Editorial: Labor mobility versus class mobilization?

On Sunday, 23 February 2003, around twelve thousand foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong—largely, but not exclusively, Filipina “maids”—demonstrated in Victoria Park against government plans to levy a new charge on migrant labor contracts while lowering the minimum wage.

On 27 October 2005, riots broke out in a *banlieue* (suburban) area of Paris, after two teenagers were electrocuted trying to hide from the police in a power distribution substation. The riots, pitting so-called “second- and third-generation” migrants from the ghetto-like suburbs of Paris against the police, spread like bushfire to all the major urban areas of France, eventually leading then President Chirac to declare a state of emergency on 8 November. The riots caused major material damage—almost nine thousand cars were burned and at least one more life was lost. It took months of police repression before the violence subsided. Although the desperate context of discrimination, unemployment, social disintegration, and violent crime was clear to many observers, no articulate political demands were made by or on behalf of the protesters.

On 1 May 2006, hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the US did not show up at work or school, whereas reportedly millions of immigrants and their supporters marched in over 75 US cities to protest restrictive citizenship legislation and discriminatory practices affecting both legal and illegal immigrants. The immigrants, many from “Latino” countries, succeeded in getting the message across that large sections of the US economy would come to a grinding halt if it were not for migrant labor.

These three events represent three different forms of political mobilization by migrant workers and residents. They speak to the current *Focaal* theme of “migrants, mobility, and mobilization.” The transnationalization of the working class apparently suggests the prevalence of defensive struggles against declining social standards, rather than a proactive trend of claiming rights. Although the historical formation of the European industrial working class created the concept of the strike and helped spread the tools of demonstration and petition, the current transnationalization of labor recreates the mob and the crowd as the forms of choice for political struggle.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the mobility and transnationalization of labor is often understood as an expression of the steamroller politics of neo-liberalism, which succeeds in removing all the defensive mechanisms of working-class politics, including labor parties, labor unions, and the welfare state—or at best renders these mechanisms and institutions redundant. Worse, neo-liberalism seems to make its alternatives impracticable, if not unthinkable. Against this backdrop the central question that this collection of articles asks is both theoretically and politically highly acute, namely, how and why political mobilization and activism is possible—or impossible—in the context of migration and mobility.

Whereas the theme section highlights the irony that heightened labor *mobility* renders political *mobilization*—in particular class mobilization—more difficult in an era of neo-liberal reconfigurations of global and local labor, mi-

gration is only one of many forms of neo-liberal reconfiguration and—eventually—reassembly. Heightened mobility of capital is the other major source of current disenfranchisement—and not just of the labor class. These things are well reported these days, but this *Focaal* issue features other instances. In Peebles’ transnational city linking Copenhagen (Denmark) and Malmö (Sweden), brought into being by the bridge (see Löfgren in *Focaal* 43, 2004: 59–75) and the EU, traditional mobile populations are regulated from vagrancy via leisure into cross-border productive-labor-seeking practices. He shows the EU as an instrument of neo-liberal governance forcing governments and populations to submit their political agendas to the economic logic of market and trade. Büscher discusses three recent books on development, governmentality, and politics against a similar backdrop of neo-liberal policy innovations. Lankauskas’ work begs the question as to what extent post-socialist contexts facilitate either the promotion of or the resistance against similar neo-liberalisms.

This ties in with the questions raised by John Clarke, Don Nonini, Peter Little, and Neil Smith in their contributions to the *Focaal* Forum section entitled “Putting neo-liberalism in its place(s),” which seek to go beyond totalizing, but imprecise conceptualizations of neo-liberalism as promiscuous, omnipresent, and omnipotent. In different ways they ask, and suggest an answer to, what neo-liberalism is and does—and what it is not and does not do—by pleading for more conceptual precision and for conceiving of neo-liberalism as particular forms of flexible, transnational capital accumulation giving rise to novel (re)assemblages of political economy, governmentality, and subjectivity. In the words of John Clarke, the coherence of this wide-ranging concept of neo-liberalism “is provided by the *combination* of a logic of market rationality, a conception of personhood (centered on, but not exclusive to, human individuals), a calculating framework of efficiency, and a view of authority as a fundamental political and social bond.”

The contributors to *Focaal*’s Forum differ in their assessments of the relative weight of the various associations of neo-liberalism, of the

degree of precision or ambiguity of the concept, and of the political valuations attributed to the various aspects and manifestations of neo-liberalism or of neo-liberal processes. However, in order to do away with the notion of neo-liberalism as an inescapable steamroller and as imprecise blanket term, all of these Forum authors plead for specific empirical historicizations and localizations, for instance in post-Structural Adjustment Africa, in post-socialist Lithuania, or in post-welfare, EUnified Scandinavia; but maybe not in China, which might be an exception to neo-liberalism, or—in the words of Don Nonini—is “distinctly not a neo-liberal formation.” Although I find the characterization of a *country* or *nation* as neo-liberal overly essentializing and not very illuminating, I embrace the plea for situated empirical analysis of neo-liberal practices and processes—or better: for social and cultural practices that conform with, against, or against the backdrop of neo-liberalizing tendencies—as a way of describing or imagining alternatives, indiscipline, or resistance to what from a distance looks like an irresistible *moloch*.

In my first editorial for *Focaal* I submit that this is where the critical, ethnographically rich, and historically informed “anthropology-at-large” that *Focaal* stands for can make a difference. In contrast with many other disciplines, anthropology—through good ethnography—situates agency not just in the “will to govern” or in anonymous structures or interests, but detects human agency in people as social, cultural, political, gendered, and “classed” beings. Rather than casting a panoptic and universalizing gaze from an imagined neo-liberal “center,” critical anthropology-at-large reverses that gaze from the vantage point of the margin—and sometimes of marginals, wherever they may be located—thus detecting the limits of hegemonic neo-liberal practice. To me this seems a necessary move in order to observe and analyze contradictions and contestations so as to eventually imagine alternatives to neo-liberal practice and to create the political space—both social and intellectual—for political action; indeed for political mobilization in an age of mobility.

—Oscar Salemink