resettled Venezuelans within and across sectors contradicts government's perspective. In addition, background checks of companies also pointed out that almost 20% of potential employers that have contacted the Welcome Operation were formally investigated for abuse, labour exploitation and slave labour (Teixeira and Costa, 2022). Significantly, Lucas Navarro himself also reveals that the Welcome Operation initially relocated him to work in another freight company for one world's largest food and beverage companies in Santa Catarina, Southern Brazil. He and another 10 Venezuelans left the job after 3 months because the working conditions there were even worse, as he explains:

The salary stated in my employee record card was 1750 reais but that was never paid. This is why we left the job (in Santa Catarina). They paid us only 1200 reais and that is it. 'If you don't like it, go back to Venezuela,' they say. Then we left and we went to work for these brewing companies and they did the same. The pay is more, it is true, but they also exploit us.

Beyond this, everything was the same. We had no rest. We arrived at the garage and then they immediately sent us to another delivery. All multinationals know that this is the way things are happening here. (...) I must believe the United Nations (Welcome Operation) doesn't know this is happening otherwise they would not allow us to be sent here.

Lucas Navarro

Such demarcations also reinforce that in Brazil official cases of slave labour and labour trafficking have been an indication of state action rather than the real scope of the issue in the labour market. 2 years later, Navarro and seven Venezuelans from that group worked together for another company in the road freight sector. They found the job through another Venezuelan worker who was resettled to work in the sector in São Paulo, which indicates a niche formation (Tsing, 2009) through the logistics of unfreedom. Navarro described that the working conditions were not much better, and he spent 9 months without any holidays or days off. However, Navarro felt that 'things have improved' because he was able to bring his family to Brazil which helped to reduce the economic and emotional pressures he was under, while acknowledging that many of his colleagues had not managed to do the same. The sense of injustice remains, and these workers now organise themselves in order to open a judicial dispute against their former employer.

Conclusion

This article showed that the labour trafficking of Venezuelan truck drivers in Brazil resulted from the complex relationship between the management of humanitarian zones and the logistics of goods distribution. It examined the deepening link between logistical regimes and understudied forms of trafficking and slave labour. The departing point from the literature on critical logistics aimed to situate the functioning of logistics within labour-value chains and its recourse to extreme exploitation. The concept *logistics of unfreedom* showed how the encroaching logistical rationale has allowed further control over labourers in wage and non-wage time.

Findings revealed the intention to leverage the labour of an internationally displaced population beyond the confines of the humanitarian zone. The humanitarian operation created a distinct political subordination (Fraser 2016; Khalili, 2023) and pathway for Venezuelan workers, inhibited

a range of statutory protections and thus commodified the conditions migrants move across the country. This understanding of containment zones aligns with previous work on the logistics of migration (De Genova, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020), while also revealing implications of this market centred approach for the exacerbation of asymmetrical power relations and unfreedom within and beyond the labour market (McGrath and Mieres, 2022; Yea 2017).

The *logistics of unfreedom* advances the understanding of labourers who are entrapped within the logistical realm. The notion showed how political mediations entangled patterns of commodification, labour control and exploitation (Mezzadri, 2016). The militarised humanitarian control of migration allowed the subordinated integration of migrant labour into the logistic conceptual scope. It created a self-contained regime in which social reproduction is not subsumed by the capitalist state under the form of free public provisions and social rights. Rather, the militarised control recasts dependencies and responsibilities of social reproduction to orchestrate labour mobility to the particular way in which value circulates.

Findings also highlighted the central role labour intermediation plays in organising the trafficking of migrant labour (Ferreira, 2022). While in principle, the militarised intermediation of labour created a gateway for the employment of Venezuelans, it turned into spatial tactics of labour control (Hopkins, 2022; Kelly 2002; Yea, 2017). The humanitarian zone became a pool of labour for the employer to obtain cheaper labour with lower rights and no recruitment costs. It favoured conditions of exploitation in which the physical, psychological and social degradation of workers (Portes Virginio et al., 2023) has little impact on the process of accumulation of multinational breweries. This was mobilised in the workplace to enhance the extension and depth of managerial control over the labour process (Suwandi, 2019).

The focus on the social reproduction of workers showed how they were contained in a structurally precarious labour market and in legal forms of coercion through which subordination was realised (Brass, 2021; Fudge, 2018; Shamir, 2012). The logistic approach to migration also introduced extra-legal practices (Dines, 2018; Peano, 2021; Walters, 2020), with workers having little control over the conditions of their recruitment and limited opportunities outside the circuits of the Welcome Operation. The separation of family, travel costs and the existence of a surplus population constrained the reproduction of truck drivers, while other family members who were trapped within the humanitarian context had to complement a subsistence and care role for the household. Although Venezuelans showed individual and collective forms of resistance to receive their pay and rest, their bargaining power was substantially constrained by these existing legal and political frameworks in Brazil.

Despite the progress of institutional counter-trafficking measures over the past two decades in Brazil, this encroaching logistic rationale may encourage other employers to recourse to extreme exploitation. In addition, the narratives of Venezuelans revealed conditions of unfreedom whereby labour trafficking cannot be simply explained by the dismantlement of labour law, migrants' lack of awareness or unregulated labour recruitment. The differences between the minimum wage and living wages, high unemployment rates and insufficient social protection showed distinctive layers of state control in which experiences of extreme labour exploitation are not an exception but a possible outcome.

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Notes

1. This is one of four modalities of resettlement organised by the Welcome Operation.
2. *Underemployment* refers to people who work less than 40 work hours per week, despite their desire to do so.
3. In July 2023, Brazil's Supreme Court ruled that this interpretation of the resting time and working journey of truck drivers is unconstitutional.

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