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## **“The Mobility-Immobility Dynamic and the ‘Fixing’ of Migrants’ Labour Power”**

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### **Abstract**

Low-wage labour migration from lower to higher income economies has become a precondition for capital accumulation. As part of this, neoliberal actors (businesses and states) strive to actively produce migrants with a strong work ethic. They do this in numerous ways. In this paper we draw upon Labour Process Theory to argue that a ‘mobility-immobility dynamic’ is a major way capital now controls precarious workers. The mobility-immobility dynamic relates to low-wage workers’ need to move (and often circulate) internationally but, once they have moved, a desire by businesses and states to keep them in place. The fixing of migrants both across space (through transnational mobility) and in place (through immobility) underlines the importance of a multi-scalar approach to understanding the control of the transnational working-class. We draw on evidence from European horticulture – 36 in-depth interviews with migrant worker, employers and community stakeholders in Norway and the UK – to highlight the mobility-immobility dynamic in practice.

**Key Words:** Fix, Geography, Labour, Migration, Mobility, Immobility, Process, Sociology.

## 1 Introduction

This article draws on a case-study of European horticulture to show how capital often requires labour that is both mobile (fixed across space) and immobile (fixed in place). This ‘mobility-immobility dynamic’ infuses the labour process, providing capital with an additional set of tools to control workers. The dynamic challenges the primacy of the nation-state (Anderson, 2019; Dahinden, 2016) and is underpinned by the increasing informalization of employment (Slavnic, 2007, 2010). Unfortunately, though, it been under-researched (though see: Harvey, 1982; Rainnie et al., 2010; Smith, 2010) and we argue it is now time to address this lacuna.

The mobility-immobility dynamic is about capital’s need to control workers and can thus be positioned within the framework of Labour Process Theory (LPT). LPT is a Marxist approach to the sociological study of work that was first advanced by Harry Braverman in his seminal text *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman, 1974) and helps us to understand the management and organisation of work. LPT focuses, first and foremost, on the relations of production. In particular, it is interested in the ways in which labour is controlled by capital in order to (usually with workers’ consent) optimise the activation and realisation of labour power and thus maximise surplus value to facilitate capital accumulation. In LPT the traditional focus (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979) has been at the site where labour power is activated: specifically, on the standard hierarchical processes of management and control within a traditional large firm/ factory setting. Work organization and management has changed considerably, however, since LPT was advanced in the 1970s. Recently, as a result, LPT has been applied to new forms of work, such as the digital-based gig or platform economy (Gandini, 2019; Veen et al. 2019) and to new groups of workers, such as migrant labour (Alberti, 2014).

The paper will argue that unveiling the capitalist labour process – something Braverman (1974) did so skilfully – can only be achieved today by acknowledging that employment is multi-scalar: commonly shaped by both the mobility and immobility of labour, within and beyond the nation-state. In the paper that follows we first examine LPT with mobility and immobility in mind. We then look specifically at the literature pertaining to precarious horticultural work and the mobility-immobility dynamic. The methods behind our horticultural case-study are then introduced before we focus on research findings. The findings look at the high levels of mobility (transnational labour circulation) amongst precarious horticultural workers and what has been termed the *in-situ* “spatial fix” they provide to employers (Scott, 2013a). They then move from considering transnational mobility (fixing labour across space) to considering immobility (fixing labour in place). The paper concludes by reflecting on the ways in which the mobility-immobility dynamic is used by capital more generally (beyond horticulture) to control labour on a transnational basis. The dynamic, we argue, is one part (within a broader labour process) of the informalization that is reshaping work in core economies. Informalization here is employed to consider not just the non-compliant and illegal part of the economy but also the complex informal-formal interface. It is at this interface, within the ‘regulatory borderlands’, that employers and states find fertile (often multi-scalar) opportunities for the control and exploitation of labour.

## 2 Labour Process Theory

Given how much time we spend at work, in paid employment, it is surprising how well veiled the capitalist labour process is. The pressures towards conformity within metrics-based academia do not make this unveiling easy for researchers, even if they provide them with ample empirical evidence of labour management and control. Braverman’s (1974) seminal

text 'Labor and Monopoly Capital' marks an important anomaly in this respect and provides the core foundations for LPT.

Braverman's work, and wider LPT, has been widely summarised, and debated, by academics (see for example: Smith, 2016). A key concept in LPT is valorisation i.e. the way in which capital amasses value, principally through the activation and realisation of labour power. However, labour power is not simply purchased as a basic commodity would be. It is an "idiosyncratic and spatially differentiated" pseudo-commodity (Storper and Walker 1983, cited in Rainnie et al, 2010: 312). This makes the transition from potential to realised labour power key in the valorisation process. LPT focuses on this transition within the capitalist system. Central in this respect is the control of labour and the 'manufacturing of consent' (Burawoy, 1979) – and associated avoidance of resistance – amongst workers under different control techniques and regimes. The control of workers is thus a core feature of labour process research and, broadly speaking, controls can be direct (workplace-based), indirect (also workplace-based) or exogenous (outside the workplace) (Scott, 2017).

In terms of ongoing processes, Braverman (1974) stressed the degradation of work (especially deskilling) in facilitating worker disempowerment and greater managerial control; with increasing work intensification following on from this (see Rogaly, 2008 for this process at work within horticulture). However, Braverman was writing at a time when the complexity of capitalism was less evident than it is today. As a result, the geographies of labour power, and associated issues of labour mobility and immobility, have been largely overlooked by LPT scholars (though see: Alberti, 2014; Ngai and Smith, 2007; Rainnie et al., 2010; Smith, 2006, 2010, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Notable early exceptions come from the geographer David Harvey. In particular, his 1982 text 'The Limits to Capital' identified a key contradiction: whereby capitalism required free mobility of labour, but individual firms also needed this labour to be fixed in place once employed (Harvey, 1982: 380-385). Harvey observes how:

"Free individual mobility of the labourer is an important attribute to be promoted. But capitalists also need to keep labour reserves in place...(this contradiction) generates countervailing influences over the geographical mobility of labour power, independently of the will of the workers themselves" (Harvey, 1982: 384).

This mobility-immobility dynamic lies at the heart of our paper but has not, we argue, received the attention it deserves; especially in relation to LPT.

Chris Smith (Smith, 2010) and Al Rainnie, Susan McGrath-Champ and Andrew Herod (Rainnie et al., 2010) are amongst the few scholars who have sought to advance the mobility-immobility dynamic. Smith (2010: 283) has argued that, since Braverman's work in the 1970s, new conditions now underpin the labour process, and: "central to all these conditions is renewed mobility of labour and capital, and increased supply of labour power". Smith also recognises, as Harvey did, that "labour power can acquire fixity" (Smith, 2010: 270). In a similar vein, Rainnie et al. (2010: 300) observe that: "capitalists always face a conflict between the need to be fixed in place so that accumulation can occur and the need to try to remain sufficiently mobile so as to take advantage of opportunities that may emerge elsewhere". This place-based fixity, alongside mobility across space, illuminates how a multi-scalar labour process exists within many low-wage workplaces.

Conceptually Smith (2006, 2015) very usefully talks of a "double indeterminacy" around the fact that labour power has two key variable elements: effort power and mobility power. Effort power relates to the distinction between labour and labour power, in the sense that hiring labour does not guarantee maximum labour power; and this is where management and control come in. Mobility power relates to the ability of workers to sell labour power to

different firms, on the one hand, and the readiness of firms to continue to buy labour power on the other. The mobility-immobility dynamic, we will show, reduces this double indeterminacy.

Illustrative of this, Ngai and Smith (2007) highlight the importance of “dormitory labour regimes”. In essence they show that processes of temporary labour mobility from rural to urban China, allied with the warehousing of workers in large dormitories at or close to work, facilitate labour control and productivity. Thus, indeterminacy is reduced for capital by the way in which migrants are moved across space and then fixed in place. The same basic principles seem to apply to low-wage horticultural work in higher-income economies (as well as other sectors outside the empirical remit of this paper, such as live-in migrant domestic/care workers and those on guestworker visas).

### **3 Horticultural Work and the Mobility-Immobility Dynamic**

The importance of international labour migration to developed world agriculture (especially horticulture) has been widely observed (Rye and Scott, 2018; Rye and O’Reilly, 2021). Preibisch (2010: 431), for example, notes that:

“The competitiveness of labor-intensive horticulture throughout the high-income world has come to depend not only on intensification through technological innovation, value-addition, or better marketing channels but, to a growing extent, the availability of international migrants”.

Thus, we have seen low-wage labour move across a lower to higher-income economic gradient to fill vacancies in the food production (especially horticultural) industry. This work is often precarious (i.e. low paid and temporary/ seasonal), particularly for new arrivals, and has been subject to intensification pressure over recent decades (Rogaly, 2008). Interestingly, and despite this intensification, migrants appear to employers as the archetypal ‘good workers’ (Baxter-Reid, 2016; Findlay et al. 2013; Friberg and Midtbøen 2018; MacKenzie and Forde 2009; Scott 2013b; Scott and Rye, 2021; Tannock 2015; Thompson et al., 2013). A key question then, in light of LPT, is how is (migrant) labour power activated and realised so effectively in precarious jobs?

We draw on Harvey (1982) to argue that a mobility-immobility dynamic pervades precarious labour markets across higher-income economies, especially in a sector like horticulture. In terms of mobility, the horticultural economy depends upon replenishing labour on a seasonal basis and migrants are now key to this requirement. The international sourcing of low-wage precarious workers by employers has been termed an *in-situ* “spatial fix” (Scott, 2013a). It is a fix in the sense that firms, unable to relocate to where labour is cheaper, simply import cheap labour instead and become dependent on this. The migrants who are recruited to work in precarious low-wage jobs are often able to extract greater value from these jobs than native workers by virtue of a “dual frame of reference” (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). In other words, both capital and labour can benefit from exploiting the differences between lower and higher-income labour markets in what has been termed a “two-way arbitrage” (Jakobsen et al., 2023): whereby mobility across economically differentiated space is both a source of profit for capital and also a resource for labour.

Over time workers in precarious low-wage labour markets often seek an exit strategy (Alberti, 2014). Their labour power once activated and realised by employers is not assured indefinitely. This is to be expected in horticulture given the seasonal rhythms of employment, but even here many employers would rather their best workers return year-on-year if at all possible. Martin (2002) describes the situation as a “revolving-door” and it is certainly true

that food production firms across the developed world either continually search for fresh sources of labour, or seek ways to keep the labour that they have as ‘fresh’ as possible (Scott and Rye, 2021).

As far as the latter strategy is concerned, the state can help in this respect through the design of temporary ‘guestworker’ visas (Anderson, 2010, 2019; Parreñas and Silvey, 2021; Wright et al., 2017). These disciplinary mechanisms act as “moulds constructing certain types of workers” (Anderson, 2010: 312) and are particularly common in horticulture (Consterdine and Samuk, 2018; Scott, 2015, 2022). Hennebry (2012: 12) talks, for example, of workers being “permanently temporary” on Canada’s ‘Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme’ (SAWP). Through SAWP low-wage workers are imported into Canadian farms but under strict conditions that ensure they remain ‘good’ workers by virtue of disempowerment. Labour circulation, rather than permanent migration, is a key mechanism of control in this respect, with workers often keen to be invited back year-on-year by their employer-sponsor (see Vosko (2016), for instance, on the blacklisting of circular migrants).

Immobility is also tied up with employers wanting to fix migrants in place through tied onsite housing. Reid-Musson (2017), for example, talks of the (im)mobilities and unfreedoms on Canadian family farms and how the ability to “fix” (2017: 1) farm labour in place acts as a control mechanism. Similarly, and also in the Canadian context, Perry (2018) notes and problematises the onsite lives of SAWP migrants. As with the “dormitory labour regime” (Ngai and Smith, 2007) in Chinese manufacturing, and live-in domestic/ care workers (Schwitter et al., 2018), it appears that horticultural employers in higher income economies also like low-wage workers to be close at hand, ideally living onsite (Scott and Visser, 2022). In most cases, horticultural migrants living in tied accommodation do so for part of the year and are circulatory in nature. It is also rare for children below working age to be allowed in such accommodation, and so normal family arrangements are effectively prohibited (Jakobsen et al., 2022).

Ngai and Smith (2007: 31) summarise the situation in China with respect to the mobility-immobility dynamic in dormitory labour regimes:

“Dormitories facilitate the temporary attachment or capture of labour by the firm, but also the massive circulation of labour, and hence the holding down of wages and the extensive lengthening of the working day, as working space and living space are integrated by the employer and state. A hybrid, transient workforce is created, circulating between factory and countryside, dominated by employers’ control over housing needs and state controls over residency permits”.

The importance of immobility in labour migration studies has also been observed for migrant domestic/ care workers: with Bélanger and Silvey (2020), most notably, talking of the need for an “immobility turn” in migration research in light of what goes on in this sector. This paper responds to this call by drawing out the mobility-immobility interplay to help understand the now widely observed ‘migrant work ethic’ within precarious labour markets of core economies.

#### **4 Methods**

To illustrate the mobility-immobility dynamic encountered by working-class migrants we draw on recent (2018-2019) research from European horticulture. We refer to our migrant interviewees as ‘working-class’ because of the nature of their migration (from lower to higher-income economies) and the nature of the work they did (low-paid and temporary/

seasonal). We certainly acknowledge the ongoing debates over the boundaries between a precariat and a working-class (Standing, 2011) and also the fact that some of our interviewees were university educated and able to engage in middle-class consumption patterns back home by virtue of remittances (see also Rye, 2019). Thus, whilst our migrants' class position was not straight-forward, the nature of migration (from lower to higher-income economies) and the nature of the work carried out (low-income and insecure) positions our study as one focused on a transnational working-class.

Our qualitative case-study evidence comes from two rural regions – South-Eastern Norway and Western England – and comprises 36 in-depth interviews. These 36 interviews include: 14 with migrant workers (6 in Norway and 8 in the UK); 10 with employers (5 in Norway and 5 in the UK); and 12 with community stakeholders (7 in Norway and 5 in the UK).

Of the migrant interviews in Norway we spoke to: 4 Poles, 1 Lithuanian and 1 Latvian. Of the migrant interviews in the UK we spoke to: 3 Bulgarians, 2 Poles, 2 Romanians, and 1 Lithuanian. Thus, the migrants interviewed were all from central and eastern Europe: due largely to the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007. There were 4 seasonal and 10 permanent (but formerly seasonal) workers sampled. All 4 of the seasonal workers lived on-site, with 4 of the 10 permanent workers living on-site as well. The 6 permanent migrant interviewees who lived within the wider rural community had all previously lived on-site. On average, the 14 migrants had lived in their case-study areas for 9 years, with a range from 2 (min) to 17 (max) years: we consciously sampled migrants who had been *in situ* for a longer period than most horticultural migrants to tap into their expert knowledge and experience.

All the employers we spoke to were born in the country where they lived/ worked: some were farm owners (5) whilst some were HR managers (4), there was also 1 employer representative. All the community stakeholders were born in the country where they lived/ worked (except for one Irish-born UK stakeholder). The community stakeholders were selected as key informants, representing *inter alia*: local government, labour regulators, the police, health bodies, and the local voluntary sector.

The research involved multiple day trips to each study location where we carried out face-to-face qualitative interviews lasting around 45 to 90 minutes. We targeted fruit and vegetable growers, a sector characterized by vertical integration along the value chain and labour-intensive production, as well as seasonal crop cycles and the predominance of migrant labour. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All were analysed manually using thematic analysis, which in the case of this article meant reading all 36 interviews and selecting quotes according to the mobility-immobility dynamic.

There were some interesting variations between the Norwegian and UK study sites. Most notably, the season in Norway was shorter than the UK but this was offset by the generally high standard of living in Norway, which made working for a relatively short season financially worthwhile. There was also the imminent ending of EU free movement in the UK and moves to resurrect guestworker migration for UK horticulture to offset this (Scott, 2022). In drawing on two sites our aim in this paper is not, however, to focus on differences but to emphasize how the mobility-immobility dynamic applies consistently in different higher income countries. Thus, by drawing on two cases we aim to add weight to the findings around the role of mobility and immobility in the labour process.

## 5 Findings

This findings section draws on LPT for inspiration in order to examine the ways in which a transnational working-class is targeted and used by employers (and the state) as part of a process of valorisation. Valorisation is the way in which capital amasses value through the

activation and subsequent realisation of labour power. Turning to a mobile working-class (fixing labour across space) and then seeking to make this working-class immobile (fixing in place) is, we argue, now one of the major contemporary mechanisms of labour control and thus key to valorisation.

Our study may be specific in that it focuses on horticulture and the EU workers drawn into the sector through the EU's freedom of movement regime. Nonetheless, the findings we present below – around the way in which working-class mobility and immobility are a key part of labour control – apply to other countries (such as the dormitory manufacturing regimes in China and the kafala guestworker regimes in the Gulf states) and to other sectors (such as domestic work and care). The findings also connect very clearly to debates around informalization (Slavnic, 2007, 2010) with the mobility-immobility dynamic demonstrating how agents of capital (employers and the state) are engaged in informalization from above whilst, from below, working-class migrants themselves are co-opted into exploitative employment regimes. Whilst it may not be illegal to expect workers to move internationally to secure their precarious work, and whilst it may not be illegal to then try to fix them in place for as long as this work is available, these requirements (and workers' willingness to adhere to them) are indicative of the opportunities for labour control and exploitation that exist for employers and states in the regulatory borderlands between the formal and informal.

### **5.1. Mobility – Fixing Labour across Space**

Low-wage employers throughout the developed world, often supported by the state, now commonly seek out working-class migrants to meet their labour requirements. This is particularly true in horticulture and, using the sector as a case-study, we will now show how employers depend upon circulatory migration each season, but with conditions placed on migrants' return year-on-year. In addition, employers also require the flow of migrants to be kept open as labour attrition means stocks constantly need replenishing. In short, the mobility of precarious low-wage workers across economically differentiated space represents a key "spatial fix" (Scott, 2013a) for employers.

#### **5.1.1 Transnational Labour Circulation**

The horticultural industry in both the UK and Norway has come to rely on transnational labour circulation to meet its fluctuating employment needs. The industry's labour uplift between low and peak season is significant, as illustrated in the following quote:

We employ the majority of 160 permanent workers. And then as a business, we employ up to 1,600 seasonal workers over the course of the year...So they all (seasonal workers) live on the campsite, with the exception of 30 that live off site. And they all live in one community. Can't tell them apart really. (Bernard, HR Manager, UK)

All Informants – employers, employees and community stakeholders – described this temporary-seasonal demand in a natural, inevitable and taken-for-granted way:

Almost all of the workers come from Poland and Lithuania, but most of them live in [the home country]. Maybe two or three live permanently in Norway, more or less. The rest lives more in Poland [and Lithuania]. And when the season starts, when the season is ready, the manager will call and send sms to ask people, to find out how many will come and how many he will have to recruit from other places or rent from firms [staffing companies]. (Gorski, Polish Migrant, Norway)



The majority of horticultural work is temporary and seasonal, and requires a transnationally orientated “revolving door” (Martin, 2002) to get enough workers in place during each season. Whilst this highly mobile working-class represents the optimal type of worker for horticultural employers, some migrant workers were eventually able to use their seasonal mobility to secure more permanent employment over the long-term:

I came here in 2002, it was first time. Four seasons. We work three months. Four years. Three months each year. And...later on when...I don't know the political situation maybe was changed a little bit. And rules was changed for our people. From that on it...then we had...then we got possibility to stay here for longer time and also my boss asked me to stay for longer time. And from 2006 I stayed here each year longer and longer and longer [chuckles]. I mean from, I begin from three months and later on I stay for six months and maybe ten years...no, not ten. Eight years I was...I stay here for six months and six...eight months...and last six years I am here full year. (Gabriel, Lithuanian Migrant, Norway)

The move from temporary-seasonal migrant, dependent upon the rhythms of transnational labour circulation, to a permanent worker was complex and far from assured (Scott et al., 2022). It tended to be based on migrant workers over-performing relative to the average and on particular skills (most notably linguistic) being amassed and demonstrated.

### **5.1.2 Conditional Return**

As part of the process of transnational labour circulation, and the desire to secure some form of stability out of quite precarious work, migrants must constantly perform or there is the danger of blacklisting (being denied work and/ or not being asked back the next season) (Vosko, 2016). Employers explained how workers' productivity was continually monitored in order to determine whom to re-employ:

Effectively it becomes a yes and a no list. So we'll look at figures. We'll sit with the supervisors when we create the list and say, "Should we invite them back?" Now that doesn't mean that we will rule them out if they request to come back, but if they were consistently for... Like last year, obviously it was quite a harsh year. If they consistently were under the thresholds, then what would be achieving as a business? So we would probably say unfortunately not...It doesn't take long for word of mouth to get around that to be invited back next year you have to perform this year. So everybody here will be very, very aware of the fact that we will be monitoring what their capabilities are... (Brian, HR Manager, UK)

So we call it a disciplinary system, but it's not a disciplinary system like a permanent person would receive disciplines. It's more a ticket system as sign, of showing warnings really...So if you're picking on the field, a supervisor can give you a what we call a warning. And then at the end of the season, when we're looking to invite people back, we look at the number of warnings that people have received, the reasons of what they received them for, and make a decision whether that's someone that we wish to invite back...We invite anyone who's been approved to return we invite back. (Bernard, HR Manager, UK)

In other words, a workers' seasonal mobility and temporariness is part of the labour control process. Horticultural migrants are set in an endless competition with co-workers. This competition determines whether or not migrants get offered work when they are in the host country and, crucially, whether they can return the next season. Monitoring and surveillance, alongside precarity and mobility, are undoubtedly key in explaining the much-celebrated work ethic of temporary and seasonal migrant workers.

### **5.1.3 Keeping the Flow Open**

There is attrition in terms of transnational labour circulation as workers either under-perform (and are blacklisted), get promoted to permanent roles, or leave the sector voluntarily. This means that employers are constantly on the lookout for new sources of mobile labour and that favoured nationalities can change over time (Scott and Rye, 2021). As a community stakeholder noted with respect to the UK's temporary-seasonal worker profile:

A lot of the Polish seem to have moved on from the fruit farms into, for example, [into] the service sector. It's the Bulgarians and the Romanians now who appear to be working the fruit farms more. (Carl, former Police Officer, UK)

Certain source countries known to provide dependable and deferent workers can get exhausted. Thus, whilst the UK had largely moved on from Polish workers at the time of the research (2018-2019), even the newer supply lines from Bulgaria and Romania were proving challenging:

Back in 2014 we had a lot younger people students, younger people who spoke a lot of English, well educated. And they wanted to work, they understood the importance of work and their work ethic was great. We're finding, now...that those youngsters are now not wanting to come in to work in agriculture as much...So they're going into work in other sectors. I don't know, it was hospitality, retail or going to the bigger cities, having families, etc. And now when we do our recruitment, we're having to go into more rural areas of Romania. So we then went into the mountainous areas, really rural areas where there are no younger people...All the youngsters are gone! And so we're seeing the age of our workforce is a lot higher. So the age of the workforce is getting high and that does have an impact. Because it's a very physical job out in the field...It's hard...So our returnees rate, it has gone down. I couldn't tell you again, I haven't got this figure. But yeah, has gone down...they're not as productive as the first wave of these Bulgarian and Romanians that came in. (Beth, HR Manager, UK)

In the Norwegian case it was also clear that employers were careful to research countries and regions where labour was likely to be of highest quality (most productive). For both the UK and Norway, since EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007, central and eastern Europe had clearly delivered migrants with the required work ethic. However, the picture appeared to be changing fast and employers talked about a need to keep the flow open and look a little further afield in future to meet temporary and seasonal labour needs. In the UK, the 2016 Brexit vote meant that this translated into subsequent calls for a global seasonal guestworker visa which was eventually implemented (Scott, 2022).

## **5.2. Immobility – Fixing Labour in Place**

Employers' reliance on transnational labour circulation can be supported by state policy, especially via guestworker schemes (Anderson, 2010; Parreñas and Silvey, 2021; Wright et al., 2017), which are particularly common in horticulture (Consterdine and Samuk, 2018; Scott, 2015, 2022). Guestworker schemes were once pronounced "dead" in Europe (Castles, 1986: 775) but have since re-emerged (Castles, 2006) as a favoured mechanism to "mould" (Anderson, 2010) the migrant working-class. They facilitate mobility (fixing labour across space) but also immobility by helping to fix labour in place especially through ties to the employer and limited citizenship rights. Such schemes were not especially common at the time of the research (2018-19) due to the significance of EU freedom of movement. However, even without their disciplining effect, working-class migrants were still fixed in place within UK and Norwegian horticulture.<sup>2</sup> We will now explore how this fixing occurred and in the process respond to the calls of Bélanger and Silvey (2020) for an "immobility turn" in migration research.

### **5.2.1 Migrant Workers' Onsite Lives**

One of the main ways in which working-class migrants are anchored in place, other than through restrictive guestworker visas, is through employer-provided accommodation. This has a disciplining effect on labour and is extremely common in horticulture (Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017; Perry, 2018; Reid-Musson, 2017; Scott and Visser, 2022). The 'fixing' of migrant workers in place via tied onsite accommodation was the norm in our case-study areas. It is also common in some manufacturing (Ngai and Smith, 2007) and live-in domestic/care work (Schwitter et al., 2018) demonstrating the wider relevance of immobility in understanding the control and exploitation of precarious migrant workers.

Migrants described everyday life on farms as encapsulated by work: they work or they prepare meals, speak with family back home or colleagues onsite, or prepare for the next day of work. They are also conscious of the unpredictability of their employment, so need to be ready and willing to work when it is available. The following quote demonstrates the impact of a life spent within the workplace and focused on work:

As I said when you are working in farm...you cannot be...make any plan, you cannot make any plans for few days forward, because you never know, we...all we depends on weather. If it is good weather, we can work two weeks without days off or something like that. But after that we have this days off which are compensate our...our time. It is OK. (Gabriel, Lithuanian Migrant, Norway)

The impact of living life onsite and being on-call was encapsulated by the community stakeholders we spoke to:

I think they do tend to keep themselves to themselves...They'd like to stick together. They live within their own cultures. They speak their own language. There might be integration at work to a certain extent but it's like anywhere else really...I think the logistics of where they actually work will dominate that. Most don't come with any independent transport. Farms are by definition rural so it could be they are four, five miles away from a central population, so other than the maybe weekly trip to go and do their shopping, it would take a large effort for them to go and actually want to join a local society or stuff like that. Plus they're there to work. Their work ethic is, and it's not like a 9:00 to 5:00 job, they can't make that appointment to go and sing in the local choir at seven o'clock on a summer's night because quite possibly they could still be out

in the fields...It's hard to make a commitment to the local community when you're a long way away. You've got no independent transport. Bus links. Walking along country lanes is not the best thing to do, there and back. It's difficult for them. Like I say, their main focus is to work...You come home, you cook your food, you go to bed, you get up, you work. There's not much time for integration. (Charles, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, UK)

Ultimately, they want to be productive, don't they? Like maybe, an unintended consequence of that is the fact that they all stay on-site except when they go to the supermarket to do their shopping. (Conor, Police, UK)

The onsite lives of migrants, allied with their reliance upon on-call work, is clearly a key factor in explaining immobility following migration. Thus, even without highly restrictive guestworker visas, working-class migrants can be quite significantly fixed in place. Whilst this fixing may suit both employers and workers, it is certainly in the interest of employers first and foremost to have access to *homo economicus* (where labour power is separated from other human attributes).

We found that the EU migrants we spoke to, none of whom were tied to a restrictive guestworker visa, felt a degree of confinement with only the occasional foray outside of the farm, usually to the local supermarket or grocery store (Scott and Visser, 2022). This confinement was often dealt with by compartmentalising: whereby life in the host country (work and the productive sphere) was seen as distinct from life back home (migrants' family and community life, the reproductive sphere). Elsewhere, we have talked in detail about this division and the "offshoring of social reproduction" that is associated with working-class labour migration to core economies (Jakobsen *et al.*, 2022).

### **5.2.2 Difficulties Changing Employer**

Immobility also relates to the lack of ability to change employer. This is often enshrined in guestworker visas, but even in our sample (where there was free movement within an EU context) it appeared that farmers sometimes tried to prevent worker mobility to adjacent farms. A kind of gentleman's agreement prevented migrants moving locally in Norway:

Ah...[sighs], as a I know farmers don't want to take people from other farms. If this farm is open, I mean in business, then. And if they are in the neighbourhood, then they don't want to take people from other farms to the work because they, I guess, are thinking that it is bad, bad neighbourhood and they will make not friendly things. It is what I think about. But I know, yeah, some people are changing places and try to find places to make more money or something like that. You know we are open for offers. (Gabriel, Lithuanian Migrant, Norway)

Interestingly, as we returned to research during the Covid-19 pandemic – after the conclusion of the interviews – the benefits of on-site isolation and confinement became even more evident. Due to the pandemic, migrant workers were required by state authorities to isolate on farms for long periods. This "quarantining" (Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017) was not necessarily seen as a challenge by farmers, as it gave them more power – and legitimacy – to demand that workers do not leave the production site.

### **5.2.3 Workers Accepting Immobility**

It would be naïve to think that migrant workers do not gain anything from their immobility and associated isolation. For example, asked if he would like to bring his family to Norway, Gaspar explained:

Well, I am not sure. Because then I could not work that much, and if I do not work as much then the family won't get too much from me also. Actually, I can give them more if I earn in Norway and spend those money in Poland. So it is no very reason to bring the family. (Gaspar, Polish Migrant, Norway)

Similarly, UK migrants reflected on the trade-offs between 'cheap' on-site living compared to far more expensive off-site accommodation:

Living outside is way, way more expensive...you have to rent a house, pay taxes, all these bills and everything, obviously car. It's way more expensive. Where on the campsite is a way to save money actually. Made you focus basically on the work. But it is a bit strict to the time. I think you cannot live forever on the campsite, because it's not like a life you would expect probably. Nobody can expect life like that. So you're looking for something else. (Alistair, Polish Migrant, UK)

The immobility of migrant workers, and the associated omnipresence of work in their everyday lives, is not something that can be sustained for the long-term. However, in the short to medium-term the sacrifices associated with the mobility-immobility dynamic are usually seen as worthwhile, especially given the periphery-to-core nature of much contemporary working-class migration and migrants' "dual frame of reference" (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Put another way, migrants do have agency within a mobility-immobility dynamic that is albeit largely about the control of labour by capital.

## **6 Conclusions**

Almost half a century ago, David Harvey (1982: 384) observed a mobility-immobility dynamic whereby:

"Free individual mobility of the labourer is an important attribute to be promoted. But capitalists also need to keep labour reserves in place...(this) generates countervailing influences over the geographical mobility of labour power, independently of the will of the workers themselves" (Harvey, 1982: 384).

Conceptually, this dynamic links to capital's need to reduce the "double indeterminacy" (Smith, 2006, 2015) of labour and is part of a broader control infrastructure that constitutes the contemporary labour process. Mobility-immobility is, very simply, about capital moving from potential to realised labour power in as efficient and effective way as possible. Surprisingly few scholars, however, have built on Harvey's observations (Rainnie et al., 2010; Smith, 2010) and this paper marks an important step forward empirically and conceptually.

Focused on the European horticultural industry, we have shown how transnational mobility is promoted – usually across a lower to higher-income economic gradient – to maximise the activation and realisation of working-class labour power. For instance: by keeping workers in a temporary and precarious state; by placing productivity conditions on their return and re-employment; and by keeping the flow of migratory labour open. Alongside this, horticultural employers also fix mobile labour in place, and most obviously do this

(outside of a guestworker visa) via tied onsite accommodation. Whilst this provision of accommodation may appear to be a benevolent gesture, there is certainly a strong degree of self-interest underpinning it.

Our Norway-UK horticultural case-study is in some senses unique in that it draws on the EU free movement context and a sector that is certainly quite exceptional with respect to its long-term need for mobile temporary/ seasonal labour. Nonetheless, the working-class mobility-immobility dynamic applies well beyond the EU context and well beyond the horticultural sector. The internal migration in China and the international 'kafala' migration to the Gulf states that supplies, respectively, manufacturing and construction/ care workers underlines the wider importance of labour control via mobility and then immobility. To be sure, there are many other ways that working-class labour is controlled: our point is that labour process theory has not paid sufficient attention to-date to the mobility-immobility dynamic and that this dynamic is evident across a number of precarious labour markets including but not limited to European horticulture.

At a time when migration studies have been criticised for methodological nationalism (Anderson, 2019; Dahinden, 2016), our revival of the mobility-immobility dynamic underlines how multi-scalar and transnational migrants' working-class labour power, and capitals' exploitation of this power, now is (see also Rye, 2019). Alongside this, the dynamic captures elements of underpinning informalization from above and from below (Slavnic, 2007, 2010). To elucidate, workers' mobility-immobility is founded upon a neoliberal labour control logic that views many of the traditional formal structures of the nation-state as essentially unwelcome, inconvenient or outdated. So, citizenship rights, trade union membership, welfare support, the ability to move employer, a private life beyond work, amongst other things, are all compromised by the hyper-commodification of (mobile-immobile) labour. Capital's exploitation of labour (i.e. the surplus value amassed) can clearly be intensified by circumventing the nation-state both in terms of affecting the supply of workers and the regulation of work. The mobility-immobility dynamic is a part of this circumvention and marks an important step forward in terms of revealing the contemporary multi-scalar labour process. Moreover the state, via both action and inaction, tends to support capital in its quest to control and exploit the working-class in ways that underline the trend towards informalization.

When we talk here of both the labour process (i.e. the management and organisation of work to facilitate the control and exploitation of labour) and informalization (i.e. how the strategies and tactics of employers, and the state, undermine the pay and conditions of workers, without this necessarily being illegal) we are seeking to combine different analytical tools in order to better understand the contemporary production/ reproduction of a transnational and precarious working-class. We cannot say, with the data we have, that things are progressively getting worse for this transnational working-class and that labour market informalization is unprecedented (and see Rye, 2017). What we can conclude is that there is now a mobility-immobility dynamic that appears to suit employers, the state, and to some extent migrant workers, nestled at the core of certain low-wage sectors of higher income economies. This dynamic shows how workers are fixed across space (mobility) and then in place (immobility) which sometimes conflicts with what might be legal and certainly conflicts with what may be seen as morally acceptable and just. Our concern, then, in line with the informalization perspective, is not only to focus on what exists within the non-compliant and illegal part of the economy but to examine the complex informal-formal interface and critically consider the way that employers and states find, within this regulatory borderland, creative and increasingly multi-scalar opportunities for the control and exploitation of labour.

In light of the above, it is now time to focus more attention on the mobility-immobility dynamic. We may have used a particular case-study (European horticulture) to illustrate the dynamic at work, but it is certainly evident elsewhere. Most notably, and outside of horticulture, it is clear that dormitory labour regimes in manufacturing, live-in domestic/ care workers, and those on guestworker visas, are all expected to be both mobile yet are also fixed in place with employers and the state entangled together in producing and reproducing this status-quo. Further research is now needed (especially by sociologists, geographers and migration researchers) to explore how a mobility-immobility dynamic helps capital to amass surplus value through the multi-scalar activation and realisation of labour power. Moreover, the impact neoliberal informalization has in underpinning capital's need for a mobility-immobility dynamic needs attending to; as does the relative importance of this control dynamic within the broader and more complex labour process. Related to this, it is also an important, though not a straight-forward task, to look at the direction of travel of labour control and exploitation and to critically examine whether things really are getting worse for the working-class. Finally, and given that many migrants essentially consent to the mobility-immobility dynamic we need to examine the long-term basis for this consent and specifically the degree to which low-wage migrant workers hope to, and actually do, gain something from their precarity (see Scott et al., 2022).

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In other areas, however, such as the gig/ platform economy, it is fair to say that LPT has kept up (Gandini, 2019; Veen et al. 2019).

<sup>2</sup> With Brexit, guestworker visas are now becoming more common in UK horticulture, and also seem to be becoming a feature in Norway as well. Crucially, they underscore the need to think about the control of low-wage workers as being about the entanglement of employers and the state (Scott, 2022).

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