

Racism, Labor Migration and Unfree Labor: Towards an analytical framework | Lisa Carstensen

A lot has been written on the relation between migration and unfree labour. Most analysis has also been sensitive to issues of sexism and race. But: often, racism, 'othering' or 'race' is referred to in order to explain exploitative and unfree labour relations. 'Race' then becomes an independent variable, a given category used as explanation instead of a social phenomenon to be explained. Thereby it runs danger to become a black box. So in order to contribute to unpacking this black box, I want to draw attention to the question of how racism is preserved, reproduced and how it changes within and through unfree labour relations. I do this by discussing the conceptual interlinkages between unfree labour, migration and racism. In a second step, I develop a definition of racism, a framework for its analysis and a methodological suggestion on how to address unfree labour. I will discuss this drawing from my research on modern slave labour in the charcoal production and clothing industry in Brazil. In the discussion of empirical research results, the attention is drawn to the difficulties of analysing racism within global production research, the role of knowledge production on the (prospective) victims as well as the need to critically reflect on the initiatives and policies aiming at the eradication of unfree labour.