

Un séptimo hombre

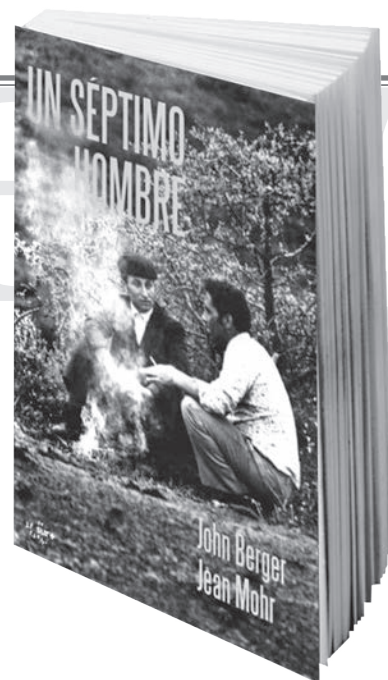
(A Seventh Man)

John Berger and Jean Mohr

Sur+

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International South-North migration has been the topic of many publications in recent decades. However, few have been capable of capturing and laying out as lucidly and radically as John Berger the experience of the migrant worker within the capitalist system, as well as the key questions for



reading these human movements, going beyond the hegemonic discourses. The latter reduce migrants to their remittances or numbers of deportees, dead, and returnees and represent them as victims or criminals, traitors or heroes, the “problem” or the “solution.” All these discourses act efficiently in our collective imaginary to hide the development of the other stories that Berger, in complicity with photographer Jean Mohr, narrates for us in this book.

Un séptimo hombre (A Seventh Man) is a book born of an eminently political intent: “to awaken from a dream-nightmare” (p. 21). Berger uses this metaphor to point to what happens to us as we are subjected to the course of history and to a system about which we are not sufficiently aware and that we cannot influence as we would like, but where there is always the possibility that the “dreamer can break into his/her own dream and deliberately try to awaken” (p. 21). In other words, the book aids in making visible the fact that every decision about migration takes place in a world capitalist

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system where countries are articulated unequally and the economy of rich nations depends on the labor of the poorest ones. To demonstrate this, the author does not resort to a lifeless macro-structural discourse, but to the subjective experience of workers during their travels, always situating them physically and historically in the context of global capitalism.

This book was written in the early 1970s and deals basically with male migrants from poor European countries who go to rich European countries with temporary work contracts: the Portuguese, Spaniards, Italians, and Turks were then the poor of Europe, seeking their future in France, Germany, Switzerland, and England, where they worked in mines, factories, and construction sites. However, the meaning of these workers’ experience is global because it speaks to us of situations and paradoxes present in other latitudes: for example, of the lack of freedom to cross borders and settle where every person considers he/she might be able to have

a better life; of over-exploitation; of non-recognition; but also of the hope that drives these movements; of the personal transformations those who cross borders undergo; of the joy of going home; of nostalgia, absence, and the improbable return.

The author narrates the migratory experience in three moments: departure, work, and return. In doing it, Berger points to different paradoxes or key questions that dismantle the hegemonic discourses about migrations and establishes a new interpretation with the “other,” the migrant, at its core.

The first thesis that he deconstructs is that migration by contract is a perfect form in everyone’s interest. This is a frequent government discourse, both in rich and poor nations. The technocrats call it “win-win” migration. The model’s apologists maintain that these agreements between states make it possible for poor countries to receive resources in the form of remittances that their own economies are not capable of producing; that they help them solve the unemployment problem without having to create jobs; that they lessen the pressure for land without having to distribute it; and that they benefit from the newly skilled labor of the returnees that will help develop their regions.

Berger shows a different situation. He points out that while local unemployment does drop, entire regions lose almost all their men at the time they are most productive and creative: in their youth. He also shows that the departure of young men degrades the peasant economy, which becomes dependent on remittances and loses its self-sufficiency. He states that, no matter how enterprising returnees are, they rarely find the social and economic conditions needed to be able to work and contribute in their own countries the knowledge and skills they have acquired abroad (p. 92).

One of the central questions Berger reveals is the paradox that rich nations want to import labor, but without the worker as a person. That is, they write agreements to import labor, and in this way accept and promote the presence of migrants to do the jobs local workers avoid because they are the hardest, most degrading, and worst paid, but they reject the other dimensions of migrants’ identities. For example, when they do not allow them to bring their families to live with them, they negate them as fathers, sons, and husbands; also as the subjects of social and political rights; they even negate them as human beings with emotional needs. Berger writes, “For the economy of the metropolis, migrant workers are not born, they do not age, or tire, or die. They have a single function: to work” (p. 78).

A second paradox he points out is that the countries of origin pay the cost of creating the migrant work force, thus subsidizing the rich economies. It is very important to mention this, since the dominant discourse harps on migrants supposedly being “a burden to society” for the receiving country. This kind of discourse is very convenient for stigmatizing them and making it possible to deport them when they are no longer needed without major repercussions. Berger poses the issue in reverse: he shows how the receiving country enjoys the labor that cost it nothing to produce because it was in the country of origin where the migrant was born, grew up, was educated, and founded a family, and where he will return once he is no longer able to work; and it will be his family who will cover the costs of his support, illnesses, and death. In other words, the powerful economies *externalize* the costs of reproducing the work force, saving themselves an unimaginable amount of resources.

Another myth about migration under contract that Berger debunks is that it permits the free circulation of migrants across borders, avoiding their having to opt for undocumented crossings that put them at more risk. Actually, the freedom involved is very restricted since they cannot return home when they want, or change jobs, or employers, much less geographical area. They will always be tied to their employers in dependent, dominated relations. All this is why workers who enter the country under contract prefer to pass into “illegality,” since, paradoxically, as undocumented migrants, they can move more freely, although undoubtedly also at greater risk.

Another myth is that this kind of migration is temporary. These contracts usually give migrants the right to work for extended periods of the year. Supposedly this is a factor in their favor because it allows them to return to their countries. The problem is that the temporary nature of their employment is the justification for them not being able to bring their families with them and have a normal life. Also, they do not have the same rights as other workers. For example, neither their children nor their wives can avail themselves of health and educational services. They will also not have the right to retirement or medical insurance like local workers. In short, the fact that they are temporary workers makes it possible to legally justify their not having the same rights as other citizens. This favors above all the economy of the receiving countries since with little investment, they obtain enormous profits.

Although Berger does not explicitly mention racism, he does deal with two matters that are intrinsic to it: the “infe-

riorization” of migrants and their not being recognized. The capitalist system organizes the relations of production based on ethnic and social hierarchies in which migrants are on the lowest rung. In destination societies, these workers are considered of inferior status, an idea that is almost always supported by affirming their cultural, religious, and social differences *vis-à-vis* the local population. These supposedly unbridgeable gaps constitute the “other” not only as inferior, but as dangerous and impossible to assimilate. The migrant’s supposed inferiority is “naturalized” to the degree that it permeates equally the imaginaries of the new society’s population and institutions. In this context, innumerable stigmatizing prejudices emerge that do nothing but reinforce this internalization and incite hostility. For example, the idea exists that they have come to take money out of the country and steal local jobs, neighborhoods, homes, and even women (p. 128). “Inferiorization” is almost always accompanied by insufficient recognition. As mentioned above, the migrant in

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the destination country only has worth as a worker; for that reason, when he leaves work, he becomes invisible. To be recognized, he will have to wait until he returns to his country. Berger writes, “When he boarded the train with his suitcase...everything that had been taken away from him was returned: his independence, his manhood, a private address, his voice, his proclivity for love, his right to age...Finally, he returns to himself with recognition” (p. 223).

Another of the fundamental issues Berger deals with is the tension and lack of solidarity of local workers and unions with migrants. According to the capitalist logic, the migrant is the ideal worker: he wants overtime and night shifts; he wants two jobs; when doing piecework, he speeds up the production line; he makes private agreements with his employers; he accepts worse working conditions, etc. (p. 152). All of this is due to the fact that his situation is extremely vulnerable and he needs to earn money quickly because his stay is temporary and he has concrete goals to fulfill during his stay. This

situation obviously creates tensions with local workers and reinforces their emphasizing the differences and affirming their supposed “superiority” instead of what they share with as him exploited workers or day-workers (p. 154). Berger undertakes a severe critique of unions, above all because they have not managed to stop believing that “the migrant worker belongs to the country he has left behind, and therefore not to the place where he works” (p. 159). He finalizes by saying that the only possible way to get past this reductionism would be for unions to question migrants’ inferior status and defend their right to be active politically; to be promoted on the job; and, above all, to demand their right for indefinite residence and reunification with their families in the destination country (p. 161).

Definitively, *A Seventh Man* is a profound, humane book in which the author very skillfully and sensitively presents a

critique of the capitalist system, giving no quarter. This book is very current because migration today has become an especially acute lens through which to observe the state of our societies, since, due to their structural situation, migrants experience more intensely the evils societies are undergoing. Knowing their situation, therefore, allows us to make visible the failings of our institutions, the limits of the current models of democracy and citizenship, and our own capacity or incapacity as societies to generate solidarity and include “the other,” whomever that may be. The corollary of this would be: tell me how you treat your migrants, and I’ll tell you what kind of society you are. ■■■

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