Argentines in the U.S. J-1 Summer Work Program

By Alessandro G. Magnasco – Spring 2022 – ANTH 712, CUNY GC

This is a cursory ethnography of international migrants participating in the 3-month ”Summer Work Program” (SWP) subclass of the J-1 cultural exchange visa program to the United States, through a class-focused lens, further differentiated by racialization and gender. To supplement the theoretical analysis, informal interviews[[1]](#endnote-1) were carried out with migrants that had previously gone through the program, were currently in it, or had worked alongside J-1 holders. Some repeated the program multiple times, and some were 1-year “interns”. Interviewees are mostly male, white-presenting Latinx migrants from middle-class backgrounds in South America.

Argentina, once a powerhouse whose GDP per capita surpassed both Italy and Spain[[2]](#endnote-2), had been destroyed by a neoliberal cycle of economic shock and privatization, originating with the U.S. combination of CIA-facilitated military dictatorship, imposed Friedmanite policies, and forced debt[[3]](#endnote-3). In 2001, managed by the same economists as during the dictatorship[[4]](#endnote-4), it collapsed: days after implementing the largest sovereign default in economic history, the government effectively stole all U.S. Dollars in the banking system, banned their further use, and eventually returned around 1/4th the value in Pesos. A blatant example of how capitalist accumulation by dispossession can be forcefully imposed by the state at even national scales[[5]](#endnote-5), this wiped out the savings of the middle class, which was mostly in dollars. At the same time, the imperialism underlying these mechanisms of dispossession asserted itself: the internationalized extractive class were not affected, as they had been forewarned by banks and moved their assets outside the country. For everyone who worked for a living, the gargantuan restrictions on cash withdrawals[[6]](#footnote-1) led to immediate crisis, and massive national strikes caused regime changes of three Presidents in the course of one week. In spite of this, the IMF was still able to assert itself, and the institutional creditors[[7]](#footnote-2) on its boards even made a profit by demanding punitive damages in exchange for their approval of more IMF loans[[8]](#endnote-6).

Since then, rampant uncontrolled inflation has fractured the economy into an official exchange rate[[9]](#footnote-3), and black-market rate[[10]](#footnote-4), since dollars remain banned from the banking system, but all large transaction markets such as real estate and even vehicles are entirely priced in USD[[11]](#endnote-7). The 200x increase and its direct relationship with inflation are a class-specific oppression: workers are paid in volatile pesos, becoming cyclically dispossessed by the extractive capital investments of the accumulative class, who remain based in stable foreign currencies. One of the very limited options available for middle-class young adults to kick-start their economic independence is by working abroad for a few months and bringing back undeclared cash dollars or euros[[12]](#endnote-8).

The J series of visas are for participation in a “cultural” Exchange Visitor Program approved by the U.S. Department of State (”DoS”). Of these, the J-1 is designated as the primary, and the J-2 for their dependents, in certain programs[[13]](#endnote-9). Group differentiation within J-1s happens internationally: the DoS reports[[14]](#endnote-10) that in 2021, of the 139,546 J-1 visas granted, 5,985 were given to Argentines, of which 3,765 (63%) were for the 3 to 4 month “Summer Travel/Work” (SWP). Eighty-six percent of global recipients across all categories are 30 years of age or younger; other categories granted to citizens of the global South include a year-long internship or au pair, or as summer camp counselors. Meanwhile, J-1s for researchers and teachers are typically granted to Europeans or Chinese; as such, U.S. hegemony in the Americas is maintained through exploitative labor relations and the maintenance of a geographically mobile pool of dispossessed workers. Within J-1 migrants, group differentiation occurs at a national level, as visa facilitators in Argentina only offer programs for the lower-paying[[15]](#footnote-5) J-1 categories[[16]](#endnote-11). Through these categorization schemes, symbolic violence and structural inequities reinforce each other in the labor process.

What we shall call “visa facilitators” are private companies in Argentina, who require paying applicants to be 18-28 with some undergraduate studies. These connect applicants to jobs in the U.S., groom them for interviews, and shepherd them throughout the process. The high cost of the process limits interest to lower-middle-class young adults that are able to draw on family savings, and is itself one of the only options available for that group to maintain their socioeconomic position. The expectation is for SWPs to recoup all costs and bring US$1000-6000 profit, a guaranteed cushion of savings which allows financial peace of mind for the rest of the year. Strong economic uncertainty in Argentina leads to inability to project income, and just spending 3 to 4 months working as wait staff or machinery operators allows some stability against rampant inflation and unexpected expenses.

Visa facilitators charge US$2000-3000[[17]](#endnote-12) and fully guarantee job placement. Visa approval is not guaranteed, but the facilitator grooms the participant for the visa interview at the US embassy, including written guides designed to minimize rejection[[18]](#footnote-6). Interviews with the Embassy and potential employers require good working knowledge of English; higher language skills open the door to working at more reputable locations, but given cost of living, that might not translate into more profits. Government fees are included in the package, but not plane tickets, rent, food, or expenses. Round-trip plane tickets from Argentina to the United States typically cost over US$1000 during tourist seasons, when most J-1 migrants choose to go[[19]](#footnote-7).

Within SWP workers, group differentiation is both self-selected and structurally imposed, around the hiring process for what are perceived as better or worse jobs. These perceptions revolved around job positions, employers, and locations. Interviewees stated how “better” jobs would be high-tip roles like wait staff, more well-known employers like Disney, and/or international tourist destinations. “Worse” jobs would be low-tip roles like ski lift operator, for local businesses, or destinations attracting mostly domestic tourists. The visa facilitator would line up a series of job interviews for the migrant, starting with the “better” jobs, and with decreasing desirability as the migrant was denied. For those workers who were still not selected, no-questions-asked interviews guaranteed placement with employers who could not afford to be picky. Whereas both groups were paid below even the minimum wage afforded to local workers, the differentiation dramatically affects remuneration (through tips), benefits (through discount programs and opportunities for vacationing), cost of living (through rent), and social interaction. Typically, higher-desirability employers will hire migrants with better grasp of English, which is strongly correlated with socioeconomic class. Women and lighter-skinned migrants both are offered, or self-select into, client-facing roles with higher tip earnings.

A financial analysis of interviewee data shows that the desirability of the job might not have a strong effect on total profit after expenses[[20]](#footnote-8), but rather only affects the ability of the guest worker to vacation on their time off. This corresponds both with statements by coworkers of SWP guest-workers, and with the marketing of these programs[[21]](#footnote-9). Typical total costs to get to the jobsite (visa, fees, and airline tickets) are about US$4000. Cost of living while there can vary dramatically across the U.S. and even within employers in the same city, averaging between US$3000-5000 depending on rent prices, food, and vacationing. While housing might have to be determined by the migrant, usually there is a turn-key solution: it might be provided by the employer, with rent automatically discounted from wages at excessive prices; or an arrangement is worked out between local landlords and the visa facilitator. These arrangements might require a 6-month rental contract, designed to stiff the migrant, who is only staying for 3 to 4 months. Wages for the higher-desirability jobs generally equal total expenses, leaving the significant amount of tip earnings as direct profit; for the lower-desirability jobs, tip earnings, living expenses and vacationing opportunities are all much lower, and most wages are realized as profit. For both groups, most profit is brought back as undeclared cash dollars, and some might be reinvested into cryptocurrencies.

Social interaction and job benefits are also both significantly affected by group differentiation. Higher-desirability jobs will typically have much more ability to converse throughout the day, more interactions with other guest-workers from the same city or region, and increased ability to travel and vacation during time off. As some employers offer substantial discount programs to staff during the holiday season, SWP migration is much higher during those times: those SWPs from higher income groups within the middle class can work while their family vacation using the discounts.

Still, there are significant risks and exploitation intrinsic to being a guest-worker within an imperialist power dynamic[[22]](#endnote-13). The disposability of the workforce ensured that SWPs were only trained for the most basic roles and did not receive any learning benefit to their experience; they did not receive any PTO or sick days; and were paid below the legal minimum wage. Some employers like Disney would enroll their guest-workers in exploitative financial arrangements, like debit cards that would charge huge fees whenever using them outside of the Disney ecosystem. The disposability of the workforce was also ensured through illegal disciplinary actions: interviewees reported their entire group of SWPs receiving collective punishment for the actions of one person, and having all work benefits taken away for the duration of the trip. If fired, workers face immediate deportation that same week; this strongly incentivized compliance, working through illness, without breaks, for extra hours, and other exploitative conditions. This structural divestment of social reproduction[[23]](#endnote-14) led to overdose deaths and escapees within their groups; employer refusal to cover health insurance costs led to one being in a coma for months.

This system of discipline and disposability for SWPs not only keeps them compliant, but also completely undermines the collective bargaining power of local workers. These two groups are maintained in clear differentiation and at odds, both structurally and through symbolic violence. As long as they weren’t breaking profit margins through things like healthcare needs, and were willing to accept lower wages and worse conditions than local workers, management would not police them as local workers were. This becomes a form of union-busting, a critical mechanism underlying the dismantling of New Deal protections for U.S. workers[[24]](#endnote-15). Locals described SWPs as immediately recognizable from other workers (many being migrants themselves), usually talking in groups, with a much more relaxed work attitude, able to come in late or call in sick to go on road trips[[25]](#footnote-10). Intricate disciplinary point systems that did not apply to SWPs put local workers at constant fear of being fired for those same actions. SWPs typically were offered a choice of duties, whereas local workers had little choice for job placement, leaving them with roles like fry cook or cleaning duties. Sometimes a piece of paper would be posted on the wall, informing all workers that they were being required to stay an extra four hours overtime that day; SWPs typically enjoyed the extra income, allowing management to circumvent any complaints by the local workers that had responsibilities and family to care for. Collective bargaining was significantly undermined, only succeeding for groups that did jobs the SWPs did not take, such as cleaning.

The U.S. immigration system and visas such as J-1 are designed to maintain an imperialist power dynamic of exploitative labor relations with dispossessed and mobile workforces, while simultaneously repressing local labor organizing into similar conditions. Within this, the J-1 Summer Work Program category maintains a unique distinction by using middle-class workers from South America for only three months per year to undermine lower-class workers in U.S. tourist destinations year-round. The SWP guest-workers are then able to use cash dollars against IMF-imposed austerity-based inflation in their home countries, protecting their class status. Thus, a cycle of structural and symbolic violence is perpetuated while maintaining class-based opposition.

1. Interviewees were sourced from the extended network of acquaintances of the author, informed of the project, and agreed to answering a short series of non-guiding questions through WhatsApp. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Becoming a serious country”, The Economist, 2004. [https://web.archive.org/web/20220423225735/https://www.economist.com/special-report/2004/06/05/becoming-a-serious-country](https://web.archive.org/web/20220423225735/https%3A//www.economist.com/special-report/2004/06/05/becoming-a-serious-country) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. see James M. Boughton, “Silent Revolution: The International Monetary Fund 1979-1989”, p. 385, IMF, 2001 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Naomi Klein, ”The Shock Doctrine”, Picador, 2007. p. 197 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David Harvey, “Accumulation by Dispossession”, from “The New Imperialism”, Oxford Univ. Press, 2003 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Roughly US$250/week [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
7. ”Fondos buitre”, a.k.a. “vulture hedge funds” and banks [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
8. See both “Becoming a serious country”, and Carina Lopez, “The Argentine Crisis”, Standard & Poor’s, 2002. [https://web.archive.org/web/20050315114120/http://www.standardandpoors.com/europe/francais/Fr\_news/Argentine-Chronology-of-Events\_12-04-02.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20050315114120/http%3A//www.standardandpoors.com/europe/francais/Fr_news/Argentine-Chronology-of-Events_12-04-02.html) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. From 1:1 to currently ~$117 ARS to $1 USD (https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/usdars=x/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
10. The “blue” dollar, currently ~$200 ARS to $1 USD (https://www.cronista.com/MercadosOnline/moneda.html?id=ARSB) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
11. Current REMAX real estate listings. https://www.remax.com.ar/listings/buy?page=0&pageSize=24&sort=-createdAt&in:operationId=1&locations=in:BA@<b>Buenos<%2Fb><b>Aires<%2Fb>:::::: [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
12. AFIP <https://www.afip.gob.ar/viajeros/20161222ingresosEgresosValores.asp> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
13. If the migrant is accepted to a J-1 program that allows for family, and these are approved for J-2 visas, then the J-2 recipient can apply for work permits upon arriving in the US, and can legally remain as long as the J-1 holder is allowed to remain. (<https://j1visa.state.gov/basics/j2-visa/>) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
14. US Dept. of State, <https://j1visa.state.gov/basics/facts-and-figures/> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
15. Even the better of these are not ideal, as an interviewee who did an internship mentioned being promoted several times, with no increase in salary or benefits. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
16. WATAR visa facilitator, <https://www.watar.com.ar/> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
17. WATAR, <https://www.watar.com.ar/work-and-travel-usa> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
18. Interviewees described how some fellow applicants forgot their memorized scripts, were denied the visa, and were dropped from the program with no possibility of recovering sunken costs. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
19. Both for significantly increased tips, for holiday discount programs, and to bring family along as a vacation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
20. Ranging between US$1000-6000, but usually about $4000 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
21. “Seeking work experience abroad? Travel and work in the U.S. for 3 months and live the experience of a lifetime!”, translated from https://www.watar.com.ar/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
22. See Fitchett, Lindberg, and Martin, “Accumulation by symbolic dispossession: tourism development in advanced capitalism”, Annals of Tourism Research, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
23. See Harris, “The secret life of cities”, Population, Space and Place, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
24. Jane Collins, “Theorizing Wisconsin’s 2011 protests”, American Ethnologist, 2012. p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
25. Similarly to the local kids described by Seth Holmes (“Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies”, Univ. of California Press, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)