

Rethinking mobility in social theory: Yann Moulier-Boutang and the motor of history

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Maribel Casas-Cortés***University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain***Sebastian Cobarrubias** *ARAID Research Agency, Zaragoza, Spain*

Abstract

This paper argues for reengaging the work on the primordial role of mobility advanced by Yann Moulier-Boutang, especially in his seminal book *De l'esclavage au salariat: Economie historique du salariat bride* (1998). His re-centering of historicity highlights the transformative potential of human mobility in broader social processes, resonating with the unique readings advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois. We identify how Moulier-Boutang's emphasis on the long-term effects of human mobility is key to rethink concepts such as agency, social struggles, and controls. This paper introduces this referential theorist to an English-language audience where his work on migration is less known, despite being praised as one of the early founders of a burgeoning tradition known as autonomy of migration. Ultimately, this paper discerns ways in which the autonomous gaze toward migration and border policies substantially contributes to social theory.

Keywords

Yann Moulier-Boutang, W.E.B. Du Bois, autonomy of migration, migration studies, social theory, critical border studies

Critical migration studies have become a central part of mainstream academic production. One approach known as autonomy of migration (AoM) has gained traction due to how it de-victimizes migrants and proposes an alternative view of the social role of migration.

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A key reference in this tradition is the work of Yann Moulier-Boutang, especially his seminal book *De l'esclavage au salariat: Economie historique du salariat bride* (1998). Despite often being credited as a co-founder of the AoM tradition, his volume has rarely been engaged deeply especially in English-language literature. This paper argues for reengaging Moulier-Boutang's work, not only to deepen the AoM approach, but also to contribute to key questions in social theory and analysis. We focus on his historical approach, particularly his emphasis on the long-term effects of human mobility, in order to rethink concepts such as agency, struggle, and borders. The re-centering of historicity within the autonomous gaze on migration highlights the transformative potential of human mobility in broader social processes. This paper thus contributes to discerning ways in which the study of migration and migration politics contributes to social theory, beyond critical migration studies. The paper proceeds to do this in a twofold manner. First by engaging Moulier-Boutang, this paper introduces this referential theorist to an English-language audience where his work on migration is less known. Second, this paper does so embedding Moulier-Boutang's work in the existing contributions of AoM. A deeper engagement with Moulier-Boutang not only strengthens the AoM approach for its own sake, but highlights how insights from this tradition contribute to broader social theoretical debates on the significance of migration.

The paper begins by presenting Moulier-Boutang's trajectory and introducing his work on migration studies. The second part engages specific elements of Moulier-Boutang's original 1998 volume, focusing on how his *longue-durée* approach leads him to develop an understanding of the transformative effects and theoretical importance of migration and mobility. We also point to how Moulier-Boutang's historical understanding of the role of mobility has interesting precursors in the work of other heterodox historical Marxist approaches that have examined the role of flight and escape. Specifically, we engage W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the "General Strike of the Slaves" (1935). Finally, the third section points to three significant debates which benefit directly from Moulier-Boutang's historical approach: (a) autonomy versus agency; (b) the study of social struggles; and (c) border-control. This is followed by concluding remarks.

Our overall argument points to how Moulier-Boutang's approach comprises a key contribution to broader social theory based on a careful analysis of human mobilities and migrations. By identifying one of his precursors, the parallel work of Du Bois, we signal how this approach is nourished by a certain Marxist and historical gaze able to influence further theorization on migration.

Yann Moulier-Boutang, French AoM

Yann Moulier-Boutang is known for his role in the development of French autonomous theory. Engaging exiled Italian activist intellectuals such as Toni Negri, and Maurizio Lazzarato, Moulier-Boutang became a founding editor of the journal *Multitudes*, which reflected an interesting intersection of post-68 French-Italian radical thought (Aubert, 2017). It remains a referential journal of French autonomist thinking. In the English language, he is most known for his work on the knowledge economy, crowdsourcing, and analysis of transformations in data-based capitalism. His concept of *Cognitive Capitalism* (Moulier-Boutang, 2011), is the title of his one monograph translated into English.

Less known in the Anglophone academy is an earlier thread of work over the 1980s and 1990s engaging mobility and migration, often combined with his readings of autonomous Marxism. This work, begun with co-authors such as Garson and Silberman (1984; 1986), was reading migration as a partly “autonomous force” distinct from potential structural causes of migration, as well as from neoclassical push and pull factors, thereby distinguishing their work from accepted theories of migration. Furthermore, Moulier-Boutang and his co-authors read this autonomy as something distinct from what would come to be called migrant agency. Moulier-Boutang’s work on contemporary migration in France also led him to engagements with colonial history, post-colonial theory and race, resulting in a series of publications unusual for migration scholars at the time (Moulier-Boutang, 2005; 2003; 2002). This work culminated in *De l’esclavage au salariat*. This volume is referenced and briefly cited in many critical migration studies works, especially those engaging AoM, where he is considered an intellectual founder. Yet, despite the rapid expansion of AoM literature in English, there has been little deep engagement with Moulier-Boutang’s thinking. This is likely due to the fact that the 1998 volume exists in French, Italian, and Spanish, but not in English.

The Autonomous Tradition in Critical Migration and Border Studies

Partly fruit of Moulier-Boutang’s insights into the historical role of migration, AoM literature has grown remarkably becoming an established approach within critical migration and border studies (Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2020). AoM has centered migratory movements and migrant practices as initiators in transformations of border and migration policy (De Genova, 2017a; Mezzadra, 2011; Mitropoulos, 2011; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Scheel, 2019). AoM-based research contributed to demystify metaphors such as Fortress Europe (Bojadžijev & Karakayali, 2010), moving critical research beyond notions of victimhood and critiques of human rights abuses (Von Osten, 2016), while acknowledging the power differential between migratory movements and border/migration authorities.

AoM insists that human mobility is not only a reaction to structural economic factors or the political ploys of states, nor fully containable by migration and border policy (Hess, 2017; Hess & Kasperek, 2017). In this way, migration was understood as transformative in and of itself, forcing shifts in the social and political realities of the places in which human mobility inhabits and traverses. Migration is no longer merely a consequence of other factors, but an instigator of broader processes.

Concurrently, AoM attempts to center migration beyond its control (Scheel, 2013b). Yet, research in this tradition often leaves the reader with a sense of a migrants versus borders dialectic. At times, it seems that AoM’s aim is to show how migrants always triumph over borders regardless of their level of securitization (Scheel, 2013a). In this sense migration’s importance is limited to its ability to challenge borders. AoM may inadvertently contribute to isolating migration dynamics from other social processes, limiting it to presentist understandings.

The breadth and nuance of AoM is reaching farther though. Referential authors such as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson have developed wider theories of transformations in borders and capitalism, demonstrating the fruitfulness of AoM inspired approaches to

conducting broad social analysis (2013). Martina Tazzioli's *Making of Migration* combines an AoM gaze with Foucauldian thought showing how the migrant itself is constituted as an object of knowledge/power and counter-knowledge/power (2020). Nicholas de Genova's work has shown how AoM combined with critical readings of race are fruitful for rethinking macro political geographies such as "Europe" or the "Americas" (De Genova, 2016a, 2017b). Collective work such as the *Near Futures* special issue (New Keywords Collective, 2016) has brought AoM debates into theoretical discussions of "crisis." These examples demonstrate how AoM has begun to consolidate itself beyond initial insights in the study of migration and its governance.

We add to these contributions of AoM to social theory by re-engaging one of its earliest articulations in the work of Yann Moulier-Boutang.¹ Working through some of Moulier-Boutang's (and co-authors') early articulations of AoM, this school of thought not only distinguished itself from other theories and studies of migration at its time of publication, but also identified theoretical insights gleaned from the study of human mobility and migrations. Moulier-Boutang makes key theoretical linkages between migration, social movements, economic development, geopolitics, and racialization. His analysis of how mobility acts with a "certain autonomy" in a *longue durée* historical approach is shown analyzing processes such as the abolition of the transatlantic slavery, the emergence of the coolie trade and the consolidation of the national worker in welfare states. It is from this long-term history that Moulier-Boutang claims this relative independence of migration from other factors, in which "autonomy" does not belong necessarily to an individual nor to certain groups of migrants themselves, but to the process of human mobility at large. Most recent AoM literature over the past decade and a half has focused on recent policy developments in border transformations, particularly in Europe.² While this literature has offered vital correctives to migration and border studies, bringing attention to Moulier-Boutang's historical approach may glean further understanding as to the role of migration as transformative of long-term social and political structures. Moulier-Boutang's longer term approach reorients our theoretical gaze on mobility. Instead of understanding mobility as a feature of the present, mobility and migration become co-producers of the present and potential transformers of the future.

Mobility as *Primum Mobile*

Yann Moulier-Boutang, involved in some of the first efforts at self-organization of the *Sans Papiers* during the 1980s, writes *De l'esclavage au salariat: Economie historique du salariat bridé* in 1998. This book, *From slavery to wage-earner: an economic history of bridled labor*, traces an economic history of mobility based on an exhaustive study of the long process of abolishing modern slavery. Moulier-Boutang observes how attempts at controlling labor mobility generated the conditions of escape throughout capitalist history, often instigating unpredictable migrations, to which states have tried to respond through readjustments in policies, both domestic and foreign, of great impact.

The historical and economic analysis carried out by Moulier-Boutang starts by exploring the following contradiction: how is it possible that in countries where a *worker* supposedly has freedom to choose their job, leave it and search for another, and freedom to

change job sector, simultaneously, a *foreigner* has a status where these liberties are circumscribed?:

In the case of the foreigner we are in effect before a salaried worker and yet, who would be capable of holding that they as equally free as an ordinary salaried worker? (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 31. NOTE: all translations are authors')

In order to arrive at current migratory laws, Moulier-Boutang carries out historical work on changes in labor mobility and its management from the 16th to the 20th century. In the second chapter of the book, "The continent of escape," Moulier-Boutang makes a key distinction between public enunciation, which he calls "voice" and daily practices of mobility, which he terms "exit" (2006, pp. 12 and 32). Moulier-Boutang distances his analysis from interpretations which center on notorious cycles of struggle visibilizing collective malaise, for example: mobilizations for eight-hour workdays, struggles for rights to unionize, or mass slave revolts. Though he does not minimize the importance of those more visible expressions, for Moulier-Boutang the principle path of change and force in these processes has been not so much through "voice" but rather "exit." Furthermore, not only does Moulier-Boutang reformulate notions of collective action, displacing episodes of confrontation with explicit demands, rather he promotes "the exit of dependent labor, free or unfree, as the *primum mobile* of the development of capitalist production" (2006, p. 32). This is to say, utilizing the concept of Aristotelian logic of the need for an ontological principle that explains reality and the unfolding of history, Moulier-Boutang confers human mobility an unprecedented analytical importance: migration becomes the primordial factor, necessary to explain historical configurations, including the destruction and recreation of labor markets and therefore of the organization of production, commerce, and accumulation in general:

What is the primordial principle? The control of the exit/escape of dependent laborers represents the principal element that has governed the birth, deterioration, and replacement of diverse forms of unfree labor, as well as the genesis of social protections, the labor statue of the free and protected wage-earner, just as has been built through the labor code. (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 32)

Moulier-Boutang deciphers how salaried work constitutes a sought-after solution for those who required a loyal, sedentary or at least predictable workforce hoping to avoid or reduce the constant movement of people. In this manner, it is the daily practices of "escape" that force the development of current contract regimes, as mechanisms to control and manage mobility from, and the abandonment of, certain jobs. This primacy of mobility in the history of capitalism is what Moulier-Boutang defines as the "autonomy of migration." This autonomy of human mobilities is what pushes the development of capitalism in particular directions. Developing a heterodox Marxist reading of the world economy, he proposes the struggle of slaves as one of the main motors for the arrival of what is called free wage labor, the current international division of labor, and for the development of existing paradigms of migration policy. This genealogy of mobility definitively reverts the conventional relation between state administration and

mobility, signaling how experts and agencies of migration management have failed to recognize the force and effects of migratory flows.

While Moulrier-Boutang's work is dense, challenging to read and apparently of the past, it contains an original contribution: the analytical revalorization of human migration. In the last instance, his economic history established mobility as the starting point to develop social analyses, in this way inaugurating one of the premises of AoM, that of "migration as a critical standpoint" (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2022) and not as a segment of reality that can be separated and studied on its own. Moulrier-Boutang defends that his study, far from being an isolated reality, has resonances far beyond the situated experience of slavery. He underlines how abolition, as an international tendency in the 19th century, unfolds into different types of forced or "embridled" labor, what Moulrier-Boutang also terms "dependent labor." Abolition does not automatically materialize into the freedom of every worker to break their contract and change employment. For Boutang, the control of mobility is the principal means for managing a labor force that is not yet free:

If freedom, understood in the sense of the asset of unilateral mobility of the dependent worker, is therefore a strategic and independent variable for the wage earner, (...) in what concerns the employers, freedom is not conceivable more than in the measure that it permits the fixation and mobilization of labor. (Moulrier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 531)

Thus, although the freedom to choose one's employment is proclaimed as a virtue in modern market economies:

(...) one might say that the liberal labor market never came to truly function at the world scale. Conquering freedom of movement for labor at an international scale, a process which to a large degree continues, stirred and still stirs so much resistance. (Moulrier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 533)

The freedom of movement for labor, that as of yet does not exist, owes its tensions to the processes which emerged after the abolition of modern slavery. In fact, Moulrier-Boutang argues that "the migratory policies of modern states in the 20th century have their contours based on the post-slavery administration of the British Empire, which developed transitional forms of labor management, institutionalizing a salaried regime that was never completely free." (Moulrier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 536).³

Moulrier-Boutang highlights that the adoption of an abolitionist position on the part of the British Empire did not come solely because this position was more in tune with the liberal economic theories espoused by many imperial thinkers. Nor does the diplomatic concern for having a benevolent appearance explain why British authorities decided to dismantle a global system of commerce with significant gains. The reason that pushed the empire to declare the end of an international business with relatively low commercial risk and guaranteed profits, was a persistent problem of governability. The massive escapes of slaves, and their influence in inter-imperial conflicts of the era, were the main causes for political and economic concern.

History advanced through escape: only this massive movement achieved the transformation of a clearly minoritarian abolitionist movement (...) into an economic reality so considerable that it entailed, regardless the opinions of different actors, the transformation of entire constitutions. (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 579)

“Had the escapes not occurred,” insists Moulier-Boutang (1998/2006, p. 579), the compromise with and commitment to slavery would have lasted longer. The British Empire, which ruled the transatlantic waters of the 19th century, had to deal with many of these escapes, including massive self-organized escapes, taking advantage of them when possible in its tit-for-tats with other empires. Furthermore, the Empire promised land to many of these slaves, for example on the West Coast of Africa, in places like Sierra Leone, a colony based on freed slaves. Nonetheless, only a few years after establishing the policy of bringing escaped and freed slaves to Sierra Leone, attempts were made to try and manage this ex-slave population as a kind of contracted emigration force to meet labor needs in British colonies. There were cases where the same individual ex-slaves were recruited to work in colonies where they had previously been slaves, this time with the promise that it would be for a limited time and with some benefits (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006). Thus, there were two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, the acceptance of the liberation of slaves and on the other, recruiting those very same people for similar, if not the same, work though with the promise of improved conditions.

For Boutang, these institutional actions that simultaneously authorize and ratify opposed practices in relation to the freedom of movement and labor are key to understand the contradictions in contemporary migratory policy where certain mobilities have an almost free hand while others are tightly controlled. It was this historical period in which:

What would end up turning into a constant feature of developed countries and the liberal ambiguity par excellence began to install itself: the alleged support for the free circulation of people that was based to a large degree on a march of many centuries toward the freedom to flee, and on the other side, a total sub-estimation – or tacit silence- of the condition of limiting that same freedom in the name of economic reason. (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 604)

This parallel ratification, on the one hand of new freedoms of movement, and on the other, new controls of mobility, constitutes a historical heritage of maximum currency according to this author. The slave regime was not limited to one country or empire, but rather functioned as a global system of commerce and control of the mobility of labor. Moulier-Boutang identifies how, in response to constant escapes, the British Empire carried out a profound legal restructuring that expanded throughout its numerous colonies, and to other empires, eventually adopting these same changes in their very metropolises:

It is simply a matter of understanding that the new juridical order established in international exchanges admitted islands of non-liberty, then in the periphery, and a century later in its core. (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 614)

The global slavery economy and its process of abolition, slow and incomplete, expanded itself through an imperial structure that contained numerous territories and seas, including agreements on the matter of slavery negotiated or demanded by the British Empire to other empires (i.e., Spain in Cuba). Given the transatlantic strength of the British in the 19th century, this inter-imperial role is particularly important. In this historical configuration Moulrier-Boutang identifies the foundations of current labor markets and migratory regimes, as well as their internal contradictions (free but dependent labor, and the legitimization of differentiated mobilities among others). Additionally, the juridical regime of mobility control consolidated in the 19th century by the British Empire was based on social hierarchizations in racial terms. Therefore, Moulrier-Boutang concludes, that current modes of ethno-racial stratification in the labor market and dynamics of differential inclusion and exclusion of migratory regimes today are related to the legacy of the said process of slavery's abolition:

The solutions proposed for this problem traced the three main directions/tendencies around which would be organized what would become the international market of dependent labor (...): (a) a market of peonage for ethnic minorities who were former slaves; (b) a market segmented by a regime of international migration under labor contract for a large number of international immigrants; (c) a market protected by racial barriers or by discrimination of those categories of the population deemed non-white. (Moulrier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 617)

The terms used by Moulrier-Boutang—such as “ethnic minority,” “racial barriers,” “non-white” populations, directly signal historical social hierarchization in racial terms in order to understand current labor markets and migratory systems.

Ultimately, the pertinence of Moulrier-Boutang rests in situating the origins of current day geopolitics of migration in the collective escapes of slaves, which shook up the buoyant global slave system. As a response, contemporaneous authorities and their immediate successors attempted to manage the excess of mobility of slave labor through a long and incomplete process of abolition accompanied by inter-state (often imperial-state) juridical restructuring. For Moulrier-Boutang this was a temporally and spatially expansive process that forces an analysis able to make connections across space and time:

The years from 1804-1889 were this of the interminable abolition of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. The following years saw the reconstitution of colonial empires and the exceptions regarding labor (forced labor in Africa, coolies in Asia), while in the center of European industrial economies labor immigration has been progressively codified as foreign labor with a particular status.

(Moulrier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 533)

All of this then comprising part of the genealogy of the racialization and hierarchization of mobilities in labor markets and migratory regimes of the 20th and 21st centuries. These newer regimes no longer differentiate free/unfree in strict geographic terms of metropole

and colony, rather the repercussion of free/unfree could occur in “the heart of industrial capitalism.”

Concretely, the creation of foreign worker statutes, including work visas, guest worker programs and foreigners’ regulations in general, facilitate the management of the mobility of different groups of people in such a way as to guarantee a “dependent” labor force (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 530). This is why for Moulier-Boutang, the apparent contradiction between a mobility regime of quasi free movement for people of certain geographic origins is compatible with a regime that illegalizes human movement from other origins (such as the Schengen zone versus most extra-communitarian mobilities in the European Union).

The term “migration,” both in the singular and the plural, is used intentionally in this text in a generalist sense, not at all exhaustive regarding the empirical diversities of actual human mobilities. In this way, we try to respect the meaning with which Moulier-Boutang works, who refers to migration as human mobility in general, previous to its segmentation, classification, and hierarchization through migratory policies. From this analytical starting point, he develops his hypothesis about the centrality of mobility to understand the development of the current political-economic system. The term “migration” then refers to the idea of human mobility *per se*, including forced and voluntary migrations, legal and clandestine ones, spontaneous and planned, without distinguishing between common migratory categories such as refugee, economic migrant, tourist, guest worker, international student, business traveler, etc. Thus, migration here is not equivalent to *migrants*, referring to a term produced as a result of current border regimes, one that racializes and illegitimizes certain mobilities (Tazzioli, 2020).

Based on this closer reading of Moulier-Boutang, the “autonomy” of migration refers to the capacity of migratory movements to intervene in structural processes be they economic, political, cultural, or legal. This independence of migration from other factors makes it both actor and site to be acted upon, within a diverse array of legal, political, and economic processes. According to this theory, the unfolding of migration and human mobility entails profound transformations, not only in borders but also in notions and practices of sovereignty, citizenship, and labor.

Moulier-Boutang’s volume gathers historical cases to illustrate his main points relating to exit, *primum mobile*, and autonomy. While the abolishing of slavery in the British Empire is central, there are also examples from the second serfdom in Eastern Europe, Brazilian slavery, and South Africa. Moulier-Boutang’s exploration of mobility and its autonomy as a motor of social transformation is an original approach to understanding human migrations, as well as economic and political transformation more broadly. Inspired in autonomous Marxism, Moulier-Boutang builds an analysis of historical developments entailing a challenging and original appraisal of the force of migrations. His identification of the effects of “exit”/mobility as structurally transformative is one of the first we are aware of. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify intellectual precursors to his thinking who, while not reducing the originality of Moulier-Boutang’s contribution, show how key aspects of his analysis were previously identified, yet not developed. This is the case of the work by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), specifically his notion of the “general strike of the slaves.” We suggest how two different thinkers from distinct time periods and geographies, by adopting heterodox historical Marxist

approaches arrive to similar observations as to the importance of escape, mobility, and migration. While not collapsing these analyses as they are very distinct, the coincidence suggests a shared analysis of migration which accounts for its theoretical importance as a motor of change, rather than simply as an effect of other factors. This insight has significant ramifications for theories of social transformation as well as for the study of migration broadly thought.

The following section discusses W.E.B. Du Bois examination of the mass abandonment of slave plantations in the United States Civil War as a key action tilting the geopolitics of the civil war, and forcing a restructuring of the economy of the US South among other changes. Du Bois, writing in the 1930s, prefigures key elements of Moulier-Boutang's analysis about 60 years earlier. We believe it worthwhile to recuperate this work as a sort of unexpected historical genealogy of Boutang's thinking and that of AoM coming from a key figure in the founding of modern sociology and critical race studies.

Du Bois and the General Strike of the Slaves

In 1935, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois publishes *Black Reconstruction*, a reinterpretation of the United States Civil War and its aftermath, highlighting the possibilities of reforms during the Reconstruction era, attempts to squash those same reforms, as well as emphasizing the role of African Americans during and after the Civil War. While often disparaged at the time, this work by a scholar now considered to be a co-founder of US Sociology has become a hallmark of studies of US History and Africana Studies. Here, we focus on one of the main arguments made in chapter four titled "The General Strike of the Slaves."

Du Bois is one of the first authors to argue that it was the action of enslaved African Americans that actually led to the abolition of slavery. His research signals how abolition was not on the policy of any significant player in the Civil War until well into the conflict. He argues that the political shift toward abolition was one forced by circumstances and by the actions of thousands if not millions of enslaved people:

It was as Frederick Douglass said in Boston in 1865, that the Civil War was begun 'in the interests of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North fighting to keep it in the Union.' (Du Bois and Douglass in DuBois, 1935, p. 61)

Du Bois highlights that military commanders of the North's armies had specific orders to return escaped slaves, or to aid in preserving the overall slave system. Despite these orders, and even the attempts of some Northern commanders, Du Bois describes the force of this fugitive movement, concluding that the will to maintain slavery was pointless:

...wherever the Union armies marched, appeared the fugitive slaves. It made no difference what the obstacles were, or the attitudes of the commanders. It was like 'thrusting a walking stick into an ant hill,' says one writer. And yet the army chiefs at first tried to regard it as an

expectational and temporary matter, a thing which they could control, (...) Not that the government planned or foresaw this eventuality; on the contrary, having repeatedly declared the object of the war as the preservation of the Union and that it did not propose to fight for slaves or touch slavery, it faced a stampede of fugitive slaves. (1935, p. 62)

Du Bois refers to chronicles by Union commanders, contemporary journalists as well as those providing aid on the tails of Union troops, referring to the increasing numbers of escapes and the assertive character of escapees:

This was the beginning of the swarming of slaves, of the quiet but unswerving determination of increasing numbers no longer to work on Confederate plantations, and to seek the freedom of the Northern armies. Wherever the army marched and in spite of all obstacles came the rising tide of slaves seeking freedom." (...) "Thus, wherever the Northern armies appeared, Negro laborers came, and the North found itself actually freeing slaves before it had the slightest intention of doing so, indeed when it had every intention not to. (1935, pp. 65–66)

In this sense, the North had to free the slaves because they were freeing themselves—now often referred to as “self-emancipation” in contrast to the popular narrative of slaves being emancipated by the Lincoln administration (see Harding, 1992; Roediger, 2014; Williams, 2014). The scale of fugitive escapees led to a situation of *de facto* free slaves:

In August [1862], Lincoln faced the truth, front forward; and that truth was not simply that Negroes ought to be free; it was that thousands of them were already free (...) Lincoln’s proclamation only added possible legal sanction to an accomplished fact. (DuBois, 1935, pp. 82 and 84)

Union policy then simply matched the mobility practices of these fugitives, and was able to turn it into an advantage. Du Bois narrates different social experiments made during the encounter between Union armies and escaped slaves, including re-organized labor systems to provide supplies, distributions of land to former slaves as well as the incorporation of fugitive slaves as troops and scouts for the Union army, which in turn, involved freeing other slaves through raids on plantations.

This “strike” against the plantation-based slave system was carried out largely through movement, by physically leaving, escaping from the plantation and surrounding region:

This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. (...) They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that, they left the plantations (1935, p. 67). *The movement became a general strike* against the slave system on the part of all who could find opportunity. The trickling streams of slaves swelled to a flood. Once begun, the general strike of black and white went madly and relentlessly on like some great saga. (1935, p. 64, emphasis by authors)

Thus, similar to Moulrier-Boutang’s emphasis on the tumultuous power of exit/escape, in the case of the general strike of the slaves, there was no official “call” to strike, nor was there an organizational node (union confederation, network of churches, mutual aid societies, etc.) that served as some sort of umbrella for the effort. No doubt there was

organization involved in the thousands of escape attempts and that some abolitionist organizations supported these waves of fugitive slaves. Clearly, specific escape events were facilitated by this support such as the Combahee River Raid. But the strength of the “strike” did not come from either organizational cohesion, nor from explicit public demands to an interlocutor (be it in the Union or the Confederacy in this case). The fact that Du Bois labels it a general strike is not only a gesture to his own politics and the framework of his study. Rather, this naming is a way to literarily capture and convey the force of this mass human mobility and its transformative effects.

The general strike of the slaves, that is, the mass escape of slaves during the Civil War, the slowing and stopping of their labor on Southern plantations, as well as their incorporation as fighters and laborers in the Union (North’s) army, transformed the politics around the conflict. Not only was the outcome of specific battles changed, but this general strike also led to the Emancipation Proclamation; to diplomatic shifts internationally resulting in recognition and support for the Union/North; and also generated distinct ties with Union generals and political leaders (especially of the Republican party) impacting post-war Reconstruction, and the social experimentation that took place therein.

This “general strike,” while constituting itself as a rather self-directed form of human mobility, was affected by other structural factors and political actors (the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy, military dynamics, the plantation economy, cotton exports, and international relations of the parties of the US Civil War...). Still, this wave of mobility baptized as “strike” entailed a certain autonomy from those factors, unfolding its own logics as well as its own direct and indirect impacts on other parallel processes underway. The mobility or migration of thousands of slaves in this case cannot be theorized as an “actor” in and of itself with some sort of collective “agency.” Nor do the fugitive slaves or “strikers” exist in the abstract as some sort of unitary subject pushing for social transformation. Du Bois’ argument, and Moulrier-Boutang’s later study insist on considering the impacts of these mobilities on their own terms, beyond the sum of individual decisions and opportunities, and not merely as the “consequence” of some other cause. Additionally, these mobilities are generative of larger systemic shifts.⁴

Regarding timespan, Du Bois is centering on processes immediately before the Civil War and through Reconstruction. While different from Moulrier-Boutang’s engagement with several centuries, both analysts are looking at the long-term effects and structural transformations resulting from human mobilities (transformations beyond what might be termed migration politics *strictu sensu*). Both authors point to migrations as holding a kind of collective power which, besides operating without formal and explicit organizing frameworks, entail a massive potential for instigating change.

There are several important resonances suggesting that, directly or indirectly, Du Bois serves as a kind of intellectual ancestor to Moulrier-Boutang and the AoM approach. While Du Bois is not engaged in the sort of *longue durée* approach that Moulrier-Boutang develops, he is highlighting long-term effects of slave escapes in transforming the economic and political landscape of the United States and its role in the global economy. Du Bois and Moulrier-Boutang both argue that the cumulative force of decisions to escape brought about a series of unexpected consequences and shifts at large political and economic scales. For Moulrier-Boutang this is over a long period of

19th century abolition and for Du Bois primarily over the course of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Yet for both authors the impacts of these mobilities are long term.

While both authors focus primarily on self-organized mobilities reacting collectively and individually to circumstances at hand, they do not argue for an *ex nihilo* spontaneity.

In labeling the slave escapes and work stoppages a general strike Du Bois is emphasizing that the cumulative force of the escapes during the Civil War, were on par with a massive general strike. Prior to Du Bois's writing, these escapes were not given similar importance by other historical observers of the Civil War. Du Bois names a social mobilization tool, at the time assumed to belong to well organized union confederations, and applies it toward what seems to be an unorganized series of escapes. This echoes, albeit in a shorter timeframe, with Moulier-Boutang's argument of the power of exit versus voice. The coincidence between these two important thinkers, regarding their view of human mobility as a motor for social change, points to the theoretical relevance of migration to study broader social transformations, and rethink key notions in social theory and research.

Rethinking Agency, Struggle, and Control

Based on our reading, the historical approach embedded in Moulier-Boutang's work and in tandem with Du Bois' example, pushes AoM, Critical Migration Studies and Mobility Studies and contributes to rethink key concepts. It is our aim that revisiting this legacy from Moulier-Boutang (and indirectly from Du Bois) will aid not only in deepening the aforementioned approaches, but also bring key theoretical insights underlying the AoM approach out from the subfield of Migration Studies and into broader theoretical discussion around mobility and social change. We think it is important to anchor this reading in dialogue with existing AoM literature rather than start from Moulier-Boutang as point zero. This is due to the relevance of the established literature in AoM and the fruitful efforts that have already moved in this direction (i.e., De Genova, 2017a; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; New Keywords Collective 2016; Tazzioli, 2020).

We have identified three main problematics engaged by AoM and Critical Migration Studies that can benefit from this historical approach: agency; migrant struggles; and autonomy beyond controls. We believe clarifying the use of these concepts through this reading of Moulier-Boutang will also further understanding of theoretical importance migration for understanding social transformations.

Autonomy and Agency

A possible slippage between the concepts of "autonomy" and "agency" emerges when thinking migration beyond victimization. For instance, AoM literature has emphasized the ability of migration to overcome migration controls. Yet, in this attempt, autonomy can come across as the agency of individuals, small groups, or even of a vague collective under the shared label of "migrants."

In contrast, the initial formulation of "autonomy" by Moulier-Boutang leads to rethink migration's capacity of transformation in different ways. On the one hand, migration holds

a certain “autonomy” from the theories that sought to explain it (Moulier-Boutang & Garson, 1984). In this regard human mobility was not merely a consequence of other factors but had its own dynamics. This built on an understanding of autonomy branching off from ideas of autonomous Marxism (Hess, 2017). In that case, the working classes were understood as often originating change of their own accord, without any sort of strict organizational center, and not only as a response to capitalist initiative (Tronti, 2019/1966). In fact, in that framework, the “autonomous” working classes were the initiators of change to which employers and the state responded:

[I]t was necessary to reverse the classical relation between capitalistic development and workers’ struggles, to identify in workers’ struggles the real dynamic element (the real ‘mover’) of capitalistic development, and to affirm the latter’s subordination to worker’s struggles. (Mezzadra, 2011, p. 585)

In Moulier-Boutang and AoM’s early articulations, migration is understood as autonomous in a similar way. Migration is not “only” reactive to external stimuli (economic push-pulls, disasters, etc.) but holds its own internal logics. These logics were more than simply the sum of increasingly diverse explanatory trends within migration studies (such as chain migration or cumulative causation, see Massey et al., 2006).

Therefore, AoM does not refer to the “autonomy” of migrant persons under a prism such as agency referring to their capacities of individual initiative (Bojadžijev & Karakayali, 2010). In this way, AoM challenges the structure–agency dichotomy in studies of migration and its governance (i.e., Vives, 2017). AoM as an approach is not collapsible into a radical version of migrant agency. On the one hand, agency refers to a notion of a sovereign individual, at least ontologically if not empirically, making decisions based on opportunities, constraints, knowledges, costs and benefits, etc.⁵ The term “autonomy,” in its common English usage can refer to this, but in for Moulier-Boutang, autonomy has a different trajectory. Mario Tronti a central figure in autonomous Marxist thought, referred to an analytical Copernican revolution in reflecting on the actions of workers as a whole in provoking structural changes in capitalism (Anastasi, 2020; Mandarini & Anastasi, 2020). This does not refer to individual acts of resistance or sabotage, or particular moments of resistance be they strikes or mass collective action. Rather, the actions and practices of a class as a whole (not necessarily as a singular actor) are able to provoke important reforms, transformations, and restructurings of capitalism. This distinct theoretical posture aims at understanding changes in the labor market, contract models, regulation or in the location and forms of production and distribution, by looking not only to business models and management theory, nor to studies of social movements and mobilization, but rather to general patterns of worker survival and everyday activity.

This same sort of theoretical shift in terms of migration is what we see in Moulier-Boutang’s reading of AoM. AoM develops this basic insight in specific and different ways in order to address the question of mobility as a central axis, while articulated to class and race. Moulier-Boutang focuses on the key role played by the mobility of servile, enslaved, and indentured laborers in transforming the structure of labor markets, constitutions, imperial states as well as notions of race, contributing to the overall historical restructuring of racial capitalism. These transformations occurred

after years and decades of human mobility. For Moulier-Boutang, certain bursts of exit, mass escape and potentially insurrection could spur events and bring issues to the forefront of political debate. But just as important are the steady mobilities that develop over time as a response to forms of dependent labor.

Human mobility then is not to be read in this agent/actant sense as migrants being the “new revolutionary subjects” (Mezzadra & de Genova, 2015). The specificity of Moulier-Boutang’s proposal is taking autonomous mobility itself as holding a structural primacy. While not focused on long-term mobilities, Du Bois’ analysis of slave escapes also argues for the key role of these mobilities in understanding not only the outcome of the war itself, but also broader political shifts. These escapes were structurally transformative even if they did not articulate a collective list of demands and attempt to act on them. From both these authors we can perceive that beyond agency, migration is able to contribute to the restructuring not only of migration policies, but of racial categories, labor markets, legal systems, as well as geopolitical alignments.

Migrant Struggles

AoM research on migrant struggles has been useful to rethink politics at large, including the positioning of migrant beyond victim and migrants as political subjects, imbued in processes of subjectification therein, such as in “acts of citizenship” debates (Schwartz, 2021). Also, analyses have interpreted migrant struggles through concepts like “imperceptible politics” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Wilcke, 2018), or thinking beyond liberal agency (Tazzioli, 2020). AoM work has contributed by examining migration struggles as “everyday” or “invisible” forces of transformation (Casas-Cortés et al., 2014; Stierl, 2020) and the role of migration in transforming “sociality” more broadly (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010). Recognizing these contributions, we highlight what might become a blindside in the AoM approach by only focusing on recent/current migration politics.

Returning to Moulier-Boutang, and precursors like Du Bois, it is not about “migrant struggles” per se, as in struggles by people called/governed as “migrants,” but unruly mobilities that hold the capacity to force economic and political changes (i.e., the abolition of slavery). AoM, in the Moulier-Boutang sense, is not only about analyzing “migrant struggles” but how mobility transforms political and social spaces. Work on migrant struggles has, often due to empirical reasons, centered on the experiences of irregularized mobile people and attempts to manage them. But this can then reduce the political field of migrant struggles, and thus the political import of mobility, to the question of “the illegal.” Inadvertently, this reinforces a state-centered definition of mobility (De Genova, 2016b). AoM authors writing on migrant struggles are often aware of this dilemma and the need for a “reconsideration of any exclusive focus on undocumented (extra-legal, ‘irregular’) migration” (Casas-Cortés et al., 2014, p. 28). This echoes Moulier-Boutang’s early imperative to understand the political and transformative potential of mobility by analyzing the regular and irregular together and as a spectrum (Moulier-Boutang et al., 1986, p. 14). Other AoM authors on migrant struggles have emphasized that migration itself is crisscrossed with antagonisms and struggles across states, scales and places, such that it cannot be limited to visible or current forms

(Papadopoulos et al., 2008). Nonetheless, the emphasis on thinking migration beyond its control can limit the potential for understanding these struggles to the present day. Understanding migrant struggle will benefit from the historical and longer-term approach advanced by Moulier-Boutang.

In fact, thinking AoM through Moulier-Boutang helps to perceive the development of “migrant struggles” themselves as the result of the emergence of the “migrant” as a semi-permanent object of governance. The “migrant” becomes the result of the back and forth between generations of mobile populations, and differing attempts to govern their mobility: from intra-imperial forms of mobility, to nationalized citizenship frameworks after political decolonization, to hardening border and visa regimes plus externalization. The “migrant” appears as a feature only after decades (if not centuries) of mobilities which have altered, chipped at, reformed, and ultimately, forced the hand of different forms of territorial and biopolitical governance.

By emphasizing “migrant struggles,” current research can unveil the constitution of migrants as a “subject.” However, in the process, this kind of biopolitical analysis might miss migration-as-mobility-as-transformative. This can result in “migrants” struggling (visibly or invisibly) as “migrants.” Whereas in Moulier-Boutang’s work, it is the “act” of migrating—as a collective force—which produces change. It is not so much about “migrants” but “migration.” The emergence of “migrant” and its counter-part “national worker” as socio-legal categories today are themselves historical results of these ongoing struggles.

Beyond Controls

AoM literature has stressed the possibility of bypassing migration controls. That is, AoM authors highlight migration’s “in corrigibility” (De Genova, 2017a, 2017a) given that human mobility, whether permitted or not, cannot be turned on or off via migration policy. This postulate has been enunciated in a certain celebratory tone at times (Papadopoulos et al., 2008), and also proposed carefully to examine how migrant practices force changes in border technology (Scheel, 2013a, 2019). As a result, one point of discussion with AoM research has centered on how important border controls are or not. AoM has contributed to decenter state or migration authorities as the only decision makers in the terrain of mobility. The unstoppable force of these sorts of mobilities also comes out in Du Bois’ discussion. In that case, it is not formal border authorities and visa inspections that are being overcome, but rather the strict control of mobility through the plantation system and forms of policing enslaved bodies through police, law, and race. This suggests that there is something more to autonomous mobilities than overcoming modern border control.

Moulier-Boutang’s historical analysis also takes us through time periods when border authorities and what is explicitly now called migration policy was nascent, absent or at least, very different. The autonomy in Moulier-Boutang’s analysis is not only vis-a-vis migration control but other factors as well. For instance, prior to the volume on the abolition of slavery, Moulier-Boutang wrote that migration seemed to demonstrate a “certain autonomy” from economic factors (Moulier-Boutang et al., 1986), especially those that were understood at the time as push and pull factors. Thus, the initial articulation of

migration's autonomy was vis-à-vis explanations from migration theory that understood human mobility as a relatively straightforward response to other stimuli, a consequence rather than a cause. In Moulier-Boutang's larger volume, the AoM seems to spread further to independence from the geopolitical maneuverings of states and empires, or the politicized manipulations of population movements (such as the "weapons of mass migration" arguments, see Greenhill 2010). Thus, an autonomy not only from bordering agencies attempting to stop or channel movements, but also, a theoretical autonomy from certain (especially more mechanistic) readings of migration theory, and from political and economic actors attempting to manage and/or ignore migration as a factor.

Furthermore, in Moulier-Boutang's analysis, the dynamics between "exit" and its management attempts, go beyond the border, whether thought of as a line or in its externalized and internalized manifestations. This becomes especially clear when taking a longer-term approach. The autonomous dynamic spreads to property rights and land tenure; racial and ethnic classifications; intergroup marriage and rights to parentage and family; access to welfare provisions, pensions, taxation, and more (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, pp. 36–37). In response to different types of exit and autonomous mobility, reactions spread beyond border or labor policy strictly speaking: "The limitation of access to citizenship, to the city, housing, exogamy, are tightly connected to the control of the escape of dependent workers" (Moulier-Boutang 1998/2006, p. 37).

Thus, the excellent work in AoM literature on the "irreconcilable conflict" (Scheel, 2013b) between borders and migration can benefit by incorporating—or at least signaling—the longer *durée* approach carried out by Moulier-Boutang, and what keeping this historical and spatial scale in mind does to our understanding of migration writ large. AoM becomes a way for understanding human mobility as a factor of primordial importance in the constitution of social, economic, and political worlds. Understanding mobility, in particular "exit" and escape, is not only a way of interpreting how border controls are overcome, but contributes to comprehend how slavery is abolished, how labor contracts are formalized or how the institution of the welfare state came about.

Concluding Remarks

Further developing the *longue durée* work of Moulier-Boutang, AoM's theoretical weight will help to understand larger scale historical transformations. This larger scale of interpretation need not only be grandiloquent theorizing but concretely situated to read key instances of historical change such as the examples provided by Du Bois and Moulier-Boutang (the abolition of slavery, the development of the coolie trade, decolonization, etc.). Mobility, or migration at large, need not be thought of in these cases as the only element to consider. Still, the force of human mobility does emerge as its own factor (again migration at large *per se*, not migrants), sitting alongside transformations in other social spheres such as trade patterns, production systems, interstate competition, or insurrections. Thus, while contributions akin to, or even working within the AoM tradition, may emphasize an understanding of autonomy similar to agency, overt migrant struggles or autonomy from border controls, we seek to clarify how Moulier-Boutang's work takes

us in different directions. His understanding of the AoM entails conceptualizing human mobility as a social force and even, as a “geopolitical f/actor” (Casas Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2022). This becomes clearer when reading it alongside Du Bois’ interpretation of the general strike of the slaves. As such, AoM, in embracing Moulier-Boutang’s historical approach, has the potential of offering broader reflections on social transformation beyond the field of migration studies.

The emphasis in this paper is on recuperating the historical work of Moulier-Boutang. Yet we bring in Du Bois’ analysis in order to demonstrate that Moulier-Boutang’ original approach toward mobility has a precursor in another heterodox Marxist inspired scholar. While Du Bois is not analyzing the effects of migration over a long period but rather a spurt of massive mobilities, Du Bois does similarly insist on the political and social impact of mobility. In a sense, Du Bois is signaling the theoretical import of mobility and Moulier-Boutang is developing an approach to understand this impact across geographies and historical periods.

While many theoretical approaches have been used to study migration, migratory politics, and borders, few of these theoretical approaches have developed from an in-depth, long-term grappling with mobility. More often than not, they are theoretical approaches developed in other fields and applied to migration. In one way, AoM continues this by adapting an Autonomous Marxist reading of labor and class to migration. Yet, Moulier-Boutang’s analysis of a *longue durée* of migration alters that directionality, demonstrating how migration studies can provide Social Theory with new insights. In particular, the socially transformative power of human mobility as an instigator of change is one of the key contributions AoM is able to offer to Social theory. Thus far, due to disciplinary boundaries, the potentials of this insight have remained too confined within the sub-fields of migration and border studies. Nonetheless, through the work of scholars such as Sandro Mezzadra, Nicholas De Genova, or Martina Tazzioli, we feel this situation is changing. We aim to contribute to that broader social thinking from the standpoint of migration grounded in Moulier-Boutang’s emphasis on the historical weight of autonomous mobilities.

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Notes

1. See a recent special issue directly working with Moulier-Boutang's concept of "bridled labor" (Peano & Sacchi, 2023).
2. For research on Latin America from an AoM perspective see Cordero et al. (2019).
3. See also Mongia (2018).
4. Curiously, other writers in the AoM tradition have also begun to reference Du Bois's discussion of the General Strike as a way to interpret migration politics and struggles in the EU and neighboring areas (see Kasperek, 2023; Kasperek & Laramanidou, 2021).
5. An analysis of migrant autonomy closer to the notion of "agency" might provide for rich empirical work and case studies. In fact, in parallel fashion to Moulier-Boutang's work, Nestor Rodriguez (1996) coined the term "autonomy of migration" in a very different context: the US-Mexico border. His work also developed in the 1990s, before the literature now called AoM had consolidated, and a different take on the notion of autonomy is visible. Rodriguez' writing also de-victimized migrants and migrant communities, highlighting how autonomy can be understood as the autonomy of migrant agents rather than a sort of structural autonomy.

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