Migrants at Work: perspectives, perceptions and new connections

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Migration – and the experiences of migrants – continue to occupy an important and controversial place in the scholarly and political debates on contemporary labour markets and societies. As new scenarios emerge at local, national and global levels, new insights and perspectives become necessary. The articles in this themed issue reflect the interest *Work, Employment and Society* has had in the topic of labour migrations and migrants at work for well over a decade and which led, for example, to the themed issue *Migration at Work: Spaces, Borders and Boundaries* in 32(5), 2018. Migration has of course been a prominent issue across the social sciences, and in recent years particularly in relation to the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and to intra-European migration ahead of and in light of Brexit. The experiences of migrants from Eastern and Central Europe in the workplace, their overqualification and devaluing of their cultural capital, and their positioning within segmented labour markets have produced a number of articles in past issues (e. g. Ciupijus, 2011; Samaluk, 2016; Sirkeci et al., 2018) to which those in the current issue (Leschke and Weiss; Rydzik and Anitha) make an important addition.

With regard to the countries of origin and destinations used as case studies, the scope of the 10 articles in this themed issue is, however, much wider; what also brings them together are some recurring aspects of analysis, such as 'precarity' – which displays different forms affecting different categories of workers. Documented and undocumented migrants have been used to fill lowly paid work through non-standard contracts, which have continued to increase with the deregulation of the labour market and the effects of the 2008 recession. Fixed-term (temporary) contracts, part-time work and self-employment (frequently bogus) continue to be the most common forms of employment, particularly among those only able to obtain a low number of hours per month (such as in the gig economy), often without access to unemployment benefits, health coverage, holiday pay, maternity/paternity leave and statutory pensions. While women disproportionately fill part-time positions, migrant women are often more likely to be trapped in this situation, which for them is frequently involuntary. As Muñoz-Comet and Steinmetz note in their article on Spain, their entrapment cannot be adequately explained by human capital or segmentation

theories and hence suggests a migrant penalty which maintains them in precarity. The opportunities, but also potential negative outcomes, of using social networks as a channel for job search are highly relevant both for international and internal migration, with the latter still being understudied. Zhao and Jen help in addressing this gap by highlighting the significance of family, relatives and friends in rural to urban migration in China; their study of Beijing shows that those who rely on networks earn lower income and are more likely to engage in informal employment. Similarly, the study of intra-European migration by Leschke and Weiss notes how those who rely on social networks are more likely to be locked into particular sectors which keep them overqualified.

Immigration controls reinforce precarity in relation to legal status and work conditions. The drive for migrants to remain in employment and gain sufficient income may also lead them to accept precarious contracts and unpaid work. This applies not just to those who have entered through labour routes, but also to the growing number of students in many states of the Global North. They constitute a hybrid category, often forced to work while studying to support themselves and, later, to overcome their constrained and limited migration status to remain in the country – as discussed by Olivia Maury in relation to non-EU students in Finland. Some are also pushed into undertaking unpaid labour in an attempt to obtain future work and consolidate their ability to remain in the country. As with other migrants, they are forced to undertake work well below their educational qualifications, either because their qualifications have not been recognised or because their language level at the outset may prevent them from taking up professional work. Hence, the differential inclusion of migrants in various legal statuses is produced even in a Nordic social-democratic welfare state, thereby cheapening the cost of labour.

Furthermore, discrimination may continue not just towards first-generation migrants but also for the second generation, especially people who pay an ethnic penalty in the labour market – such as those from Africa and the Middle East. For example, through the application of a correspondence system which tests employer preferences in recruitment in Finland, Ahmad shows that Somali and Iraqi second-generation applicants faced greater difficulties in obtaining an interview than those of Finnish or other European origin. Similarly, in France, the issue of the inequalities and perception of injustice by descendants of migrants emerges strongly in the study by Hennekam et al. on perceptions of diversity management. As French citizens,

they compare themselves with their fellow citizens, rather than with first-generation migrants.

The importance of examining the perspective and life-projects of workers and migrants – rather than applying top-down analytical approaches – is also raised in the articles by Groutsis et al. on emigration from Greece and by Rydzik and Anitha on Eastern European migrant women in the hospitality sector in the UK. Based on a survey among 150 highly skilled Greek migrants, Groutsis et al. argue that the political and economic crisis in Greece has not only affected living conditions dramatically, but has also impacted on most aspects of social life in the country. As a result of this, a 'new' migration wave from Greece to Germany is as much related to the intersubjective view of identity, self-realisation, respect for personal autonomy and critical distance to their 'crisis-stricken homeland' as it is to economic motives. Hence, applying Honneth's theory of emancipation and recognition, migration as a form of emancipation enables these highly skilled migrants to regain recognition and self-respect. As for the small number of Eastern European female migrants interviewed by Rydzik and Anitha, while poor economic conditions or career prospects may have pushed them to migrate, they were also seeking to fulfil other cultural and social goals. Almost half had degrees, while the rest had the equivalent of A-levels. Such objectives may contribute to some migrants remaining in exploitative work conditions while building up their cultural and social capital. Although collective mobilisation to improve working conditions and pay and counter discrimination may not be common as a form of agency, migrants may engage in small acts of resilience and resistance or reworking where they exit a particular place of work and find more rewarding and better paid work.

Collective action or outright resistance, however, has not been that common. Mainstream traditional unions have often not been successful in involving and supporting migrants. Davide Però's study shows that indie unions operating largely in London offer a different, distinctive and remarkably more successful way of organising and mobilising workers than traditional unions because of their intersectional-oriented activism, their non-bureaucratic structures and the fact that they operate as a community movement beyond the workplace.

The field is diverse, complex and in a state of constant change. The articles presented here indicate the importance of gender and intersectional perspectives,

similarities between internal and international migration through the ways in which social networks are deployed, and the need to reconsider the concept of segmented labour markets traditionally applied to those from the Global South. They also indicate the importance of examining 'migration at work' through the lens of identity, subjectivity and personal autonomy, alongside an analysis of meso and macro processes of social interaction. These factors challenge a solely economic reading of migration, acknowledging the importance of multiple transnational relations and engagements, lifestyle choices and cultural allegiances in order to understand the varied factors involved in new mobilities and individual trajectories. Likewise, the perception of the impact of migrants by non-migrant populations in specific localities has as much to do with cultural and social identity as it is to their perceived economic threat, as Howley et al. argue in their study of immigration and subjective well-being in England, and which may help us to better understand the anti-immigrant vote in the UK.

At the same time, future research will need to investigate the impact of broader socio-political processes – such as Brexit and COVID-19 – on labour markets and on work conditions. In the UK, in particular, negative sentiments towards immigration have fed the 'hostile environment' and contributed massively to the vote in favour of Brexit and to the development of future migration policy frameworks which are tending to privilege the skilled. Hostility has been greatest towards those undertaking so-called low-skilled jobs. On the other hand, the current COVID-19 pandemic may lead to some re-evaluation of negative attitudes towards many such workers, now classified as key and essential, who have ensured the security and survival of individuals, families and communities. Still, as some states withdraw into national sufficiency wherever possible, a re-emergence of more organised forms of capitalism and a reduction of economic migration flows may occur. Finally, while most recent analyses – and articles – have focused on international migration to European countries, further efforts are necessary to examine internal migration and South–South movements, ensuring that the study of these global processes is properly global.

References
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