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Exploring the tensions of migrant labour in London's hospitality: ethnographic reflections on subjectivity, transiency and collective action after a decade

Abstract

This paper reflects on the findings and methodology of my ethnographic research on precarious migrant workers in London's hospitality sector between 2007 and 2011. The research drew from the tradition of Unbounded Ethnography to study migrant workers' everyday practices, and from autonomous-Marxist approaches to understand the significance of transiency for worker subjectivity and collective action. Developing a reflexive analysis on the researcher's positionality at the time of the research, the author exposes the strategies as well as the barriers experienced by temporary workers and migrant women as they engage with the structures of British unions. While major changes have since occurred in the field of labour migration in the United Kingdom, 'revisiting' the field of London's hospitality ten years later helps illuminating some of the critical workplace tensions at the root of current political contestations that surround the question of labour mobility today in the context of Brexit.

Key words: Ethnography, migration, subjectivation, trade unions, subcontracting, hospitality

Almost a decade has passed since the end of my ethnographic study on the working lives of precarious migrants in the London's hospitality sector (Alberti 2011). My doctoral research (*Transient working lives: migrant women's everyday politics in London's hospitality industry*) carried out between September 2007 and 2010, explored the working conditions, practices of resistance and possibilities of unionisation among one of the lowest paid, mostly abused, insecure and hard-working populations of the global capital.

The hotel and restaurant industries have been historically a difficult area for trade unions, presenting the lowest union density of any sector in Britain (3.9% in 2009) and the lowest workplace union presence (9.6%) (BIS 2010). No collective agreement has been signed since the 1980s (The Guardian 2015a). These trends are often explained by the high levels of

turnover of the workforce[1] (about 40%) and allegedly, the high percentage of foreign labour (People 1st 2009).

I was interested in exploring the lived experiences of migrant workers in this crucial sector of the service economy in a 'global city' (Sassen 1991; Massey 2007; Wills et al. 2009), and their forms of *subjectivation*[2] or empowerment as workers, inside and outside the l institutions of the labour movement. The end of the 2000s was indeed a critical time for labour and migration movements: other sectors of the under-belly of City's financial economy like cleaning and security were being mobilised through public campaigns such as the London Living Wage (led by the civic organization 'London Citizens'), and the 'Justice for Cleaners campaign' (led by the Union T&G Unite, one of the largest private sector unions in the United Kingdom) .

My theoretical interest was to explore the forms of subjectivation and 'everyday politics' (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006) enacted by migrant workers *despite* the rhetoric about their 'un-organisability', inspired by research across the Atlantic such as Milkman's *Organizing Immigrants* (2000). I was also interested in developing a finer understanding of the significance of transnational migration on labour/capital conflicts (Mezzadra 2006; Ong 1999). Critical in the shaping of this research was my 'ethical motivation' to conduct a qualitative and participatory study to explore whether a relatively invisible section of the precarious service workforce would also break the silence and set in motion new forms of struggles from the margins of the (declining) British labour institutions.

Times were ripe for my project, as the T&G Unite Hotel Workers branch in Central London had just decided to hire an organiser to launch a unionisation effort in large London's hotels. The industry was well known for poverty wages, long and anti-social working hours, unpaid overtime, bullying and harassment, high turnover, subcontracting and casualisation of labour

[1] According to the Trade Union Congress report on agency work, turnover figures in 2007 were very high, with 51% of all workers in hospitality having been with their current employer *for just 12 months* (TUC 2007: 22).

[2] With the term subjectivation I indicate a 'process of becoming subject' as worker empowerment drawing from the Italian autonomous-Marxist tradition started by intellectuals like Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati, Raniero Panzieri, Toni Negri: their move away from the Hegelian understandings of the subject consisted in the switch from the centrality of the worker's identity, and party away from a Foucouldian emphasis on the passive nature of being 'subject to' (Neilson 2009), towards the decentralisation of the *process* of subjectivation..

contracts (Dutton et al. 2008; Vanselow et al 2009; TUC 2007). Indeed one of the key line of division that soon emerged through the research was a new form of segmentation within the workforce: on the one hand the 'permanent workers' (the majority of the union members) and on the other, the so-called 'newcomers' (agency workers, mostly disengaged from union politics). While the contemporary literature on the hospitality sector in London emphasised the overlap of growth in agency employment and the new flows from Eastern Europe following Accession of the new member states (McDowell et al. 2009), I deepened the analysis of such new migrant divisions of labour (Wills et al. 2008) looking at the everyday relationships between these contractually and racially differentiated workers across the spaces of the agencies, the workplaces and the trade unions.

In what follows I summarise the central design and findings of the research, reflecting also on the implications of my ethnographic practice. I expose the rationale for the selection of a workplace ethnography that combined covert and overt participant observation, the key findings and 'theoretical extensions' (Buroway 1991), and include some recent developments in terms of union action. Revisiting the field of migrant labour in hospitality and the contradictions that migration brings to the fore in the labour movement a decade after the fieldwork, provides an opportunity to adopt a longer view on the re-configuration of migration patterns and precarious work, whereby many of the 'new migrants' from the EU Accession countries found work in this sector. In light of the latest political developments with the historical decision of the UK to leave the common market and end freedom of movement of EU workers, this 're-visit' provides the opportunity to trace some continuities and changes in a sector that remains one of the lowest paid, precarious and most challenging for trade unions.

Rather than solely reflecting on the realisation and legacy of my study, one of the hopes of this paper is to illustrate and revive the tradition of workplace ethnography in the, now relatively disused, tradition of 'industrial sociology' (e.g. Beynon 1973; Glucksmann 2009; Pollert 1981), perhaps less known than the organisational ethnographies of critical management studies (e.g. Van Maanen 2006). I focus in particular on the different ways in which a researcher may inhabit different 'fields' drawing from the urban multi-sited, 'unbounded ethnography' of Michael Burawoy and colleagues (Burawoy et al. 1991, Sherman 2007), but also reflecting on the researcher as embodied/situated subject and participant observer (Malo De Molina 2004; Smith 1987), interacting with different segments of the workforce and multiple actors in social movements. I therefore unpack the tensions between the knowledge

produced through the *overt* participant observation in the public campaign by the unionised part of the workforce, and the *covert* ethnography in the-less publicly visible- agency employment where no form of unionisation was recorded, and where transient migrant workers appeared to adopt an *instrumental and disenchanted* approach to work. In the conclusions I develop some epistemological and methodological contribution to the ongoing debate on labour and migrant ethnographies.

The context: labour exploitation and labour struggles in the hospitality sector

The hospitality sector has been historically known for its low wages, long working hours and physically demanding work, lack of career structures and union voice, poor training, and a highly diverse (often migrant and female) workforce (Peoples1st 2009; Lai and Baum 2005; TUC 2008; the Guardian 2015a). While my research recorded numerous cases of minimum and unpaid wages, a recent interview with a union organizer on the Guardian newspaper reports that the average pay for a room attendance in 2015 was still "£6.50 an hour to clean 13 rooms in eight hours, every day, five days a week– a long way short of the London living wage of £9.15 an hour" (The Guardian 2015a).

The downward pattern in pay and working conditions in the UK for hospitality and hotel workers in particular has been documented by quantitative and qualitative studies (Dutton et al. 2008, Lucas 2004, Vanselow et al. 2009). The term 'casualisation' in the UK union jargon synthesizes the new rise of 'precarious' work (Vosko 2006) in the sector with the expansion of temporary and insecure employment and an erosion of employment rights. The flexibilisation of recruitment involves hotels' greater reliance on the 'temporary staffing industry' to respond to fluctuation in the timing of demand and supply of labour, intrinsic to unpredictable nature of demand in tourism and accommodation (Lai and Baum 2005). However, third party agencies can also provide the employer with an alternative strategy to manage employment relations: not knowing who your real employer is is a crucial component of the de-collectivisation and restructuring of the employment relations under what Jane Wills (2009) has called the paradigmatic nature of "subcontracted capitalism". According to one of the trade union officers from the T&G Unite branch

> The practice of *outsourcing*, especially in Food and Beverage but also in other jobs, creates a situation where workers *have no relation with people but only agencies*. (Part-time unpaid officer, Hotels branch, UK-born, Irish origin)

Outsourcing of entire departments such as cleaning, and the growing use of agencies for the insourcing of labour were intensifying at the time of the fieldwork, with parallel processes of new labour migration from Eastern Europe (McDowell et al. 2009). The internationalisation of the workforce appeared doubly intertwined with the internationalisation of the industry structure, with the entry of large multinational chains and the segmentation of ownership and management (Alberti 2011; Clancy 1998). The union officer developed this point arguing that the new separation between management and ownership of hotel estates, implying a high level of segmentation in the governance of the hotel involves wage cuts for the workforce, overall degradation of working conditions and lower quality of the service provided.

Reflecting what reported in the literature and by the trade unionists, my empirical research disclosed among the key issues suffered by the workers: low and differentiated levels of pay; wage expropriation in the form of unpaid overtime and errors in pay slips; intensification of the pace of work through 'piece rate' system; irregular shifts and anti-social working hours; lack of training and career opportunities; harassment and bullying by managers; cases of sexual abuse, intimidation and fear related to raids and immigration controls for non-EU workers. My empirical observations around pay, working time, workload and occupational mobility showed however how these issues were differently experienced by the workers according to multiple lines of racialised and ethnic divisions among the workforce, where a critical line of separation lied at the intersection of *contractual and migration status* (see also McDowell et al. 2007; 2009).

Multi-sited, unbounded ethnography

I chose the school of Burawoy's 'Unbounded ethnography' (Burawoy et al. 1991) to explore the invisible lives of migrant workers in this devalued sector of the labour market, as I believe that the sensible lens of urban ethnography and a multi-situated strategy would help me understand a complex subject such as migrant employment. The original idea of locating lived experience within its 'extra-local determinations' is at the core of Burawoy's 'unbounded' (and

later 'global') ethnography but can be traced back to the work of feminist ethnographers such as Dorothy Smith's (1987). This approach re-emerges in the unbounded ethnography's drive *to extend* 'workplace ethnographies' into external aspects such as race and ethnicity, citizenship, markets and local politics[3].

By travelling across a global city for more than a year, back and forth between the different *sites* attended by the participants (e.g. job agencies, workplaces, union buildings, street actions), my research on the ground resembled the embodied habitus of 'travelling in dwelling and dwelling in travelling' described by Clifford in *Routes* (1997). However my fieldwork was in fact still concerned with one specific and *relatively bounded* place: the urban space of a 'post-industrial metropolis' such as London; the quintessential example of an economy based on an expanding personal services industry and predicated on the supply of migrant workers (Massey 2007, Sassen 1991). The practices of its differently positioned inhabitants, negotiating with the changing structures of economic and political regulation and de-regulation (Wills et al. 2009), constituted this one particular locale as a *multiple locale* in itself.

Two phases of participants observation: moving between the spaces of 'organized' and 'disorganized' labour

The qualitative data of my project was generated in London between 2007 and 2009 through *two main phases* of 'participant observation' and a mix of formal and informal interviews (see below). The two phases of the participatory study partly overlapped and consisted of 1) one total period of four months of *covert participant observation*, working as a waitress via registration with two temporary job agencies*; 2)* a second phase of sixteen months of *overt participation* in a trade union-led campaign to promote the rights of hotel workers in Central London.

As it is typical of the tradition and practice of industrial sociologists (Beynon 1973), the initial access to the 'field of hospitality' was realised through a gatekeeper from the union movement, namely a long -officer of the Hotel worker branch of the T&G Unite. The branch had just started organising migrant workers in some of the large hotel chains in Central London. In turn,

[3] See also Glucksmann 2009; Pollert 1981 and, for more recent examples of ethnographies of gendered transnational migration, Cravey (2005).

my my engagement with the "campaign against immigration controls" (CAIC) had opened the door for me to access the contacts in the headquarter of T&G Unite.

While the trade union was a strategic point of entry into this relatively informal sector of the economy, it soon became clear that it was only one, distinct space and *a* channel into that world: the branch meetings were not a transparent window into the variegated experiences of hospitality workers, the realities of migrant working lives were much more complex and not always represented in the branch meetings. The problems perceived by the majority of the long-term union members were not necessarily the same as those of the migrants who had just found work. It made a significant difference whether a worker was employed in a major hotel chain, directly or through agencies, or on a casual or a permanent contract of employment. The fact of being a 'newcomer' from an Eastern European EU country or a migrant from outside the EU, relatively recent or somewhat settled[4], represented other major differences in *their migrants' statuses*.

Therefore, in order to expand my view of the field and better explore the challenges of this extremely differentiated workforce, I needed to venture outside the walls of the union building and explore the workplaces myself. This was essential in order to detect the everyday relationships at work in this industry, going beyond the accounts of officers and long-term employees. I wanted to uncover the ways in which the recently arrived migrants entered the sector, why they chose this kind of work and how they came to terms to its highly exploitative conditions. I wanted to find out about their mobility strategies, why they *were not* interested in joining the union, and in what ways they were seen as 'others' by most union members. To examine these issues, my gatekeeper – the chair of the hotels branch – suggested the 'best' temporary recruitment agency (i.e. the worst with regards terms and conditions of employment), where I could register and take a job as a migrant worker myself. During this phase of the fieldwork I carried out assignments mainly in the restaurants of large hotels or at catering establishments in various hospitals and conference centres across the city where I was sent by the agencies.

[4] Ironically, a few years after with the decision of the UK to leave the EU I was forced to apply to become a 'settled resident', having lost my free movement rights. Brexit constitutes indeed a critical development with major consequences in the Hospitality industry reliant on migrant labour from the EU (CERIC 2018).

'Covert participant observation' seemed the most appropriate research technique to access the field and, moreover, was to some degree the only feasible strategy of inquiry to obtain first hand data. If I had chosen to approach recruitment agencies until I obtained management permission, this path would have probably taken me several months before finding an employer willing to employ a research student who was critically exploring the poor working conditions of migrant agency workers. Even then, the main reason for choosing covert research was to avoid the managers at work treating me differently from others, or hiding or trying to reduce the worst aspects of the jobs since they knew they were observed. In other words, overt research would have increased the 'reactivity' of the participants to the extent of substantially impacting on the results of the research (Bryman 2008).

Being an agency worker: covert research

The registration with the temporary agencies threw me into the everyday world of newly arrived migrants. The long hours spent in the 'recruitment hall' of the agencies waiting for the shifts to be announced or 'begging' in the crowd for more working hours, exposed me to the daily conversations, stress, fears, the sense of degradation and strategies of survival of the new arrivals in to the world of London hospitality.

Similarly to many of my new co-workers, I had very little previous experience in the sector: what was required to become an agency waitress in the shortest possible time? I would soon learn that, rather, *we had to pretend* that we had a relatively long experience in the sector and then simply start working, with or without training. Waiting on tables appeared an easier job to apply for someone inexperienced than cleaning hotel rooms, which, despite the rhetoric about its low value and skills, involves a lot of experience, dexterity, refined manual skills, and stamina. My Italian 'credentials' as well made me more suitable to interactive jobs in the eyes of the agency employers (Wills et al. 2009).

Learning what skills and attributes were expected on your CV was something quickly to learn from the other applicants. These were also partly suggested by the standard electronic forms that we were required to fill in in the computer room of the agency. I was only partly surprised to find out that signing the 'opting out' from the Working Time Regulations (which establishes 48 hour a week as a maximum standard, made more 'flexible' by the UK national

transposition of the respective EU directive) was a tacit condition to get the job, embedded as a default preference in the electronic forms for the applicants.

I had to go through various obstacles before actually starting work. This included long queues, bureaucratic issues with my Italian I.D. card, having to show deference and submission to the agency managers, and even the payment of 'informal' fees:

> When I went for the third time after registration (…) one of the agency's employees kindly whispered to me that I should provide an 'extra fee' of £10 (necessarily in cash), in order to have my name in the short-list of candidates for the training (Fieldnotes, International Talent agency, March 2008)

Finally, in March 2008 I started my assignments as a waitress in the restaurants of large hotels in the West End. For the successive 4 months I learned the reality of being a migrant temporary worker in London: given the meagre pay and the casual employment patterns, it was necessary to collect shifts across the city by registering with more than one agency in order to secure a minimum weekly wage. The 'East End agency' offered me relatively short and 'lighter' catering shifts in various venues, from hotels to hospitals and conference centres, where managers appeared to have a more 'human attitude' towards the 'temps', who were often young overseas students or came from relatively settled minorities who had worked in the sector for a sometime (on a casual basis). In contrast, my experience working night shifts at the 'Lush Cafe' (the large restaurant of a luxury hotel where I was sent by the agency 'International Talent'), together with a large crowd of relatively inexperienced and more recent transitory migrants, was particularly tough, both mentally and physically. I learned about the job in a relatively short time, yet in order to actually perform it properly I would have needed more training than the one hour offered by the agency's staff. In itself the work was much more tiring than I had expected, and it involved stress, mistreatment and humiliation that the consciousness of being a relatively privileged 'undercover researcher' who could quit the job at any time, was not sufficient to attenuate.

Especially during my shift at the Lush Café I learned how the labour process of waiting on tables resembled the Taylorist methods applied in the XX century manufacturing, with clear differences in terms of the nature and physical effort, but also some common patterns: a tight

management and time control, an 'assembly line' type of labour process, where the customer experience was packaged as a product[5] giving rise to a hybrid type of neo-Tayloristic management of service work:

> Our shift does not even cover the whole duration of dinner. In turn, the three-hour shift is divided into a series of phases, each one corresponding to the course included in the menu. From the main to the coffee, the work process includes a range of *well-measured* gestures which do not allow for time wasting and extra interaction with the guests. Any time the waitress or waiter approaches the table she/he will be asked to remember a load of details and at each round, bring in and free the table of certain items, but only those prescribed, otherwise the manager will stop you from working and you won't have the shift renewed… (Ethnographic diary, shift at the hotel restaurant 'Lush Cafe').

Such lack of discretion by workers and 'standardisation' of the labour process has been already highlighted in research exploring how management increases the need to control *employees' affects* against the backdrop of an overall tendency toward 'rationalisation' (Carls 2007). In this sense the 'neo-Taylorist' reorganisation of work, coinciding with a strengthening of direct control associated with industrial production (Ritzer, 1996) often displays a combination of participatory and hierarchical forms of control over workers' subjectivity.

My participant observation as an agency worker in hotels and catering services ended mainly because of exhaustion. I could not bear the burden of multiple shifts for more than four months in a row. This proved a testament to the strength of the other migrant women and their capacity to withstand the multiple shifts and the intensity of the work. It was becoming clear how the hardship and the physical effort involved in work such as waiting and cleaning were crucial aspects of these migrants' lives, thus adding a further (embodied) dimension besides the intrinsically precarious (existential) character of employment by temporary job agencies.

The union branch: overt ethnography

[5] See also Cole (2018) for a more recent account of labour in the hospitality industry and the notion of 'the circuit of service assembly' to describe the whole labour process occurring in the hotel as a factory.

During my agency employment, I continued to attend the union's branch meetings. My participation in the meetings of the hotel worker branch of T&G/Unite lasted for a period of sixteen months. I also took part in the various initiatives of the campaign that was launched in the meantime by Unite and London Citizens, a large civil society organisation. The campaigners mainly advocated a Living Wage (Holgate and Wills 2007) and better employment conditions for workers in the hotel industry in London, focusing in particular on one international hotel chain, the Hyatt (former Intercontinental).

The collaborative nature (Burawoy et al. 1991, Malo de Molina 2004) of my project with the union (based on a shared concern about the improvement of migrant workers' conditions in the industry), led me to declare my role with the participants involved. In October 2007 I obtained informed consent from workers and officers to allow my attendance at their monthly meetings of the branch and participation in its initiatives, and for later conducting interviews with individual members of the branches. I conducted formal semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 informants, 10 of whom were migrant workers and the rest trade unionists and other activists from London Citizens involved in the campaign.

This second phase of the ethnography with my full-time participation in the 'Hotel Workers campaign' was a critical observation point to collect more in-depth ethnographic insights into the relationships between different groups of workers and explore how they union strategically approached them .

A major *tension* soon emerged. It identified a fundamental split within the workforce, and in particular between the 'established workers' (the majority of the members of the union) and the so-called 'newcomers'.

'New comers' and 'settled' workers: divided

The core of the workforce, represented by more or less settled migrants, felt 'threatened' by the new ones, whose availability to 'work more (hours) for less (money) was perceived to reflect the typical opportunism of the 'economic migrant'. In this context the union appeared to establish its main role as 'protector' of the settled 'core-workers', defending their working standards allegedly put under pressure by the combination of new immigration and spreading practices of subcontracting.

Some of the migrant workers interviewed expressed fear of a 'race to the bottom' in terms and conditions triggered by the increase in agency workers, but also showed awareness about the local management attempt to manipulate these differences. While emphasising the distinction between 'permanent workers' and 'newcomers' in her hotel in the West End, a Portuguese housekeeper described how divisions were played out at strategic times to introduce 'management change', as when they attempted to change the hotel 'rulebook':

> They are trying to put us in the same position as the 'newcomers' (…) they tried to take away the bonus given to us by the "Intercontinental hotel" (previous management company)
>
> -Interviewer: And are 'newcomers' also organising to change these conditions?
>
> *They* (the agency workers) reacted against this thing, it's *not fair,* they should have the bonus as well, perhaps they should have appealed to the people that created the frictions between them… because it is about money, and money matters (Arianna, Portugal/Angola, 28 years in London, housekeeper)

While the housekeeper laments the fact that the previous contractual conditions of the permanent workers are pushed down to the level of 'people who have just come' and blames the new group of workers for the degradation of working conditions in the hotel, she also points to the fundamental *injustice* at the basis of the differential treatment received by the recently arrived workers. The particular history of the large hotel chain exemplifies how changes in recruitment practices overlap with major restructuring of the hotel governance (with a new management company, the Hyatt, taking over the previous one, the Intercontinental).

Critically, however, this was not merely a conflict between more and less senior employees but a social tensions between relatively established groups of Black Ethnic minority workers (some of them settled Black minorities from the former British Commonwealth with British citizenship or leave to remain, including Nigerian, Ghanaian, Caribbean) and the 'new migrants' to the UK (some enjoying free movement rights as EU citizens, some on a variety of visa permits such as student or working visa). In other words, in the face of apparently

straightforward and binary divisions between hired directly (in-house) and contract workers (agency) ongoing processes of re-racialisation created more nuanced forms of fragmentation (Jordhus-Lier and Underthun 2014) or multiplication of labour (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) with the effect of reducing the possibilities of collective action.

However, I wondered whether these 'new migrants' were really as money-oriented and opportunistic as depicted by the settled workforce and by officers. How did their practices reflect their particular status as migrants? Were the 'newcomers' from the EU Accession countries behaving differently because of their recently gained mobility? What other forms of resistance were these migrants expressing *outside* of the traditional structure of labour organisation? How did their relative detachment from work impact on their sense of justice in the workplace, and to what extent did this make them more individualised than others?

Starting to work for the agencies myself provided me with a clearer understanding of the important function that that particular form of recruitment played for the newly arrived migrants. The agency almost represented a reassuring employer, a 'home', a point of reference, where migrants new to the city and (often) to the job could meet other migrants with similar experiences and start their meticulous passage into the capital's precarious service sector. The strategic use of subcontracted work and the temporary nature of that passage appeared somehow inevitable for those with a good education and who had a high awareness of the process of skill degradation implied in taking a job in the hospitality industry[6].

Migrants' mobility practices and 'transnational exit power'

On some occasions my participant observation in the field of temporary migrant work extended beyond the 'walls of hotels' and the agencies, to explore the intra-cultural dynamics characterizing the life of these migrants, revealing at the same time the squalor of their poor and crowded housing conditions and the beauty of their capacity to counter tiredness and loneliness with relatively easy spaces of socialising and festivity. As part of the multi-sited ethnography I followed the participants in their neighborhoods and private homes in the occasions of public events, barbeques and house parties. Soon it was possible to discover much

[6] The fact that most migrants working in so-called 'low-skilled' jobs are in reality skilled or highly skilled, and that taking employment in the UK means accepting this form of 'labour market devaluation' has been widely documented in research on migrants' employment (e.g. McDowell et al. 2007).

beyond their 'working lives' since most of our conversations and interactions in and between the spaces of work and non-work disclosed a much richer world of activities these migrants engaged with to cope with their precarious working lives, organize their social and leisure time and regenerate themselves.

By attending the spheres of non-work and leisure time it was possible to better understand their own approach to working in the hospitality sector: one of the findings from this phase of participant observation was that migrant temporary workers approached work mostly instrumentally: they did not believe their engagement with the hospitality sector would last for long, they *did not care* about the job and their employers, they just saw it as a stepping stone to enter the labor market or put aside some money to start an educational or training programme and 'move on'. Lack of investment in the job and a strategic approach to temping by an agency co-workers from Lithuania:

> Diana seems to prefer to be sacked rather than show any interest in the assignment. Her main tactic is *slowing down* and *avoiding work* whenever possible. Yet, as usual, she stays longer than the foreseen schedule. It is already 4:30 pm, she is tired and tomorrow she is gonna work for *15 hours* or so, till 2 in the night she said (Ethnographic diary, catering shift at the 'Westminster Hospital')

While adopting a clearly *instrumental attitude to work* and trying to reduce effort to minimum, at the same time this worker seemed to subscribe to a peculiar 'work ethic'. Broadly this is part of the 'flexible migrant worker''s *taken-for-granted disposability* to work extra hours. However, far from reflecting any form of loyalty to the company or pride for the work done, the reasons for this flexibility are rather to be found in the fear of not having shifts renewed. Having the agency as your employer it is important to be '*showing* that you are more flexible with time' (Ethnographic diary, catering shift, 'the River Hospital').

However the difficulty of juggling different agencies and the bad treatment received from a manager led my Lithuanian workmate to cancel her registration with the East End agency precisely because the managers did not make any effort to help her to balance her different shifts. After *quitting the agency* Diana had to face a relatively long period of unemployment

but she was relieved from the burden of 'dealing with those horrible people' (Ethnographic diary, informal interview with Diana, Lithuania, agency worker).

This led me to develop the notion of 'migrant mobility practices' as a form of coping with precarious work. However, going beyond the industrial relations approach that tends to reproduce the dichotomy between 'coping' as individualistic and weak form of agency (ultimately detrimental to collective bargaining) and genuine forms of collective resistance (Smith 2006), I argued that far from being a mere form of survival, *migrant labour turnover* could be understood as a direct form of resistance to capital controls in the labour process. This was consequential to my observation that migrant occupational cross-border 'mobility power' (Alberti 2014) represented immediate challenges to management attempt to organise workers temporariness and flexibility:

> The manager of the staffing agency I worked for in East London during my job interview complained about the fact that the margins for the agency to *replace* workers in the face of high turnover were not actually very significant. The constant supply of labour for this sector in London, a result of the increased presence of migrants arriving in the city in search of work – especially after EU Enlargement – would initially appear to suggest the relative ease of firms *replacing* workers at any moment in time. However, the agency manager lamented the fact that in reality it is not always so easy to fill in vacancies in the industry considering that '*jobs are not always good'* (Ethnographic diary, job interview, temporary staffing agency 'East End').

I concluded that the contradictions involved in the patterns of labour turnover and migrant labour in the sector are to be observed not only as outward strategies aimed at cutting labour costs and undermining workers' bargaining power, but as *organized response by management* to workers' mobility choices and their own understanding and strategic use of flexibility. I drew from Smith's key theorisation that quitting remains a significant expression of conflict within capital-labour relations (Smith, 2006, p.393). However, while the author's primary intention was to emphasise workers' use of mobility as a threat in dispute resolution within the workplace, my ethnographic study showed how migrants make use of their 'mobility power' for reasons that transcend the workplace. They exercise their mobility practices to flee a difficult situation at work but also move between different jobs or change sector all together, access education, or engage in onward migration.

By highlighting the material tensions that quitting, withdrawal from work and other mobility practices of temporary migrant workers create vis-à-vis management, it is also possible to illustrate the *relatively autonomous character of temporary work as a form of subjectivation*. This is in contrast to the victimising view of agency workers often subscribed to by trade unions and other civil society actors.

The union problem with agency work

While the original principle of the hospitality branches was that 'migrants are the solution, not the problem' (Turnbull, 2005, p.13), such principle was not acted upon or updated in the face of the new tensions and divisions along the lines of different contractual and migration categories within the workforce. The individualising tactics used by the managers to disrupt the organising process found a fertile terrain in the growing divisions emerging in the workforce.

The '2009 pay claim' proposed in the framework of the broader campaign for the London Living Wage, was considered a particularly suitable strategy to bring together different workers and organising workplaces with high levels of subcontracted work. The argument was that, while it would be difficult to organise agency workers on their own, they could engage in a wider Living Wage Campaign fostering *unity* with in-house staff and a multitude of allies in the wider community (see also Evans et al 2007).

However, it became apparent in the course of the campaign at the Hyatt hotel that the focus on the Living Wage was not sufficient to bridge the distance between the different categories of workers. The campaign did not address the specific problems experienced by agency workers, neither it managed to smooth the tension between the latter and the workers employed in-house. Many of the union officers and some LC members retained the underlying assumption that agency workers were detrimental, or at best indifferent, to the fate of the organising effort in both the hotels. The union's particular emphasis was to defend the conditions of 'core workforce' against the downward pressure brought about by the introduction of subcontracted work:

> We try to attack hotels at the business end, to *reduce agency labour* because as a union we find very difficult… you can understand… It is impossible to organise. Even on 39% turnover, if you have got a 100% of unionised members it makes only 40% of union membership… this is an impossibility! (…) They are *buying* waitresses like baked potato… *you cannot organise baked potato*: 'I am here only for three months, what shall I do in the union and *what shall the union do for me anyway*? (Tom, white male, part-time trade unionist, Hotels branch, UK-born, Irish origin).

Trade unions find not strategic to focus their organizing effort on the contingent workforce (a 'waste of resources'), and acknowledge the limited expectations by the temporary workers of gaining any benefits from union membership *given their transient status*.

While I identified some forms of resistance and dignity in the contingent workforce, many challenges persisted in terms of the question of labour re-composition. The joint organising efforts in the London Hotel by the union and the CSO appeared to bear only small fruits in terms of wins or changing strategies by management, but still represented a critical step in what would become a higher profile and visible campaign as few years after. Indeed when I asked the organiser (a Polish woman) to offer her analysis a year after the end of the campaign, she reiterated her belief that there is nothing intrinsic excluding agency workers from becoming the leaders of organizing campaigns:

> -And how many of the people involved in the Hilton were agency workers?

> -All of them! I mean Lev (the leader) was an agency worker… So it is not that there is no chance to organise them: they are agency workers only because the hotel does not want to employ them, but if the hotel would, they would work for the hotel longer, *they would rather have a stable job*… there are some who leave quickly after few months, people *who cannot bear it*, but many people have been with them for 3, 4, 5 years even if they are agency, this is just a job (Agnieska, Poland, 9 years in London, community organiser, hotel workers campaign)

It emerged that there is nothing 'essential' about the impossibility to organise not only migrant workers (Milkman 2000) but also migrant temporary workers. What is mostly needed perhaps, is rather to provide the existing institutions of the labour movement with the right strategic tools and renewed political cultures, away from traditional understanding of union engagement and membership, that help tackling the growing divisions of labour at a time of heighten racial tensions, rampant subcontracting process, and the growing divisions among working people in the context of nationalism and xenophobia in the UK and beyond.

Recent developments

The Hotel workers branch of Unite has grown substantially between 2007-2015: from below 100 to 1,000 members across more than 80 establishments (The Guardian, 2015a). Small if symbolic victories have been achieved, such as the promise to introduce the Living Wage over a five-year period by the The InterContinental Hotel Group. After a period of stillness since the end of my PhD, in 2015 a new organiser (coming from the social movement and feminist scene in London) has been hired by Unite to launch a new organizing effort in the hotel industry. This reflected a greater interest from the union hierarchies, and the choice to invest more resources in the sector. The new organiser has since set up Hotel Employees Action Teams (HEAT) to recruit more members and build units of activists to stage weekly actions. Indeed, what was most striking from the last wave of struggles has been the greater protagonism of hotel workers, including the -no longer 'new arrivals'- Eastern Europeans, which reverses the stereotypes about migrants' reluctance to be involved in trade unions. New attention was brought to the conditions of migrant workers also thanks to a blog launched by a migrant room cleaner who started a forum to share experiences and name and shame bad employers: the "maid in London" blog (the Guardian, October 2015). According to Unite's new organiser, "[b]logs and social media make it possible to animate the invisible" (ibid.), and initiatives from below and new media strategies can help these marginalised sections of the workforce to overcome isolation and vulnerability.

The increased *visibility* of hospitality workers' grievances may be given by the parallel spreading and normalisation of "zero hour' contracts of employment (Bessa et al. 2018). This form of work 'on call', where no minimum number of hours is guaranteed to the worker, finds

its root precisely in this hospitality sector: in 1983, following a protest against a case of unfair dismissal at the Grosvenor London hotel, a sentence was issued legitimising this new form of casual employment. The spreading of casualisation in the UK and across Europe has shown the paradigmatic nature of precarious work in the hospitality sector, given the latter more visibility and strengthened the voice of many workers in their daily struggles with management.

Meanwhile, inspiring examples have come from across the Atlantic, particularly New York, where hotel workers unions have obtained 80% of the union density in some establishments, a salary of 24$ per hour and a degree of respectability from their employers and managers that they could have only dreamt of (The Guardian 2015b). One of the recipes to achieve such success for the organiser is to combine the traditions of the rank- and file and that of community organizing (see also Bronferbrenner et al. 1998). The re-generation of cultures and tactics through the breeding of new generations of activists and organisers (and indeed lay members) whereby migrants young workers appear to take the lead and shake from within the pale, male and stale institutions of the labour movement, appears to be a positive development that will hopefully inspire new ethnographies and action-research in the low-paid sectors, and contribute to winning better conditions, dignity and respect in one of the central knots of our urban economies.

Final remarks: positionality and reflexivity in participatory research

After ten years from the completion of the fieldwork, what can we learn from a reflection on the positionality of the researcher in that specific labour market and research context, and against the background of the literature available at the time and the one that followed?

The recent developments in the politics of labour migration in the UK, with some of the discourses emerged from the interviews with the workers becoming popularised by public media and political parties in the context of Brexit[7], may be interpreted as direct expressions

[7] The popular Referendum about the continuing UK membership of the European Union held in June 2016, delivered a majority of Leave preferences. After a long and convoluted period of negotiation and two Government

of the racialised and migration-related tensions experienced by different groups of workers in my research. It is noticeable for instance that the language of the "race to the bottom" in working conditions has become dominant in many trade unions in the run up to Brexit, and used by rightwing parties to blame migrants (and their free movement) for the overall degradation of work and welfare. Rather than focusing on the effects of labour subcontracting practices or austerity measures, migration as 'problematic mobility' becomes the political target (Anderson 2017), reflecting not only the recurrent scapegoating of migrants for wider societal problems, but also the ongoing suspicion that the labour movement maintains towards migrant work and workers.

In this final section however, rather than reflecting on the legacy of the research or the socio-political situations ten years later, I offer some remarks on how the embodied positionality of the researcher has influenced the research process and findings, and some wider thoughts on the importance of reflexivity to consider the limitations of the knowledge produced.

The ethical standpoint of my participatory research was the belief that that every thought is always *situated* and that co-production of knowledge involves 'taking sides *with'* the participants (Haraway 1988). This is a recognition of being always already 'implicated' as a researcher in the field of study, against all disembodied theory that pretends to speak from a 'neutral place of enunciation' (Malo de Molina 2005).

At the same time, adopting a reflexive practice was crucial to consider the *limits* of my participatory research: with the words of Bourdieu *not* "forgetting to inscribe, into the theory we build of the social world, the fact that it is the product of a theoretical gaze, a "contemplative eye,"" and that the conditions under which theoretic knowledge is produced are not those of practice (Interview with Bourdieu, in Waquant 1989, p. 34). While Bourdieu argues that "objectivation of any cultural producer involves more than pointing to-and bemoaning-his class background and location, his race or his gender" (Waquant 1989: 34), and that any genuinely reflexive sociology must encompass the position of the academic in the field of cultural production, my reflexive practice on the different *intersectional and contested* positionalities

changes, the UK has officially left the EU on the 31st of January 2020. The terms of the UK departure, including new rules on the migration of workers from EU members are still partly undetermined and will be subject of the negotiation on other matters such as trade and regulations, during the so called Transition period (2020-21).

between researcher and participants (Yuval Davis 2006) critically guided my research ethics, and at times allowed for a deeper understanding of the world of low-paid labour in the London's service economy.

Although I did in fact *become* an agency waitress for a few months, I was well aware of being in a very different position to my workmates. First of all, while my small doctoral scholarship made me still belong to the low-income strata of London's residents, I was not doing *that job* for the money but to generate data for my research. Although I had some of the attributes typical of the average worker in the sector (being a relatively young worker, a student, and a recently arrived migrant in London), I was still able to withdraw from these precarious jobs at any time, and in any case I knew that I was more or less a 'visitor' in that world of hardship and insecurity. Many others would remain trapped in it for a much longer time, according to their differential access to social networks, occupational and geographical mobility (Author 2014).

Secondly, in terms of my migrant status, being a 'non-UK citizen' (although still a privileged EU migrant coming to the UK to enroll in a postgraduate programme) made it easier to start a conversation with the workers both in the agencies and the union and helped to 'break the wall' between researcher and researched (Malo de Molina 2004). I made a strategic use of certain aspects of my own 'intersectional identity', highlighting how multiple subjectivities can be valued in different phases of participant observation. I emphasised my Italian *accent* not only to facilitate my access to the agencies but also in the everyday conversation with my colleagues as a means of making myself appear 'more foreign' or 'more recently arrived', and thus closer to their positions and experiences.

And yet, unlike many of my co-workers, I still maintained *the advantage of being white* and, being from a 'country like Italy': not having to deal with the persistent, although subtle, *orientalist stigma* attached to the EU migrants coming from Eastern Europe (Ciupijus 2011). Because of the unspoken cultural stereotypes about national embodied attributes, as a national from a Mediterranean country I fitted more easily with jobs involving 'soft' and interactive skills such as waiting work (McDowell et al. 2007). In contrast, I consistently saw the middle-age (often Eastern European, Latin American or African) women queueing in the other section of the agency's room applying for longer-term jobs in housekeeping. My age, i.e. being a

relatively young worker considered suitable for certain jobs, confirmed employers' stereotypical views that segment and assemble the hospitality workforce not only in London but internationally (Iannuzzi 2019, Jordhus Lier and Underthun 2014).

The ongoing reflexivity on my positionality in the union branch elicited a deeper understanding of the questions of the boundaries of trade unions politics and its gendered dynamics, helping to expose the limits to democratic participation in union structures for temporary migrants, ethnic minorities and migrant women. Being a migrant and in particular the fact of not being a native speaker hindered my initial understanding of the functioning of the union branch. Like mine, I noticed how the voices of the migrant women members of the branch were partly curtailed because of their relatively weaker fluency as compared to the union leaders. The specialised and legalistic jargon used by the union officers in industrial disputes also presented barriers to migrant members' democratic participation.

My growing awareness of the intersection of language and gender in shaping my own position within the union and campaign constituted a crucial aspect in my analysis and interpretation of the data, unveiling the barriers that migrant women encountered in their process of 'engagement' in the official spaces of worker organisation. This also contributed substantially to the 'theoretical reconstruction' (Burawoy et al. 1991) of my thesis, highlighting the persisting *masculinist character* of trade union organizing strategies and the reproduction of fixed gendered political roles in the division of labour between community and labour leaders, as a major impediment to migrants' empowerment.

In summary the elements of commonalities with the other migrant workers (gender, foreign accent, being a new comer to London, my relative precariousness as a low-income student) facilitated the process of accessing the field and gaining trust from the participants, while the elements of difference with some section of the workforce (whiteness, migration status, age, educational background, non-dependence on the job and being a doctoral researcher) constituted barriers in terms of understanding the actual experience of working in hospitality as a migrant worker, and therefore defined the partial and *mediated* nature of the knowledge produced (Waquant 1989). By unpacking the tensions between the data generated across the overt and covert phases of the ethnography it was possible to observe the shortfalls of traditional union politics towards migrant agency workers, while the covert observation in

particular unveiled the relative disruptive power of the everyday forms of resistance and mobility enacted by London's 'new birds of passage' (Piore 1979).

In conclusion revisiting the field of hospitality and my methodological ethnographic practice provided a space to reflect on the continuous challenges and tensions that transient labour represent for collective action, and the ways in which workers, labour institutions and the state, may respond to them. It also showed how the ambivalent role of the embodied researcher (herself a carrier of a set of gendered, racialised and socio-political positionings) constitutes the richness and at the same time the limitations of participatory action-research, highlighting unsurmountable power differentials with the research participants. And yet through ongoing reflexivity on such differences, engaged participatory research might constitute news grounds for building genuine, open and mutually transformative relations of solidarities and everyday politics (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006) with those who continue to struggle to break their invisibility.

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