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Migrant workers and labour agency

Social actors or submissive players?

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
- contribute to new theoretical approaches
- advance understanding of the multi-level forces driving migration

Abstract

Migrant workers tend to cluster in particular industries, occupations and geographical areas and to experience disadvantageous working conditions. This article discusses the role of migrants as social actors in the labour market by looking at how and to what extent they are able to actually influence the conditions of their working lives. I use quantitative data collected in four European destination countries (Portugal, United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Norway) complemented with qualitative data collected through interviews in the same countries. The analysis of this data indicates that despite the heterogeneity in the groups analysed and their globally intermediate-high level of qualification, migration leads to high levels of clustering in the low and unskilled segments of the labour market followed by limited progression thereafter. Involvement in classical collective labour movements is low but other daily strategies are employed to navigate the labour market mostly involving individual agency. Recognising these processes of mostly individual agency targeting self-improvement has implications for understanding the limits and potential of wider labour struggles seeking to tackle structural exploitation of migrant labour within destination labour markets. In addition, looking at distinct migration corridors, linking different origin and destination countries, also puts in evidence the specific contextual frameworks that shape migrants' agency in particular labour markets.

Keywords: migrant workers, labour agency, migration, labour geography, labour struggles, exploitation

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1 Introduction

Migrant workers tend to cluster in particular industries, occupations and geographical areas (Castles 2000: 33, Waldinger 1996, Anderson and Ruhs 2010). These concentrations have been considered to be more dependent on structural factors related to the demand of workers in destination countries and on the spatial organisation of their (capitalist) productive structures than on migrants' agency (Castles 2000, Piore 1979). Nevertheless, some authors have looked at the role of meso-level factors in shaping the access to and position of migrant workers in the labour market such as employment and recruitment agencies, employers (Peck 1996, Krissman 2005) and migrants' social networks (Waldinger 1996: 21/22, Portes and Rumbaut 1990: 88/89, Sanders et al. 2002: 306). These agents have been considered instrumental to ensure that successive waves of migrants continue to access specific occupations and industries, following the initial entry of the pioneers (Pereira 2010, Elrick and Lewandowska 2008), thereby contributing to the constitution of the above-mentioned clusters. Other authors have also put forward arguments that point to the agency of workers (migrants and others) in shaping their own spaces and time as well as their working lives (Herod 2001, Rogaly 2009, Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). Despite recent efforts in this field, however, it has also been recognised that workers' agency has not been sufficiently acknowledged within the study of employment relations (Stuart et al. 2013: 389).

In this article I propose to explore the role of migrants as social actors in the labour market. I depart from an analysis of patterns of labour market incorporation and subjective experiences of employment in the context of migration to discuss: how migrants influence the conditions of their working lives; and the extent to which they are willing to and actually engage in labour struggles and negotiations. For this discussion I analyse processes taking place in different contexts, involving diverse origin and destination countries, and look at questions such as: how similar is the labour market situation (upon entry and subsequent progression) across origins and in different destination countries? Are changes visible across time and space? How is this related to migrants' mobility to other occupations (entering new niches for example) or to changes in the demand side? How are migrants experiencing these labour market processes and consequent living conditions? Which collective and individual strategies do they adopt to navigate and negotiate their position in the labour market?

To this end, the first section discusses the theoretical framework of the article with regards to immigrants' experiences in destination labour markets. The second section presents the data and methods that support the empirical analysis. In the third section I look at education and occupation upon departure and in the fourth, processes of clustering and agency upon arrival at destination are analysed. The fifth section examines the strategies and constraints involved in processes of labour market entry and the sixth specifically deals with subsequent trajectories and the constitution of agency as resilience, reworking or resistance. I conclude with a brief summary of the main findings and some ideas on how to move forward with the agency-structure debate within labour market and migration analysis.

2 Immigrants' labour market experiences: clustering, de-skilling and the role of agency

Labour market insertion is central to the migrants' experience. Despite the multiple motivations that may lead to migration (King et al. 2002) a large proportion of migrants are wage earners whose livelihoods depend on entering the labour market of destination countries. In OECD countries labour market participation rates (2007/2008 average) for foreign-born ranged from 50 (women in Belgium) to 88 percent (men in Spain and Switzerland) (OECD 2009: 9). Data from our own survey indicates that nearly 88 per cent of all migrants interviewed had worked at least once in the destination country.

In addition, labour insertion patterns of immigrants also carry important political bearings with implications for public opinion and popular discourses on the role of immigrants in host societies. One question that has been systematically targeted in research as well as in public opinion is the threat that immigrants may pose for native workers both in terms of ‘taking jobs away’ and of ‘reducing wage levels’ (Ruhs and Vargas-Silva, 2012: 4, Dustmann, Fabbri and Preston 2005, Borjas 1990: 87; 90). Research findings have indicated that the negative effects in both wages and unemployment are slim and tend to be concentrated in particular groups (lower paid workers or those with intermediate education) (Dustmann, Fabbri and Preston 2005, Nickell and Salaheen 2008) and that indeed, in general, migrants contribute to economic growth and to fund the welfare state (Smith-Bozek 2007, Peixoto 2011). However, the extent of effects needs to take into account space and time specificities (Ruhs and Vargas-Silva, 2012: 3).

The labour market insertion of immigrant workers has been consistently associated with positions of disadvantage (low status, low wages, hard working conditions), mismatch between skills and occupation as well as de-skilling following migration across destinations (Kelly 2011, Chiswick et al. 2003). As a result, migrants have tended to cluster or concentrate on particular jobs, industries and economic sectors, although the sectors involved may vary across countries (Castles and Miller 1998: 164). Different theoretical approaches have sought to explain these observed patterns: human capital approaches focusing on inadequate human capital or difficulties in transferring competencies across countries (Forrest and Johnston 1999); discrimination theories (Wrench 2007); structuralist perspectives pointing to labour market segmentation (Piore 1979) and labour demand (Castles 2000); and meso-level factors, related to the role of social networks (Fawcett 1989, Gurak and Cases 1992) or intermediate agents (such as job recruitment agencies and employers) (Krissman 2005) as actors shaping labour market insertion. These processes pertain not only to low-skilled workers but also to the higher-skilled, who increasingly participate in labour migration flows (Castles and Miller 1998: 168).

Not all higher skilled migrants have been able to benefit from their qualifications to gain access to working conditions equivalent to those of their native counterparts (van Riemsdijk 2013; Kelly 2011). Indeed, even for the skilled and highly skilled further segmentation takes place differentiating between native and foreign workers, to the disadvantage of the latter. For example, Polish nurses in Norway (van Riemsdijk 2013: 386) or Eastern European and Spanish medical doctors and nurses in Portugal (Sousa Ribeiro 2008: 211) have similarly experienced processes of segmentation that relegated them to less attractive jobs in their professions, leaving the high-value most attractive places to the native born.

This overall trend gives credence to the view that universal patterns can be discerned in migration processes (Bakewell 2010: 1691), including within migrants’ processes of labour market incorporation, but it also calls for the discussion of two important questions: what specificities may be found in the particular contexts within which migration takes place (origin and destination); and what is the role of migrant workers’ agency in these processes?

Every day, migrant workers make choices about staying at home or moving abroad. This choice is sometimes misinformed and in many ways constrained by larger structural factors such as global inequalities and restrictive immigration policies (Ruhs 2013: 7). Nevertheless, at least some degree of choice is involved in most people’s decisions to move abroad for employment purposes (Ruhs 2013: 7). The following quote illustrates well how global structural inequalities inform migration and its labour market outcomes.

The salary was really low – only 6 euros per hour, but at least [I] was provided accommodation to live in. The job was not very pleasant ... Each day [I] was picked from the apartment where [I] lived with 6 more people by bus, and came back only in late night. After two weeks [I] was able to save more than 600 euros, which was

already much more as [I] could possibly earn in Ukraine, even at the old job as logistics manager assistant, but this money came at quite a high cost. (Ivan, Ukrainian in the Netherlands)

In the new residence countries migrants are confronted with realities that directly affect their lives, not least in the sphere of the labour market. In particular, migrants are often faced with disadvantageous working conditions by destination countries' standards. Inspired by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 964) one could ask: 'how are migrants, as social actors capable (at least in principle) of critically evaluating and reconstructing the conditions of their own lives in the context of destination labour markets?'

The claim to consider and examine labour's agency has been put forward especially by (labour) geographers (Herod 2001, Lier 2007, Rogaly 2009) who have sought to place labour at the centre of the analysis and to conceive it as a '(pro)active agent in the production of economic geographies and not merely a victim of the dictates of capital.' (Bergene et al. 2010: 4). However, most of this approach has neglected the particularities of migrant labour (Castree 2007; see for example Rogaly 2009). This article therefore seeks to add to this debate by looking at how migrants (as social actors) interact with labour market structures in countries of destination to influence and shape the conditions of their labour market insertion and labour practices, more generally.

In this paper I depart from the understanding of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 970) as: '...the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments - the temporal-relational contexts of action - which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' and include the crucial spatial dimension, of 'where' workers are embedded. The spatial dimension seeks to address the question placed earlier of how particular contexts may contribute to shape the labour market incorporation of migrant workers. I propose to look at different migration 'corridors' (borrowing the concept from Carling 2010), involving a number of origin and destination countries (as will be explained below) to analyse patterns of labour market insertion and discuss whether, to what extent, and through which means migrants act as agents that shape the patterns of this insertion in a different country.

To this end, I propose to look at the experiences of labour in contexts of mobility not only through the perspective of how they 'fit' within occupational structures and wage levels and how they compare with previous, country of origin, situations but also through the narratives of their subjective experiences, negotiations and struggles, developed individual and collectively in the new context. This includes looking at particular forms of collective organisation and negotiation with employers in countries of destination, but also considering more nuanced forms of agency in spaces of production and involving the act of migration itself, pushing employers for particular forms of payment or shifts away from specific job roles (Rogaly 2009: 1976). In this sense, the understanding of agency proposed by Katz (2004) and used by Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) provides an interesting framework to look at how agency may be exercised. The author proposes a distinction between: resilience - small acts that constitute daily coping strategies put in place by individuals and groups that do not produce effects in terms of changing existing social relations; reworking - reflecting people's strategies to improve the material conditions of their lives, thereby producing changes within the existing system of social relations, to their advantage; and resistance - constituting a direct challenge to capitalist social relations by attempting to regain control of times and spaces of labour relations (production and reproduction).

3 Data and methods

For this discussion I draw on data collected on three origin groups – migrants from Brazil, Morocco and Ukraine – linked through different migration histories to four destination countries – Portugal, UK, Netherlands and Norway – and identified the groups with highest labour market entry rates, indicated by the proportion of the group that had worked at least once in the destination country. By doing this I opted to focus on experiences inside the labour market. Outside the scope of this paper lay, for example, experiences of failing to access the labour market. The groups where this percentage was 85 or above were selected (corresponding to a total of 1769 respondents): Ukrainians in the UK (99%), Ukrainians in Portugal (97%), Moroccans in Portugal (94%), Brazilians in the Netherlands (93%), Ukrainians in the Netherlands (88%), Brazilians in Portugal (85%), Brazilians in Norway (85%). I use quantitative data collected in destination countries complemented with qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews in the same countries and cities.

Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires applied using Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) in most locations and for most origin groups (except Brazilians in Norway and Ukrainians in the Netherlands where RDS was abandoned and replaced with snowballing). Questionnaires were applied in specific locations in the four destination countries and therefore reflect the dynamics taking place there: Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Ukrainians and Brazilians), Algarve (Moroccans), Amsterdam (Brazilians), Rotterdam (Ukrainians), Oslo (Brazilians), and Greater London (Brazilians and Ukrainians) (more details in Horgen Fridberg and Horst 2014 and Kubal et al. 2014). The description of the interviews conducted in each phase and location are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 – Interviews and Questionnaires applied in each location, per origin group

Country of migration	Country of Origin	Semi-structured qualitative interviews	Survey	
		No.	No.	% F
Netherlands	Brazil	29	214	56.5
	Ukraine	32	215	46.5
Norway	Brazil	30	187	79.7
Portugal	Brazil	31	400	60
	Morocco	25	207	49.8
	Ukraine	31	306	47.1
United Kingdom	Ukraine	34	240	45
TOTAL		212	1769	

Because of the specificities of respondent driven sampling – which relies on incentives paid to interviewees on the moment of the interview; and incentives paid for the recruitment of others, which potentiate peer pressure to attend the interview (Johnston 2008) – this method has proved to be very effective in recruiting hard to reach migrants (with irregular immigration status, for example) but may also lead to biases introduced by the likelihood of recruiting migrants that are either more available to attend the interviews (unemployed or residing close to the interview site) or more in need of the incentives paid (low skilled workers, unemployed, women or students). As a result, overall, the higher skilled have been a difficult group to reach in the four countries. For this reason, it is vital that data obtained in the survey is complemented with qualitative data obtained in the interviews conducted in the same locations for the same origin groups. In addition, to capture the more nuanced individual experiences of employment, qualitative data is also a crucial source.

Most of the surveyed migrants indicated ‘opportunities for work’ as the most important motivation to go the respective destination, especially in those groups with higher rates of labour market

entry. However, interestingly, this was not the case for all the groups (Table 2). Particularly noteworthy is its lesser relevance in the Brazilian groups that are simultaneously those that are female dominated (Norway (80%), Portugal (60%) and the Netherlands (57%)). In these cases, even though entry rates in the labour market are high, other motivations are also relevant (joining family members or loved ones, opportunities for studying or experiencing the life and culture of another country). This indicates that migrants enter the labour market not necessarily because this was their primary reason for moving but because livelihoods or professional aspirations are linked to that insertion. Multiple identities intersect with labour market experiences and agency (Coe and Jhordus-Lier 2011: 217-18) and one must be aware of this both from an academic and policy point of view when analysing migration trajectories.

Table 2 – Most important motivation per origin/destination

	Opportunities for work	Joining family members or loved ones	Opportunities for study	Experiencing the life and culture	Learning a language
Ukrainians in London	73%	10%	8%	3%	2%
Ukrainians in Lisbon	64%	26%	4%	5%	1%
Moroccans in Algarve	67%	27%	2%	4%	0%
Brazilians in Amsterdam	35%	19%	9%	22%	10%
Ukrainians in Rotterdam	46%	33%	10%	7%	1%
Brazilians in Lisbon	40%	18%	22%	19%	1%
Brazilians in Oslo	18%	56%	8%	15%	2%

These migrants are adults of working age, the majority aged between 26 and 45, except in the group of Brazilians in Amsterdam where the majority is younger (18–35). In the group of Ukrainians in Lisbon there is also an important share of older migrants aged 46–65 (43%).

Across all the different groups, migration mostly occurred throughout the 2000s (68%), with a nearly balanced distribution between the first and the second half of that decade (38 and 30% of the total, respectively). In addition, 21% moved in or after 2010, and 10% moved during the 1990s (the remaining 2% moved before 1990). Therefore the bulk of this sample is composed of contemporary migrants and reflects recent migration trends with limited comparison scope with previous migration flows (namely from 1960–80s). It is among the most recent arrivals that entrance rates in the labour market are lower (27% of movers in 2010 or later had not yet worked in the destination country).

Through this extensive cross-country comparison (based on the experiences observed in particular cities within receiving countries) I propose to analyse, in the next sections: 1) the respective patterns of labour market insertion (first job, activity during first year and activity at the time of the interview), particularly distilling differences and commonalities, across origin/destination to identify the persistence of patterns across different spatial contexts without neglecting the potential effect of different times of arrival and 2) the factors that potentially contribute to shape these labour market patterns of insertion, including how migrants perceive them.

4 Education and occupational profiles upon departure

To begin with I want to locate these immigrants in the context of their countries of origin before they migrated, looking in particular at those that found work at least once in the destination country. What level of education and which occupation did they have before leaving? How were these different per migration ‘corridor’ (from Carling 2010: different origin/destination links)? Overall, the level of schooling completed upon departure is medium-high. The majority had completed upper secondary

school (22%), followed by undergraduates (completed at least one year) (18%), those with post-secondary vocational training (18%) and postgraduate courses (at least one year) (16%).

Looking at the specificities of particular spatial contexts involving origin/destination connections some differences stand out. For example, Ukrainians in London are particularly highly educated (52% with at least one year of a postgraduate degree) while Moroccans residing in the Algarve are particularly poorly educated (44% without formal schooling or less than primary education completed). In addition, some particular features are also evident, accounting for particular contextual characteristics: i) a large share of Ukrainians hold post-secondary vocational training in all destinations (31% in Rotterdam, 43% in Lisbon and 29% in London), which is something unique to this group and reflects a particular education system in Ukraine; and ii) education levels seem to be somewhat polarised for Brazilians in Oslo (23% with lower secondary school or less completed and 55% with at least one year of undergraduate or postgraduate course completed), despite their small numbers.

Looking at occupational profiles, we identify a large portion that were not working before leaving (Table 3), because they were in education (13%), not working by choice (8%) or unemployed (6%). Those that were working were mostly concentrated in intermediate level occupations, followed by skilled manual work (particularly as skilled construction workers) and routine clerical, sales and other non-manual work. Overall, a proportion of 7% held higher professional occupations.

Table 3 - Occupations upon departure

	No.	%
Not working	454	28.1
Associate professionals, lower management, technicians	254	15.7
Skilled manual work (except agriculture)	213	13.2
Routine clerical, sales and other non-manual	187	11.6
Semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (except agriculture)	152	9.4
Higher-level professionals, managers, entrepreneurs (10+ employees)	120	7.4
Small employers, independent workers	106	6.6
Agricultural workers	90	5.6
Informal survival strategies	24	1.5
Manual foreman, supervisors	16	1.0
Total	1616	100

If we analyse and compare the features of different migration corridors we are able to grasp the more nuanced patterns of occupation upon departure and identify the different contextual frameworks. These involve both commonalities across origin group regardless of destination as well as specific interactions taking place in each corridor. Commonalities within each destination for the different origin groups are more difficult to identify in this particular case study.

The next table (4) highlights some noteworthy features of the occupational profile upon departure of the migrants residing in the European cities in the research. A large share of Brazilians in Oslo and in Amsterdam was in education, followed by Ukrainians in London and in Rotterdam. Higher professionals upon departure are mostly found among Brazilians in Oslo and to a less extent also among Ukrainians in London and in Rotterdam. Routine clerical and sales jobs constitutes an important departure occupation for Brazilians across destinations while semi-skilled and unskilled occupations are most relevant among Brazilians in Lisbon and also Brazilians in Oslo, which again reinforces the argument put forward above of the polarisation of the Brazilians in this city (including both higher skilled, educated and lower skilled). The majority of agriculture workers on departure were Moroccans

that migrated to the Algarve. Unemployment before leaving affected mostly Ukrainians in all destinations.

Table 4 – Most relevant Occupations upon departure, per ‘corridor’

	Student	Unemployed	Higher level professional	Routine clerical / sales / other non-manual	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (except agriculture)	Agricultural worker
Brazilians in Amsterdam	18%	2%	6%	18%	8%	1%
Brazilians in Oslo	23%	1%	20%	15%	11%	0%
Brazilians in Lisbon	11%	3%	5%	23%	18%	1%
Moroccans in Algarve	7%	1%	1%	1%	9%	36%
Ukrainians in Rotterdam	14%	12%	9%	6%	8%	3%
Ukrainians in Lisbon	10%	12%	6%	7%	6%	2%
Ukrainians in London	15%	11%	10%	6%	3%	0%

5 New jobs: clustering at the bottom

Upon arrival the occupational structure of these immigrants changes and is accompanied by an increased concentration in one particular occupational level. The most important first job found at destination is semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (51%), followed by skilled work (15%) and agricultural work (13%) (Table 5). Within the semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, unskilled construction work, cleaning, domestic work, and waiter/bartender and other jobs in hotels, clubs, etc. are particularly relevant. This constitutes a clear illustration of the clustering effect in particular kinds of occupations occurring after migration. In the segment of skilled occupations the majority is in the construction sector. Routine clerical, sales and other non-manual work retains some of its importance as an occupational category after migration (8% were employed in these occupations on arrival while 12% had this occupation on departure).

Table 5 – First occupation upon arrival

	No.	%
Semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (except agriculture)	838	51.8
Skilled manual work (except agriculture)	240	14.8
Agricultural workers	202	12.5
Routine clerical, sales and other non-manual	132	8.2
Associate professionals, lower management, technicians	102	6.3
Higher-level professionals, managers, entrepreneurs (10+ employees)	52	3.2
Voluntary work	14	0.9
Informal income generating strategies	12	0.7
Small employers, independent workers	9	0.6
In education (student/pupil)	4	0.2
Not working, by choice (being a housewife, looking after children at home, etc)	4	0.2
Manual foreman, supervisors	4	0.2
Follows language and/or integration course	3	0.2
Unemployed	1	0.1
Total	1617	100

If we consider the contextual features involved in each migration corridor (Table 6) we observe a general polarisation towards clustering in semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (except agriculture) with particularly high concentrations for Brazilians in Amsterdam, Ukrainians in London - despite their high qualifications - Ukrainians in Lisbon and, though to a less extent, Brazilians in Lisbon.

Beatriz, a Brazilian immigrant in Amsterdam recalls the changes experienced when she moved to the Netherlands:

I thought it would be much easier to work here as a journalist. I started to suffer. I began to see the challenges I would have.

Ihor, a Ukrainian in London, also refers to the change after migrating there:

I started as a helper, and now I learned to do tiles by myself. I work for myself now. I also learned independency because I didn't see any of this back home. But all so dramatically changed when I came here.

In a similar way, Juliana, a Brazilian living in Oslo, recalls how she started to use the Internet to search for jobs in Norway that were suitable for her experience, educational level and skills. She found several vacancies; however she never imagined that it would be difficult for her to get a job once in the country.

For Moroccans in the Algarve there is a specific clustering in agricultural work, which is linked to a particular demand in this sector in that region, and to the role of networks that have mediated the insertion of successive waves of Moroccan migrants into this activity. In addition, on departure a large share of immigrants from Morocco was already employed in agriculture.

In the case of Ukrainians in Rotterdam we do not observe a high concentration in any specific occupational category but the tendency is also to cluster at the bottom end of the labour market. Ukrainians in this area are distributed into skilled manual work (28%), agriculture work (23%) and semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (22%). In the Netherlands we find a combination of both a restrictive immigration regime and particular labour shortages in some lower skilled occupations and sectors (agriculture, construction or domestic work and care, examples found in Engbersen et al. 2011), which is likely to contribute to explain such distribution.

In the case of Brazilians in Oslo, the importance of semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations is also present but this is the only destination where intermediate professional occupations and higher level occupations maintained their significance. This is also the group where a significant proportion secured contracts before departure (20%), there was less assistance provided to access the labour market upon arrival, where work driven migration is less salient (the most important motivation was joining family members and loved ones) and the proportion of higher-level professionals was higher on departure. Horst (2013) suggests that immigration policies and the structure of the Norwegian economy (knowledge-based) limits opportunities for lower-skilled migrants to enter the country and to find employment.

Table 6 – First occupation upon arrival, per corridor

	Higher-level professional	Associate professional	Routine clerical / sales / other non-manual	Skilled manual work (except agriculture)	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual work (except agriculture)	Agricultural worker
Brazilians in Amsterdam	2%	9%	3%	7%	78%	1%
Brazilians in Oslo	16%	22%	15%	5%	37%	0%
Brazilians in Lisbon	3%	6%	18%	17%	54%	1%

Moroccans in Algarve	0%	1%	2%	8%	18%	70%
Ukrainians in Rotterdam	4%	8%	5%	28%	22%	23%
Ukrainians in Lisbon	0%	1%	1%	24%	68%	3%
Ukrainians in London	2%	5%	11%	8%	69%	3%

This shift in the occupational structure upon entry in the destination country and the high degree of clustering around specific bottom occupations in the labour market indicates that, for many migrants and despite the specific contextual differences, this move constitutes a discontinuity from previous occupational and professional histories or from prior educational paths. This change has been well documented in the migration literature (Kelly 2011, Chiswick et al. 2003) and evidences persistence across time and space. Despite migrants' freedom of movement (leaving aside discussions on the political, economic, social or cultural contexts that shaped the decision to move) this indicates that, at least upon arrival, migrants' ability to influence their occupational level is limited (Rodriguez and Mearns 2012: 583). Agency to influence occupation of entry tends to be constrained by the labour market structure of the destination country, the characteristics of labour demand there and the mechanisms through which the labour market operates. The mediation of social networks or other agents such as paid brokers or job placement agencies seem to reinforce entrance into the sectors where access is easier for migrant labour rather than resist it or work around it. Enright (2013), for example, has provided an interesting reflection on how labour market intermediaries contribute to shape employment practices to the disadvantage of the worker.

6 Accessing the labour market: strategies and constraints

The majority of migrants interviewed already had some contacts in the destination country before departure (82% knew someone there). The least (but nevertheless high) connections were found among Ukrainians in London and in Lisbon (74 and 78%) and Brazilians in Oslo (77%). With time of arrival, the degree of contact with the destination country increases (only 68% of movers during the 1980s had contacts while the proportion for those that moved in the second half of the 2000s was 89%). However, the majority did not seek information on how to find a job before departure (only 43% did). This information was mostly sought by Moroccans moving to the Algarve (73%) and Brazilians going to Amsterdam (56%). Therefore, the majority did not express a high concern to gather information on the particular labour market they would be facing or on trying to devise entrance strategies.

Nevertheless, most of them did receive assistance to find their first job in the destination country (70%). Ukrainians in Rotterdam and Brazilians in Oslo received the least assistance (56 and 60%, respectively), which is not surprising as they were also among the least networked groups. Ukrainians in Lisbon relied to a large extent on paying someone to find a job (14%), which is related to the fact that migration from Ukraine to Portugal was by and large driven and mediated by the work of organised groups and travel agencies, which often included this kind of service (Peixoto et al. 2005). Previous research (Peixoto et al. 2005, Pereira and Vasconcelos 2008) has also shown that even though in most cases immigrants were able to secure an entry into the labour market through this strategy, many subsequently faced exploitative and abusive situations. For example Vasyl, interviewed in Lisbon, said:

...when we finished the first [weeks of work] I wanted to receive my salary and received only half... the employer did not pay. He vanished and I could not find him [...] So I started again to look for another job, this time on my own.

This can be considered to correspond to a form of agency through resilience, as small acts that constitute daily coping strategies without effects in terms of changing existing social relations (Katz 2004).

In Oslo, a relevant proportion of Brazilians had secured a work contract before departure, mostly at the higher end of the occupational ladder (39% were higher-level professionals and 16% were in education). The latter were more strategic in their action and were able to find good jobs at the destination thereby constituting what could be considered reworking agency in the definition proposed by Katz (2004), of putting in place strategies to improve the material conditions of their lives, thereby producing changes within the existing system of social relations, to their advantage. This constitutes an exception to the overall observed pattern which largely shows a limited ability to influence the conditions of entry into the labour market at destination.

Migrants themselves present justifications for such limited capacity to influence initial occupations and working conditions. In migrants' discourses the lack of language abilities upon arrival is indicated as an important barrier to access better positions in the labour market on entry.

...how can you get started with that without speaking the language? So the first thing I did was to take a Dutch course [...] So I cleaned windows to gather some money...
(Gustavo, Brazilian in Amsterdam)

...then I started working as a dishwasher and worked there for one and a half year until I learned the language. (Dmitri, Ukrainian in Rotterdam)

This indicates a 'language cost' associated to moving to a different country which creates a relative disadvantage for migrant workers in the labour market, at least upon arrival (Ciupijus 2011). However, this should not constitute such a constraint for Brazilians migrating to Portugal and yet similar clustering processes occur, though to a less extent than in other countries.

Similarly, lack of training or qualifications is also referred as an important obstacle. In this case, however, the group of migrant workers interviewed possesses a medium-high qualification level. This puts in evidence the importance of considering how skills' transfer across countries is limited by different factors (see also Kelly 2011).

Some migrants refer, for example, the hardships and time involved in obtaining the recognition of diplomas:

I am taking care of getting the equivalence for my diploma, since December and I still have no feedback [...] four months and no feedback. (Gabriel, Brazilian in Lisbon)

Others the inability to do so:

I don't want to say that I enjoy the cleaning work because in Ukraine my profession was to be a dance teacher [...] I did try to do that [the recognition of the diploma]... but many years have passed and I have forgotten [...] what I can do of my profession, I do in Church with the children. (Katya, Ukrainian in Lisbon)

Having an irregular immigration status upon arrival is also referred as an important impediment when accessing the labour market. In this situation migrants are less demanding and more accepting of whatever jobs and working conditions they find.

Well, I was exploited, because the first time I came without a visa. I came as tourist to see how it was. (Elena, Brazilian in Lisbon)

...my husband didn't work for a year. He could not get a job. They all said: a man without papers cannot work. It was really hard. (Irina, Ukrainian in Rotterdam)

While I was waiting for the permit, I took many small illegal jobs. I worked mostly as a cleaning lady and as a babysitter. (Veronica, Brazilian in Oslo)

The political regimes that regulate the migration of workers are therefore also a fundamental constraining factor for migrants as agents in the labour market. Migrants may not be entitled or

empowered to shape the terms of their employment, because of their (lack) of residency status. This is mostly evident upon arrival and during the initial stages but depending on the context may be prolonged thereafter. Therefore, even when the decision to move is taken freely and a considerable degree of agency is involved, the conditions faced upon entry become severely constrained by the immigration regime in place in the destination country and the position of the migrant within it. The majority of migrants (55%) obtained information on this before leaving and most of them either travelled with a short-stay permit (34%) or obtained one at the border (21%). For the most part, agency upon entry is limited to resilience, as small acts that constitute daily coping strategies without producing effects in existing social relations.

7 Labour trajectories and agency: resilience, reworking and/or resistance?

In this section I focus specifically on the migrants that entered the labour market through the most disadvantaged occupations (64% of immigrants in the study group selected, N=1040), I include both manual works outside agriculture and in agriculture. Which labour market trajectories are observed for this group? Which negotiating strategies do these migrants adopt to navigate the labour market, individual and collectively? How may they be considered forms of agency through resilience, reworking and/or resistance? Which factors can contribute to explain the adoption of such strategies (or the lack thereof)?

For the majority of them, their entry occupation was maintained as the most important during the first year after arrival (78%). More than half of those who spent most of their time in something else during that first year were not working (13% followed a language course, 21% were in education and 13% were unemployed). These results indicate that there is limited scope for immediate substantial changes after arrival, whenever good jobs are not secured immediately upon entry.

At the time of the interview 59% did not maintain the same occupation and this proportion was higher in older contingents in comparison to the more recent groups. For example, while 81% of migrants that arrived during the 1990s and 74% of those that arrived during first half of the 2000s had changed occupation, only 30% of those arrived in 2010 and after were in the same situation. In addition, some groups have been more mobile than others. The least mobile were Brazilians in Amsterdam (28% changed) and Moroccans in the Algarve (39%). Opportunities for mobility seem to be independent from destination (it is present in the different destinations analysed) or origin (some groups were mobile in some countries but not in others) pointing to the specific opportunities that may be available for different migrants in different destinations. To understand these nuances, rooted in the specific contexts and involving particular relationships of migrants with their destinations, further in-depth comparative research is needed.

The majority of those that had a different occupation were still concentrated in semi-skilled or unskilled manual occupations (except agriculture) (28%) but a relevant percentage had also found their way into skilled occupations (21%), associate/intermediate professions, lower management or technicians positions (7%) and routine clerical, sales and other non-manual jobs (7%). With time there seems to have been an occupational upgrade but only for a limited number of immigrants who had entered the labour market through semi-skilled or unskilled positions.

The majority of these workers did not obtain further education in the destination country (90%). Those that did, however, seem to have been positively impacted in terms of gaining access to more qualified positions: 25% of them were able to move to associate/intermediate professions, lower

management or technicians' positions (only 5% of those that did not acquire further education managed to do the same move), 14% moved to clerical, sales and other non-manual jobs (6% of those without further education) and 8% to higher level professions (0.6% of those without further education). These processes could be conceptualised as agency through reworking, as migrants take advantage of existing structures to move up in the occupational ladder and upgrade their socio-economic status in the destination country while creating new avenues for migrants' integration in other segments of the labour market. These moves were more relevant for Brazilians in Oslo, reinforcing an already existing participation in the intermediate-higher segments of the labour market, Ukrainians in Rotterdam and Ukrainians in London, who were already the most highly educated on departure and where a relevant proportion were higher level professionals. For example, for Jessica, a Brazilian in Oslo, her first job was attending telephone calls at the Cancer Register Institute when she barely could speak Norwegian; in the second she worked as a secretary for a school where she was learning Norwegian and now she is an entrepreneur in real state administration.

Apart from the upward mobility experienced by some migrants with time of residence, and their engagement in the acquisition of language skills and further education migrants also tend to adopt a number of daily based strategies to negotiate their position and satisfaction in the labour market that are invisible in strict occupational analysis or when the focus is on labour movements. In other words, whenever upward occupational mobility does not take place it does not mean that other forms of negotiation and improvement are not happening. Indeed, more nuanced forms of daily negotiation of terms of employment, working and living conditions (Rogaly 2009, Cumbers et al. 2010: 54) seem to be present across the different corridors and need to be analysed together with subjective experiences of employment if we are to understand both how migrant workers' agency is played out and constitutes resilience as well as reworking strategies.

And now as I realized that the life of domestic worker is better, I moved to that and I am not ashamed of my work...and I wanted to come here, because all my friends from my home village were here [Lisboa] and they earned a lot more and did not work as much so I came here...and found work. (Veronika, Ukrainian in Lisbon)

Then, I went to work as a nanny. It became a bit easier. Firstly, you are working for a private individual. You work and you don't pay taxes [cash in hand]. I was earning very little in that restaurant and they were deducting 20% in taxes. You can't get them back at the end of financial year [if overpaid]. (Liudmila, Ukrainian in London)

My boss always has work and I have work, do you know why? I worked Saturday, Sunday, Extra time, Holidays [...] there is work and I work there are others and Portuguese that do not want to work on Sundays [...] and I stay and my boss helped me to get documents. He said: "Skhatou works, works". (Skhatou, Moroccan in the Algarve)

So he started working there and he is now a freelance DJ and cleans windows at another company during the day. (Matheus, Brazilian in the Amsterdam)

In Oslo, Paula, a Brazilian immigrant, works as an assistant cook, but she also dances samba for organised shows.

These strategies range from moving horizontally to occupations deemed more favourable, to pleasing the employer to secure employment or combining multiple jobs, sometimes enabling access to desired but less profitable occupations, as the quotes above illustrate (also Rogaly 2009 or Cumbers et al. 2010). It remains unclear to what extent such individual improvement strategies contribute to influence the broader picture of working conditions offered to migrant workers (or indeed others) in those industries with higher shares of immigrant labour. Are these particular individual strategies contributing to reinforce oppressive structures (through the exploitation of more vulnerable migrant

labour) or promoting progressive change (leading to higher labour market protection)? Migrants interviewed do seem to reveal a certain level of acceptance of the constraints imposed within migration processes (namely through the 'language cost' or immigration regimes) and to act within those constraints rather than to offer overt resistance, for example through collective action. This is expressed by Liudmila, an Ukrainian living in London:

When we were coming, we, as adults, knew that no one is waiting for us here [with arms open]. We were aware and some already worked abroad before. But to say the truth, there was this hope for something better and greater.

Her words seem to hint that to get substantially different working conditions is not really within the migrants' reach but rather dependent on more contextual structural factors within which they act to bring about individual improvements.

Classical forms of workers' organisation and mechanisms for negotiation in the labour market through trade unions have not been very relevant for immigrant workers (Kolarova and Peixoto 2009; Penninx and Roosblad, 2000) and in parallel trade unions have struggled to understand and act upon migrant workers' specific issues (Holgate 2005). These migrants are no exception; 98% do not participate in political groups or trade unions (participation is higher for Ukrainians in Lisbon and in London, around 4%). Yet, in their respective current places of work, the majority is not concentrated in 'ethnic niches', which could account for a disengagement from larger labour struggles and labour organisations (the position of 'isolated' workers, mostly in domestic, care and cleaning roles presents some specificities which will have to be further elaborated elsewhere). The majority works with some persons from the same origin country (32%) or with no one from the same origin (22%). Brazilians in Amsterdam reveal the highest share of work exclusively among other Brazilians (17%).

Migrant's engagement with religious organisations - such as churches or mosques - or community organisations is higher (65.5% and 16%, respectively), with some differences per corridor. For example, religious organisations are very important for Ukrainians in London (93%), Brazilians in Amsterdam (73%) and in Lisbon (71%) and Ukrainians in Lisbon (68%) but less for the others. And involvement in community organisations is particularly relevant for Ukrainians in London (27%) and in Lisbon (23%) and Moroccans in the Algarve (23%), and less for the others. However, the involvement of these immigrant community based organisations in workplace demands is yet to be fully comprehended as well as the potential for their cooperation with labour movements (Holgate 2005, Jordhus-Lier 2012, Abbot et al. 2012).

The recognition of individual-level agency is important to understand the nuanced processes of labour struggles (Cumbers et al. 2010: 57) but also to grasp the extent to which migrants may be willing or encouraged to join larger (collective) labour demands and calls for a further understanding of 'labour consciousness' and its implications for labour agency (Bergene 2010) in migration processes. In addition, when looking at labour's agency it is important to think not only of 'how much' or 'in what way' but also 'whose agents' are involved in contexts of uneven power relations (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 216, Gregson 2005: 29) and potentially with conflicting interests (for example national workers vs immigrant workers, older vs more recent workers, etc). Who is empowered to contribute to changes in particular structures? How are the disenfranchised and most vulnerable groups able to contribute to change and develop agency capabilities, for example in articulation with other, more powerful, groups?

8 Conclusion

Migrant workers seem to perform more the ‘submissive player’ than the ‘social actor’. Given their heterogeneity, namely in terms of origin, motivations and contexts of reception, it is surprising to observe how entry in new labour markets coincides largely with clustering at the bottom of the occupational ladder. Particularly striking is that overall the group analysed here is, on departure, of medium-high education and has intermediate level occupational experiences but patterns of labour market insertion are not more favourable on account of that.

Migration’s links to the agency of migrants themselves has been subject to much debate (Bakewell 2010). Moving the analysis into the field of the labour market does not provide conclusive or final arguments but in my view it does suggest the overwhelmingly conditioning role played by structures in the destination countries in processes of labour market incorporation. These include the labour market itself (particularly of labour demand or employment practices) but also immigration regimes or structures available to migrants for example for the acquisition of language skills, recognition of qualifications or further education.

Simultaneously, the analysis provided here reveals that migrants are also able to perform the ‘social actor’ role and to act in ways that enable them to: gain access to more qualified positions in the labour market, with time of residency, namely by investing in further education and language acquisition; and negotiate more favourable labour market positions within the same occupational levels. Though there are some observable general trends across the different migration corridors, there are also some important differences. One case in point is that of Brazilians in Oslo, where an important share has been able to secure professional jobs either upon entry or, to some extent, also through time of stay. Across the corridors, negotiations take place at the micro-scale of migrants’ working lives which impact on their subjective experiences of employment and agency is exerted in more nuanced ways than has been generally acknowledged (exceptions mentioned by Cumbers et al. 2010: 54), thereby constituting mostly individual agency through reworking and resilience (Katz 2004 in Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 216). Collective labour agency articulated either through community based institutions or origin country structures or in association with destination country social and labour movements is less evident in the data collected, however, further research is needed to tap into this dimension, which includes higher potential for agency through ‘resistance’ or indeed a more (pro)active labour role as an agent shaping the economic geographies of capitalism (Bergen et al. 2012: 4, Herod 1997).

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