1. Introduction

The modern age saw migrants making their appearance on the world-scene in chains, and their liberty remains a conditioned one almost everywhere today. Generally speaking, capital has not so much followed in the footsteps of migrants as exercised its centripetal force in order to lure them with the promise of a wage or enchain them after destroying the preceding forms of subsistence. In what follows, we wish to draw attention to certain salient features of this process, which has combined elements of freedom and bondage, playing out largely on the terrain of employment-systems that have combined for four centuries the free trafficking of slaves and indentured servants with the contested liberty of wage-workers to abandon their employer. Contrary to what is affirmed or implied in many a manual of political economy, the waged individual's right to abandon his or her employer does not necessarily entail the power to choose a different, less unfavourable employer; if systems of employment can be described as battlefields, then Monsieur Le Capital usually has the advantage of acting from the higher ground.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in 2005 the world's immigrants – defined as those living outside their country of birth for longer than a year – numbered 191 million (49.6 percent of them women), a figure corresponding to 2.9 percent
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of the world's population.¹ This is not a very high percentage, even though the number of immigrants corresponds to more than 10 percent of the indigenous population in some countries, such as Switzerland and Saudi Arabia. These 191 million individuals, to which one should probably add another 10 percent of refugees, can be disaggregated into five principal categories: permanent immigrants, or those who intend to remain in the country they have migrated to; contract-workers, who receive a temporary residence-permit (valid for the duration of a few months or years) and are denied the right to bring their family-members into the country of residence, as is the case for most such workers in the Gulf states; professionals, who are normally employed by transnational corporations or hold qualified positions within local firms; undocumented workers, so-called irregular immigrants (sometimes also called illegal immigrants), who have either entered the country illegally or outstayed their visa; the fifth category is that of refugees, or of those with a ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’, in the words of the Geneva Convention. There is of course a certain overlap between each of these five categories; generally speaking, the most frequent overlap is that between people who outstay the duration of their tourist-visa and people who occupy an irregular position within the national system of employment. Moreover, qualified professionals are not always immune to forms of constraint; in the United States, for example, many of them work under fixed-term contracts and do not have the right to bring their family members into the country.

The early twenty-first century has seen various attempts to rediscipline migrant-flows: in North America, in Asia and in Europe. We can describe these attempts in terms of a twofold selection-process. Immigrants deemed a threat to society face the most explicit and severe barriers; the populations of entire subcontinents may be subject to such barriers. A more opaque selection-process operates by granting a certain leeway to persons acting as formal and informal recruiters of labour for the target-countries. The regimentation of migrant-flows through bureaucratic procedures is driven by production-interests that would apply the ‘just-in-time’ principle not only to stocks but also to so-called human resources. This embeddedness accords well with a strategy of fostering the indigenous population’s illusion that the presence of immigrants is only temporary.² The strategies autonomously developed by migrants³ are frequently confronted with state- and institutional structures that tend towards imposing a rigid itinerary on

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² Gambino 2003.
³ Papastergiadis 2000.