

Chiara Arnavas  
PhD Candidate in Anthropology  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
London, UK  
[c.arnavas@lse.ac.uk](mailto:c.arnavas@lse.ac.uk)

## **Bangladeshi Labour in Transit A Case Study of Marghera (Venice), Italy**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents an ethnographic study on Bangladeshi migrants working for the Fincantieri shipyard in Marghera, located on the Laguna coast at 10 km from Venice, Italy. I aim to contribute to the question of how migrant labour is crucial to accumulation in post-colonial capitalism.

This paper addresses the situation faced by Bangladeshi migrants working in the industrial hub of Marghera, which is a theme that has been largely overlooked both by public debates and scholarly analysis on the current forms of Italian capitalism. In the last decade, there has been an emphasis on the financial crisis faced by companies in the Marghera hub. In the first part of my paper, I will rather aim to probe whether these discourses served to hide the behind-the-scenes mechanisms of exploitation to which Bangladeshi migrant workers are subjected. I will then take a further step into this enquiry by asking what are the specificities and tensions of this exploitation. Ultimately, I will seek to connect the forms of exploitation experienced by Bangladeshi communities with the current forms of accumulation of resources and capital in Marghera. I will thus argue that our analysis of capital accumulation will remain incomplete if we don't take seriously the specific role played by labour in transit today. I will therefore aim to unravel the significance that Bangladeshi cheap labour has for contemporary forms of Italian capitalism.

The industrial hub of Marghera, located on the Laguna coast near Venice, is rarely considered in its relation with migrant workers from Bangladesh. The ethnographic data collected in this study point to a huge growth of Bangladeshi communities in this area, with numbers that are four times bigger than in 2004. Compared to the rest of Italy, in this region in the North-east of Italy, the majority of Bangladeshi migrants find jobs that are connected to the industrial sector, especially shipbuilding. In order to examine the relation between this large-scale migration and the kind of capital accumulation that is in place in Marghera, I will look at the three, deeply intertwined aspects of Bangladeshi migration to this area. First, I will examine the migration regime they experience. Drawing from Nielson and Mezzadra's concept of "differential inclusion", I will show how migrants experience a whole series of filtering mechanisms and processes of differentiation, detention and transit that crucially shape the labour market in which they are inserted. Importantly, these mechanisms not only occur at the border between Italy and Slovenia, but they are replicated within the different stages of migrants' journey within the Italian territory. Second, I will consider these "bordering" processes in the Marghera area. I will look at the physical and social borders between the Fincantieri shipyard, the "workers' villages" in Marghera, at the Bangladeshi communities located a bit further in the nearby town of Mestre. Third, I will pay special attention at the labour regime Bangladeshi migrants experience in their work in Fincantieri shipyard. With this regard, I will present ethnographic findings on the ways migrants seem to understand their own labor power within this context, and the significance and meanings they attribute to it.

As a final remark, I will propose new possible directions in the readings of Antonio Gramsci, especially in relation to the post-colonial condition of Italian capitalism.

## Full Paper<sup>1</sup>

Jayadul looks at me, showing a blank piece of paper: “You see, Chiara, this is how they threatened us in the shipyards. This piece of paper is the reason we had to work at least 12 hours. Often more than that, night and day”. He sighs and, as if he is really re-experiencing the very encounter with his employer, Jayadul grabs the pen I have in my fingers, and he writes his signature on the blank paper. He explains: “Pieces of paper like this one, with our names written on them, reminded us we could lose our job anytime, if we did not work at the speed they wanted”.

Jayadul is one of the 2,500 Bangladeshi contract workers who work within the Marghera dockyard owned by United Shipyards, a state-owned company and one of the world leaders in the shipbuilding sector. In the Marghera shipyards, located in the Venetian Laguna 10 km from the crowded squares of Venice, non-unionized Bangladeshi migrants work for a minimum of 12 hours, often more, in dangerous conditions. They carry on arduous and hard jobs such as welding and covering with glass wool the cabins of what will be luxurious floating hotels, for which United Shipyards is famous all over the globe. Security norms are not respected in the shipyard, as often workers lack the necessary equipment to safeguard themselves from injuries, and the scaffolding is never enough to prevent accidents. “If you get injured, you are told to do nothing, you are forbidden to report, or you lose the job”, Jayadul exclaims.

The Bangladeshi community in Italy is the second biggest in Europe, right after the one settled in the United Kingdom. It started in the beginning of 2000s. In 2001, Bangladeshi migrants in the Veneto region were 3,097, in 2004 8,730 (showing an increase of 182%), in 2011 they were 17,738, and in 2013 32,475<sup>2</sup>. Bangladeshi migrants are quickly becoming one of the bigger migrant communities in Italy. Since 2004, the number of migrants has become four times bigger. The Veneto region figures as the main destination for Bangladeshis in Italy. However, no scholarly analysis has been done on this community yet. Media and public debates tend to ignore the phenomenon alike, thus reinforcing the image of Bangladeshi migrants as peripheral. When Bangladeshi migrants figure in national media and public discourses, they are only described as petty traders at the margins of the streets, as selling roses at restaurants’ thresholds, as setting up shanty eateries or small souvenirs shops at the margins of the crowded streets of Venice or Verona. My paper considers a different, even more hidden marginality of Bangladeshi labour, one that is constantly reproduced within the shipyards of Marghera. My aim is to offer a different perspective, that is, to shed light onto the fact that Bangladeshi labour does not constitute a peripheral exception in Italy, but it is rather *key* to contemporary capitalistic modes of production in the country.

My conversation with Jayadul dates back in 2009, when I started enquiring on the exploitative conditions workers were experiencing within the United Shipyards’ dockyards. Since then, a question has been swirling around in my head, and it is that very question that my paper will seek to address: What is the fundamental role of migrations in contemporary forms of capital accumulation? And, for the specific case under examination, how can we locate Bangladeshi migrants’ labour within the context of current transformations of labour, brought about by neoliberal turns in Italian politics and political economy?

I use the work transit labour to describe subjects who traverse both material and conceptual borders, and by transiting from one side to the other, they show the inherent dialectics between the two sides of the border they cross. The condition of border-crossing and border-setting these subjects experience in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the ethnographic study I conducted in the shipyards of Marghera, Monfalcone and Sestri Ponente between March 2009 and August 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Data are from the Veneto National Health Services, including those migrants without a legal stay permit.

their lives and bodies is deeply connected to the condition of crisis of capitalism globally. The word *crisis*, from ancient Greek, means *caesura*, scission, division, and at the same time the way such a division leads to a transition into something else. Interestingly enough, *crisis* also means choice. Thus, we could say, if you don't choose the king of transition you embody and put into practice, there is always capital that chooses for you.

In this paper, I will look at the kinds of transformations of labour that are brought about by the neo-liberal turn in Italian capitalism. Specifically, in order to make sense of current transformations of Italian capitalism, I will take living labour in transit as my analytical angle. The perspective of transit labour, I argue, is crucial to shed light onto *the violence* inherent in the constitution of labour markets within new forms of capital accumulation. Such a violence, I will show, results from the ways Bangladeshi living labour is constantly reproduced as a commodity in the shipbuilding labour market. Such a violence, which is continuously perpetrated to make the capitalistic dream of accumulation possible, has been defined by Marx in the Book 14 of the first Volume of Capital as "Economic Power itself". By labour market, I mean the social, institutional, juridical, anthropological, spatial and social conditions that regulate the transformation of living labour into waged labour. The violence with which Bangladeshi migrants are controlled and inserted into the labour market shows how the prehistory of capital, i.e. primitive accumulation, constantly encounters and is combined with the history of capital, high and virtual forms of accumulation. Moreover, I will consider specific mechanisms through which this violence is reproduced. In other words, I will show how migrant labour is produced as a commodity through a series of processes of boundary-setting and boundary-crossing. In particular, I will illuminate **1.** the setting and crossing of geographical borders within Italy itself, through practices of zoning and circulation of production, goods and labour; **2** the setting and crossing of temporal borders, subjecting the migrants to programmed elongation, delays and interruptions of the labour contract; **3** the setting and crossing of national political borders through a specific migration regime, called the Bossi-Fini migration law. I will then show how new forms of political organization are emerging among workers in United Shipyards, and how this may connect to Gramsci's account of the Southern Question in Italy.

United Shipyards was founded in 1959 as a state holding company, part of the national Industrial Rehabilitation Policy implemented by the Italian government. The company was created with the purpose to coordinate the national shipbuilding production, and to support it on the technological and financial level. By the 1960s, United Shipyards controlled the 90% of the Italian shipbuilding market. The year 1984 brought an important transformation of the company: United Shipyards became an operating company, absorbing eight firms and organizing the shipbuilding production over eight shipyards scattered across the country. These are: Marghera and Monfalcone, both in the North-East of Italy and strategic for the production of cruise ships, then we have Sestri Ponente, Muggiano e Riva Trigoso in the North-Western coast, and finally Ancona in central Italy and Palermo and Castellamare in the South. In the 1990s, the company decides to completely abandon the production of small and medium-sized vessels for freight transport and private uses, in order to orient the great majority of production towards the luxury sector of cruise ships and mega-yachts. In 1995, in spite of the evident global shrinking of the cruise ship sector, United Shipyards' managing director affirms the company's intention to become world leader in such a niche economic sector, aiming to pose a real challenge to the South Korean competitors. To this aim, a whole restructuring of the production system was put in place since 2000 to cut production costs and speed up production times. To render the whole production system more flexible, zones of specialized production have been created. In other words, vessels stopped being produced entirely in one location, and instead each shipyard specialized in the production of just *one or few parts* of the final ship. In Marghera and Monfalcone, the most strategic shipyards producing the most delicate parts, workers construct the cabins, in Sestri Ponente, Muggiano e

Riva Trigoso the doors and security accessories, in Ancona the lifeboats, in Castellamare the furniture. Simultaneously, a spatio-temporal and social re-organization took place within the company. And along with it, new systems of control were implemented over the time, the space and the conditions of work within the docks.

At the level of public discourses, through a careful analysis of media and political debates, it emerges that consensus was created by presenting the reorganization of production system as the only way to face the financial crisis that was shaking the company. A whole rhetorical apparatus was build around the image of United Shipyards' cruise ships representing the best of Italian national industry all over the world. The general public concern seemed to focus on how to maintain the companies' ships, i. e. the final commodity, circulating all over the globe, smoothly sliding onto the surface of the world's seven seas to keep high the expectations for the made-in-Italy luxurious ships. This consensus around the importance to maintain United Shipyards as world leader in the cruise ship sector served to hide the ways in which the ships were being produced, the ways circulation of labour and money began to be key to ships' construction, and on the frictions, on the processes of boundary-setting and boundary crossing that accompanied ships production.

New corridors of goods and labour have been created between the different shipyards scattered throughout the country. This has been done by setting up an endless chain of subcontracting system within each shipyard. In total, United Shipyards today counts almost 9,000 permanent employees, while through a complex sub-contracting system it hires another 40,000 contract workers all over Italy. While talking with one my Bangladeshi informants in the Marghera dock, Joy, he explained to me that his direct employers are two young Italian entrepreneurs whose small company took a sublease from another slightly bigger company, which in turn took a subcontract from United Shipyards for the production of cabins for its cruise ships. Importantly, my Bangladeshi informants working on the United Shipyards' dock in Marghera have no contact with United Shipyard staff. When asked who they work for, they always mention Company X, Y, Z, small and medium firms to which United Shipyard outsource the shipbuilding production within its own shipyard. Migrants are hired by subcontracting companies with short-term contracts. In Marghera there are 1000 permanent workers, and more than 4000 contract workers working for subcontracting companies, the great majority of whom are of Bangladeshi origins. What is striking, o perhaps not, is that these small companies are often owned by United Shipyards' managers and employers themselves, under false name. When the subcontract is over, and the cabins are ready, often the companies go bankrupt, workers are dismissed and transferred to another company, or to another shipyards, while employer share the profits. This system represents the highest realization of the logics of endless subcontracting – a reduction of infrastructure, accountability and costs of labour to a minimum. This sub-contracting mechanism has gone side by side with the complete absence of new investments in the design, research and planning of new projects. All the cruise ships that have been constructed since 2000 are all copies of the very same model. It is thus clear where profits are coming from.

As United Shipyards' managing director stated in 2013 “Our production system is like a puzzle. The whole mechanism is like a clockwork device, and our job is like the watchmaker's”. Indeed, workers are subjected to the fragmented time of shipbuilding production. Indeed, I would argue that through this complex subcontracting system, the time of exploitation is synchronized with the time of finance and the Stock Market. It is not a coincidence that since 2005, there have been plans for the privatization and financialization of United Shipyards. “We want to find new resources to make the company grow. In the past we've been growing with our own resources, now we are going to invest on market's opportunities to find new resources by entering the Stock Market”. In June 2014, the financialization of United Shipyards began, with the objective of selling up to the 45% of total capital. Such financialization in in line with the privatization policies of the Italian government. This operations means that the working conditions and the times in the shipyards are subjected to the pressures of

banks, finance and to the Stock Market. It exposes the company to the speculation game, where stakeholders share in the loot-and-prosper process. This is an important example showing how public sector companies and institutions, which have previously been agents of social investment, are now becoming extractive agents seeking to derive revenues from public resources through any means possible. Now, the question is: what kind of political constitution of labour market would allow such a high form of capital accumulation? To answer this question, we need to go back to the blank piece of paper with Jayaduls's signature on it that I mentioned at the beginning. This will allow us to probe how United Shipyards' strategy for accumulation puts the primitive forms of accumulation right at the heart of its own shipyards. At the implications of this.

Anup, a Bangladeshi worker who has been in Marghera for 5 years now, told me: "The first day of work, they forced us to sign blank papers. So they can then threaten us constantly by saying that this piece of paper can always become a walking paper. If they fire us, we immediately loose our residency permit". I would argue that these blank pieces of paper are a way for capital to circumvent the border between necessary labour and surplus labour, thus necessary working hours and surplus working hours. You are potentially fired, the moment you are hired, so the more you work, the more your dismissal is deferred and postponed. Significantly, this mechanism of border-crossing between necessary and surplus labour is the direct consequence of another mechanism of border-setting and border-crossing, this time occurring at the very national borders of Italy. I am referring to the migration regime stated by the Bossi-Fini migration law of 2002. The Bossi-Fini laws allows migrants to cross the Italian borders with a temporary legal status guaranteed by the submission of proof of contacts with a future employer in Italy. By strictly tying the residency permit to the labour contract, the Bossi-Fini has triggered an informal market in which brokers and middlemen sell off labour contracts to migrants.

The majority of Bangladeshi migrants come from the Shariatpur district in the Dhaka division of central Bangladesh. The most common route is the one passing through Eastern Europe, and reaching the Italian northern borders with Slovenia. "The persons who help us cross the border make us promises of jobs waiting for us. We show the border authorities some papers showing we are going to do this or that job, through which we are able to have a temporary permit. Sometimes you have to pay 10 or 15 thousands Euros to enter Italy!" said Joy, who has been working within United Shipyards' dock for 3 years now. "The problem is that most of the times there is no job at all. They fool us. So you have to accept what they then offer you, or you are out in a few days if they catch you. And most brokers send you to the docks of Marghera", Joy continues. From my findings, it emerged that brokers are paid by small and medium entrepreneurs to direct migrants into the shipbuilding market. Migrants live and work under the constant threat of loosing their jobs and thus being deported. Blurring the line between legality and illegality, the Bossi-Fini law leads to what has been effectively called "the legal production of illegal and deportable subjects" (De Genova). Most importantly, it shows how the State and politics make strategic use of borders and boundaries to facilitate the restructuring of capitalist order. This migration regime allows to accommodate processes of informalization and flexibilization of labour. It affects the migrants' insertion into labour markets, such as the shipbuilding one, that relies on the constant presence of new cheap and exploitable labour force. Such a legal regime controlling migrations shows the crucial function of processes of boundary-setting and boundary-crossing created through material and juridical means to manage and filter the movement of people within national borders. In particular, I would like to stress that measures such as the Bossi-Fini serve, as Neilson and Mezzadra effectively put it, "less as a means of excluding migrants than of regulating the time and speed of their movements into labour markets". I think spatial and temporal boundaries are key for the workings of such migrations regimes. Right after crossing the Italian border in dangerous conditions, the Bossi-Fini law puts migrants in another borderscape that has material effects within the Italian

territory. Left in precarious and uncertain conditions, migrants are subjected to the time of the complex subcontracting system put in place by United Shipyards within its own yards.

We have seen how through a system of zoning and circulation among those zones of labour and commodities, and through a complicit State implementing the legal regime of Bossi-Fini, Bangladeshi migrants are key to United Shipyards' accumulation. The exploitation of Bangladeshi migrants within the shipyards allows the company to make profit, buy companies and shipyards in the U.S. and in South Korea and, more recently, to keep up with the Stock Market pressures. We have seen a violent incorporation of migrants into the shipbuilding market, through their violent reproduction of their labour as commodity. While Bangladeshi migrants symbolize the global dimension crucial for capital's reproduction in Italy, migrants' stories also shed light the constant reaffirmation, reinstatement and reinforcement of the national Italian borders. Capitalism regenerates itself everyday through primitive accumulation of migrants: it expands the horizons of Italian capitalism beyond national border, and at the same time it shows how this expansion reinforces the Italian borders as mechanism of selective and differential inclusion. Bangladeshi migrants are crucial for a national order based on capitalist expansion, and for circulation of the made-in-Italy commodities across the world, which is crucial for Italians' sense of pride in their nation. In a time of economic crisis, the South of the world connects with the North and allows capital to reproduce itself through a combination of primitive and high forms of accumulation.

But there is something else that comes into the picture, disturbing it. As primitive accumulation happens everyday within the shipyards of Marghera, Bangladeshi migrants work side by side with Italian permanent or contract workers, mostly coming from the South of Italy. This means that borders and boundaries emerge in the shipyard itself. Migrant contract workers, doing the most dangerous and heavy work, are separated from the more structured space of permanent workers. The divisions are clear, and migrants are not allowed to enter areas beyond their working space in the dock. However, in 2009, in Marghera, after a few serious injuries and one death among Bangladeshi welders occurred, permanent and contract workers started fighting together against the exploitative and dangerous conditions to which workers were subjected. They demanded contract workers had the same rights as permanent workers, such as the availability of toilets in the dock, the lunch break, the necessary equipment and protections (shoes, helmets etc.) and scaffolding. Workers fought together with public demonstrations and strikes against the "global pay slip". The latter is a common form of payment in sub-contracting companies, and it should represent a comprehensive payment to the Bangladeshi worker. However, it does not include contributions not health insurance benefits, and it masks overtime work with various forms of compensations. Last but not least, the global pay slip never includes the actual amount of working hours. Metaphorically, the global pay slip began to signify the global dimension of mechanism of primitive accumulation and exploitation that emerged as all but marginal to contemporary forms of capitalism. As a result of protests, the owners of three sub-contracting companies working for United Shipyards have been convicted for extortion, and the security measures were adopted in the dockyard. And although mechanism of exploitation continued, this fact had repercussions within the other shipyards across the country. When the United Shipyards' managers announced the necessity to close down the Sestri Ponente dockyard, again permanent and contract workers struggled together to keep their jobs, and the government was forced to postpone the issue. While unions are, more often than not, an impediment to workers' rights due to networks of corruptions, Bangladeshi migrants in Marghera are now founding their own unions with the help of Italian permanent workers, and one of the aim of the union would be to connect workers from all the shipyards in the different regions of Italy.

Unanticipated forms of political organization and networking are emerging.

As colonies of exploitation emerge right at the heart of Northern capitalism, the violence of primitive accumulation is revealed and cannot be ignored. New political forms emerge from the connection between migrants from the South of the world, and previous migrants from the South of Italy. The Southern peasants incorporation into the North through primitive accumulation is not without tensions and new political implications. There may be space for a rethinking of the unity of labour and the unity of the nation in different ways rather the ones imposed by capitalism. The oppositions enacted by migrants show where the possibility for democracy lies in Italy. They dismantle the logics of history and emerge as antagonist to the process of production of labour force as a commodity.

In conclusion, we may ask, who and where are the Southern peasants today? And what is their key role for the contemporary forms of capitalism? What is the implication for politics?

The actuality of Gramsci's account of the crisis of capitalism for the contemporary Italian situation is striking. What is even more important for the purpose of our analysis, is Gramsci's emphasis on what the Italian crisis signifies and represents. That is to say, a particular kind of *caesura*, of split, as well as a particular kind of link: the one between the North and the South, i.e., the Northern capitalists and the Southern landlords, for the purpose of the reproduction of capital accumulation. One of the main, crucial consequences of such a crisis, that allows the crisis itself to reproduce itself, is the *crisis* of Southern peasants, their division and dismemberment. And yet, as the case of Bangladeshi migrants shows, a crisis can lead to a new, different political choice. There is an analytical, epistemic and practical salience in the division and intertwining between North and South occurring in the dockyards of United Shipyards. It is an intertwining that, on the one hand, reinstates the violence that allows a certain national and economic political order to reproduce itself, on the other hand, it is an intertwining that produces conflicts and frictions.