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Helping a Little, Hurting a Lot: The Capitalist Sociospatial Condition as Refugee Experience

Jonas and Rodriguez posit a theory of the social production of space, describing a process by which refugees and the space they move through constantly change each other, responding to their mutual sociospatial interaction in a ceaselessly morphing dynamic. In this paper, I will interpret the Syrian refugee journey under the lens of this social production of space, focusing on the dynamics of the capitalist sociospatial condition which forms the economic base of the nation-states through which Syrian refugees must travel. I will discuss how the capitalist mode of production functions simultaneously as a social mode of production, manufacturing a space of liminality in which the agency of the travelling refugee, determined by constantly shifting economic power dynamics, is rendered volatile. While I will concur that a higher socioeconomic status does allow refugees to use the capitalist system to their advantage, easing the way to their destination, I assert that in most situations this is not the case. I argue that refugees' concurrent undocumented status typically supersedes the modicum of privilege their higher socioeconomic status might afford them. Ultimately, the capitalist system largely exploits refugees, preying on their undocumented vulnerability to fulfill its monomaniacal, profit-maximizing purpose.

Jonas and Rodriguez note that "differences in social and economic backgrounds…differentiate…migration" paths, uniquely shaping each refugee's experience as they journey to seek asylum (Jonas and Rodriguez 9). Matthew Cassel's documentary focuses on one such family's migration experience—a family with a higher socioeconomic status than those typically portrayed in popularly disseminated media representations of Syrian refugees. Thus, it

can be understood that the Shalhoub family's migratory experience is not representative of every Syrian refugee's migratory experience. Their socioeconomic status provides them with particular opportunities that are not available to those refugees belonging to a lower socioeconomic status—for, throughout their journeys, they are able to "take advantage of…[certain] spatial qualities…and accommodate to yet other spatial conditions" by virtue of their socioeconomic status (Jonas and Rodriguez 8). An exemplification of this theory is rendered in Shalhoub's ability to consider paying a smuggler to make him a fake ID that will allow him to board a plane instead of hiking through the Balkans on his way to the Netherlands. Even though Shalhoub ends up taking the route on foot, the fact that he is able to even consider the possibility of purchasing a fake ID shows that he has the opportunity to "take advantage of [the]…spatial condition" that is capitalist society (Jonas and Rodriguez 8).

A central figure in this particular capitalist situation is the smuggler. The smuggler, driven by economic incentive, has recognized the niche market for fake IDs that the refugee crisis has inadvertently created, and so rationally moves to supply the fake IDs that refugees "demand." It is an emotionless transaction—the smuggler is not providing refugees with fake IDs out of the kindness of his heart, or any humanitarian sympathy generated in him by their situation. No, the smuggler is merely an actor in the capitalist matrix, responding to a perceived market opportunity to produce profit. This unfeeling transactional opportunity gives Shalhoub an opportunity to invoke his agency as a refugee—he is able to use that abstract notion of "the system"—a system so predominantly driven by self-interest that it bemoans the arrival of refugees who "steal domestic jobs" —to advance his *own* self-interest, by, ironically enough, *creating* a job for this smuggler and others like him. In so doing, he implicitly "imbu[es] [this] [environment] with [a] new social qualit[y]": Shalhoub is able to harness the weakness of the system to his benefit, thus deriving a sense of agency as an individual (Jonas and Rodriguez 7). To the extent that is possible within the

relatively inert "structural contours" of the system, Shalhoub thus gains more control over his journey and his future as he reasserts his will against a series of nation-states that seek to assert their power over him through their increasingly restrictive immigration policies (Jonas and Rodriguez 5). Thus, for the refugee, in a twisted way, to possess capital is to possess power—it allows the refugee to be recognized as a player in the economic system and thus someone to be acknowledged—someone with buying power, if any power. It is important to note that this economic sociospatial condition that refugees like Shalhoub "take advantage of" is selectively permeable, and in this sense unjust—it aids only those near the top of the hierarchy of wealth, favoring the more economically affluent while it deprives the majority, who possess less with which to barter for their futures. Yet, even while the sociospatial capitalist condition may sometimes benefit refugees of higher socioeconomic standing, it still harms them, as can be seen when Shalhoub and his fellow traveling refugees are overcharged for bikes and taxi rides. Recognizing the dearth of transportation options the refugees have, capitalist actors seek to profit off this perceived desperation, turning what could be an opportunity to empathize and aid the refugee, instead into another occasion of self-interested financial gain.

This self-interest is more explicitly evident in interactions with refugees of lower socioeconomic status. Not only does does the capitalist sociospatial condition deprive these refugees from the scant opportunities it offers more affluent refugees, but it goes so far as to exploit these refugees for monetary purposes, adroitly reducing their individual bodily persons into mere vehicles of economic opportunity. "International migration within and between regions…supplies capitalist economies with lower-wage labor," transforming both space and refugee, write Jonas and Rodriguez—and it is clear that the Syrian refugee crisis reflects this theoretical conception (Jonas and Rodriguez 5). In Turkey, reports show that "increasing numbers of Syrians are forced to work under exploitative conditions, with their lives at risk…[as] farm and factory owners exploit

[them] due to their vulnerable situation" (MPC 12-13). Employers recognize the lack of choice that these refugees have within the structural confines of the system—they are without a work permit, yet they must earn money to survive. And so employers are able to deny refugees a complete salary, and sometimes even forfeit paying them a salary at all.

In the midst of these uneven economic transactions, a social space is produced. This space is characterized by a trade-off that takes the form of a zero-sum game: employers profit off refugees' lack of documentation, and, in turn, refugees lose agency and control over their surroundings and their futures as they become caught in a cold capitalist network that perceives them as mere instruments to utilize to amass capital. This is not a process that takes place incidentally. Instead, it is often intentional, as Turkish authorities actually "indirectly encourage" this exploitation by allowing refugees to leave the camps, acknowledging that they are easier workers to "deal with" because they "have to do what the factory owners order them to do" (MPC 13).

Thus, employers who exploit refugees' vulnerability are free to do so, because the authorities—who might have held them accountable in a utopian world—are cognizant and complicit in this economic arrangement. Refugees, in the eyes of employers, quite nearly become tools that are "desired [by]…employers [who can then] hold wages down in the lower echelons of the labor market" (Jonas and Rodriguez 6). "Thanks to Bashar al Asad, we now have cheap labor," comments one such employer, essentially admitting that he owes his increased profits to a veritable dictator who has forced his people to flee into countries where they become creatively exploited in new capitalistic ways. Refugees are perceived as machines "order[ed]" to act at an employer's behest, easily manipulated to extract the fiscal value produced by their unrewarded efforts. The nation-states that refuse to grant documentation to refugees become indirect sponsors of this exploitative capitalist neglect. Thus, the "developmental consequences" of the refugees'

interaction with the capitalist social-space are decidedly negative, as this social-space discreetly serves to dehumanize and commodify refugees (Jonas and Rodriguez 7).

Ultimately, Jonas and Rodriguez' theory of the social production of space provides profound insight into the Syrian refugees' journey to asylum. By considering the sociospatial dynamic that comes to fruition as refugees interact with capitalist actors as they migrate, we are better able to understand the nuanced, unspoken transformations that occur by way of this interaction. It becomes clear that, while capitalism may somewhat benefit those refugees belonging to a higher socioeconomic class, it largely exploits refugees' vulnerability in order to maximize profit. Considering this analysis, it is perhaps worth exploring how we may—if we may at all—respond to the problematic dynamic thus created so as to respect the agency of the refugee and eschew the unjust exploitation they so often face as they migrate.