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The Alienation–Insulation Dynamic and the Low-Wage Migrant Work Ethic

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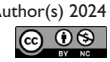

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Abstract

Low-wage labour migrants moving from lower- to higher-income countries have been celebrated for their strong work ethic over recent decades. The paper draws on qualitative insights from European horticulture to explore why low-wage migrants work as hard as they do. We centre our analysis on an 'alienation–insulation' dynamic. Specifically, we show how migrants are particularly alienated in ways that are different to that of the immobile working class. However, we also argue that migrants' spatial (their dual frame of reference) and temporal (their liminal) agency insulates them from this alienation to some degree. It is important, in this respect, to differentiate between alienation as ostensibly encountered (an objective phenomenon) and the actual felt experiences of alienation (as a subjective phenomenon). We conclude that the alienation–insulation dynamic is a key, but underexplored, element in understanding the complex relationship between labour mobility and labour power.

Keywords

alienation, geography, insulation, labour, low wage, migration, sociology, work

Introduction

Employers are acutely aware of the importance of sourcing the right quantity of labour that is also of a suitable quality. As De Genova (2018: 436) observes: 'labour power is the premier commodity

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in the global circuitry of capitalist exchange'. Crucially, he goes on to acknowledge though that: 'above and beyond any other commodity, there has also been a(n) escalation in the mobility of labour-power' (see also Smith, 2006). The paper is interested in this relationship between labour mobility and labour power; and how the former can underpin the latter. Employers, especially low-wage employers, appear to construct some groups of mobile workers as possessing superior sets of attitudes and skills. Illustrative of this is the 'good migrant' and associated 'migrant work ethic' that has been well documented by academics over recent decades (Baxter-Reid, 2016; Findlay et al., 2013; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Tannock, 2015).

Anderson and Ruhs (2010: 40) very usefully talk of the migrant work ethic as being about: 'employer preference for a workforce over which they can exercise particular mechanisms of control'. Similarly, MacKenzie and Forde (2009: 150) link the good migrant to: 'perceived willingness to work hard, follow management instructions and, crucially, work long hours when the firm requires'. This emphasis on the control and exploitation of workers is a key element in understanding why migrants work as hard as they do. However, the question remains as to what specific mechanisms constitute and facilitate the particular control and exploitation of migrants, especially those within precarious labour markets? Or, put another way, what underpins the migrant work ethic when wages and job security are low? We argue that this question can be substantially (though not wholly) answered through a focus on the migrant-specific 'alienation–insulation' dynamic.

Alienation is commonly discussed by social scientists in relation to Marx (1975 [1844]) but has a broader meaning (Leopold, 2022). This broader meaning centres on: 'the problematic separation between a subject and object that belong together' resulting in 'social and psychological ills' (Leopold, 2022, n.p.). In the paper, we will show how migrant workers can become politically, culturally and socially estranged through migrant-specific alienation processes linked to their precarious low-wage work. This alienation occurs within and also beyond the workplace and through and also beyond direct managerial control (making it different to conventional Marxist definitions of alienation). The 'problematic separation' migrants encounter is also now often taken-for-granted in higher-income countries, even seen as natural, and the paper will seek to challenge this.

Our first proposition in exploring the link between labour mobility and labour power is that migrants moving from lower- to higher-income countries are particularly alienated. Alienation has, by Marxist scholars, been examined within workplace contexts and connected to managerial control. However, our use of alienation, in line with definition advanced above, extends the concept. The production and reproduction of good migrant workers is about a wider form of alienation that occurs within and beyond the workplace, and through and beyond managerial control (Burawoy, 1979). Put simply, capital has found that there are certain constraints that can now acceptably be imposed on migrants to alienate them yet further. The control and exploitation of labour, especially migrant labour, has thus become multi-scalar and multi-dimensional. Along these lines, Rainnie et al. (2010: 299) have argued that: 'understanding the labour process requires understanding that what occurs on the shopfloor is shaped by what goes on outside the factory or office gates'. This recognition is important from a sociological and geographical point of view and shows how the broader landscapes of global capitalism come into play in capital's search for good workers (see also Burawoy, 1979).

The second proposition in exploring the link between labour mobility and labour power is that, in understanding why migrants work as hard as they do, we also need to consider their specific insulation in the face of alienation. By this we mean that migrants' spatial (their dual frame of reference) and temporal (their liminal) agency appears to insulate them against some of the impacts of alienation in ways that are simply not possible for immobile workers. In this respect, work ethic is about more than just the control and exploitation of labour and ties into worker agency (see also Vidal, 2022).

In advancing the alienation–insulation dynamic, the paper draws on the empirical case of European horticulture. The sector has, over last few decades, become increasingly industrialised;

and we have seen the large-scale manufacturing alienation that Marx observed mirrored within the 'factories' in the fields. Temporary farm workers, traditionally recruited from the local workforce, but now increasingly international, have replaced family labour resulting in the proletarisation of farm work (Rye et al., 2018). Workers have, for example, very little control over the labour process and their worktime is highly regulated and monitored, most notably through the performance based piece-rate system of pay. Workers are also denied work, or not invited back the next season, if their performance falls below a carefully monitored level, with warning systems used to inform workers of their 'failings'. The speed of work is considerable, and workers are often locked in competition with others: either individually or within harvest teams. Moreover, the intensity of work has been increasing while precarity is endemic and many workers have an unclear relationship with their employer in the sense that they are supplied through labour market intermediaries (Rogaly, 2008). In numerous ways, then, the conventional Marxist definition of alienation applies particularly intensely to the horticultural sector.

Together with the very clear evidence of Marxist alienation there are particular migrant dimensions to alienation that are often located beyond the workplace and/ or beyond direct managerial control. Migrant alienation is manifest most obviously in having to leave family behind in the home country and having to live at the workplace. It is also often sanctioned, even facilitated, by state guestworker visa regimes that limit citizenship rights and entitlements. This migrant-specific alienation – whether about isolation from family, living at work, or restrictive visas – sits alongside Marxist alienation. The two are inter-related and driven by the same force: capital's obsession with labour power and the need to find 'good' workers even in the face of low wages and job insecurity.

In linking migration and alienation, we can see working-class differentiation: with migrants often particularly exposed to alienation, and also particularly insulated from this. This alienation–insulation dynamic helps us to understand why migrants are deemed by many low-wage employers to have a superior work ethic compared to the locally available immobile labour. It also shows us why higher-income countries target migrant labour not only to fill shortages (a quantity issue) but also to underpin efficiency and productivity needs (a quality issue).

Next, we will review the relevant literature around low-wage labour migration, before outlining the qualitative interview-based methods illustrating our arguments. The findings will then be profiled in two parts: focussing first on three types of migrant-specific alienation and then on migrant-specific insulation in a spatial and temporal sense. Finally, our conclusions will reflect on the alienation–insulation dynamic as a key element in understanding the relationship between labour power and labour mobility.

Literature Review

The literature review is organised around the themes of alienation and insulation. The focus on migrant-specific alienation helps us consider three main ways in which migrants may be alienated by virtue of both their international mobility and their precarious employment. The focus on migrant-specific insulation leads us to consider two forms of agency (spatial and temporal) migrants are able to demonstrate with respect to their highly alienated position and draws an important distinction, in this respect, between objective alienation (as ostensibly encountered) and subjective alienation (as actually felt) (see also Vidal, 2022).

Migrant Alienation

The link between alienation and work has been developed most within Karl Marx's 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts' of 1844, though it is also developed within Marx's later works (Øversveen, 2022). In terms of defining alienation, four main dimensions are commonly identified:

1. *Alienation from the product of labour*. Whereby workers tend to be engaged in a small fragment of the production process; with what is produced immediately becoming the possession of another; and workers often also not even being able to afford the product they are creating.
2. *Alienation from the labour process*. Whereby workers sell their labour but experience a lack of control over their time and the processes of production.
3. *Alienation from self*. Where the nurturing value of creative work is lost and where work even becomes damaging to a workers' physical health, psychological health or both.
4. *Alienation from others*. Where workers in the capitalist system are broken down into individuals locked in a competitive cycle and divided from each other, with limited opportunity for communality and collective endeavour.

Alienation as developed by Marx has ebbed and flowed in terms of academic interest over the years (Yuill, 2011). However, it is clear that alienation remains a central feature of capitalism as a key outcome of the wage relation.

International migration, especially of low-wage workers into precarious labour markets, brings added dimensions to alienation and takes us beyond the Marxist definition. Few scholars though have discussed alienation alongside the increasing presence of migrant workers (though see Bridi, 2022; Fu et al., 2018; Lindio-McGovern, 2004; Smith, 2019). There are three main ways in which migrant workers – to help capital achieve a strong low-wage work ethic – become particularly alienated.

First, migrants often have to move without their family in tow, with social reproduction effectively being 'offshored' (Jakobsen et al., 2023). This means that the costs of reproducing a workforce – unpaid care work, socialisation and maintaining relationships – are offloaded to the home. Feminist scholars have, in particular, focussed on the issue of migrants' families being left behind. Temporary migration of women from lower-income countries to provide care services to families in higher-income countries has become commonplace. The 'global care chains' (Hochschild, 2000) that emerge, where migrants provide paid care in host countries while balancing family care responsibilities back home, have now been widely researched. Through this literature, it is clear that the financial gains derived from migration must be balanced against family separation and a reliance on 'transnational intimacy' (Parreñas, 2005). Some scholars have even identified the separation from family through this form of migration, and the related need to live with the employer, as a key part of contemporary alienation (Fu et al., 2018; Lindio-McGovern, 2004).

In horticulture, the sector focussed on in this paper, McLaughlin et al. (2017) identify the adverse effects of male farm labour migration to Canada on the left-behind households in Mexico. For children, the absence of a father appears to have negative impacts on school performance, and children's health is negatively affected. For the women staying behind, the absence of their spouse involves an intensification both of household work and of wider family responsibilities (Rosales-Mendoza and Campos-Flores, 2019). Put simply, although low-wage labour migration may be economically necessary the family separation with which it has become associated carries a significant social and emotional cost. This cost is felt both by migrants and by the family left behind.

Second, as well as having to contend with family separation low-wage migrants are sometimes also compelled to live at their workplace. This is particularly the case in sectors like horticulture (Scott and Rye, 2023; Scott and Visser, 2022) and domestic work (Schwiter et al., 2018) and also common under mobility regimes like the kafala system in the Gulf States (Ngeh, 2022) and the dormitory manufacturing regimes in China (Ngai and Smith, 2007).

In terms of horticulture, Reid-Musson (2017) identifies how on Canadian farms workers are fixed onsite through the prevailing accommodation arrangements. These often emerge due to

restrictive guestworker visa regimes like that of the 'Seasonal Agricultural Worker Programme (SAWP)' in Canada (Bridi, 2022; Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017; Perry, 2018). Many have understandably been critical of the presence of accommodation tied to employment. Horgan and Liinamaa (2017), for instance, talk of 'social quarantine' when characterising the situation of migrant farm workers housed at the workplace.

The conflation of home and work may be economically beneficial to employers (they extend and intensify control over their workers) and migrants (they get relatively cheap, accessible and flexible housing) but it limits migrants' ability to establish an 'autonomous and dignified life' (Perry, 2018: 1021). In such contexts, any thoughts of integration into the wider community must be put to the back of migrants' minds: it is simply not possible to lead a 'normal' life when so embroiled within the world of work (Samuk, 2020; Scott and Visser, 2022). In various ways, then, the benevolence associated with employer provided accommodation can be critiqued.

Third, the state also plays a role in migrant alienation via the creation of guestworker visas and limited citizenship rights and entitlements for migrant workers. Guestworker visas schemes were once pronounced 'dead' in Europe (Castles, 1986: 775) but have since re-emerged (Castles, 2006) as a favoured mechanism for states to grant employers the 'right' kind of migrant workers. Anderson (2010: 312) talks of the state 'moulding' migrant workers:

> . . . as well as a tap regulating the flow of workers to a state, immigration controls might be more usefully conceived as a mould *constructing* certain types of workers through selection of legal entrants, the requiring and enforcing of certain types of employment relations, and the creation of institutionalised uncertainty.

Guestworker visas are particularly common in horticulture (for discussion in the United Kingdom, see Consterdine and Samuk, 2018; Scott, 2015, 2022) and they tend to have the interests of employers at the fore. That is not to say that migrants do not benefit from their guestworker migration, just that the visa regimes tend to restrict and constrain migrant workers' rights (Ruhs, 2013).

There are often, for example, restrictions upon residency in the host country; the visas are often tied to particular employers; there are restrictions on welfare entitlements; and exclusions from political participation. Moreover, guestworkers are rarely allowed to bring family with them under such schemes and the restrictions, if lifted at all, usually diminish only after years of service. No wonder, then, that Bridi (2022) has made a direct link between guestworker visas – in his case, Canada's SAWP – and migrant worker alienation (see also Smith, 2019).

These three migrant-specific alienation processes – family separation, living at work and restricted citizenship – are driven by capital's search (aided by the state) for low-wage work ethic and contribute to the estrangement of migrants (along political, cultural and social planes) from their species-essence. It is not a desired state for migrants to find themselves in: removed from family, distanced from community and with fewer rights and entitlements than non-migrants. Yet, because of the logic of capital accumulation, and the uneven geographies of global capitalism, this alienating situation for low-wage migrant workers prevails and humanity gets sacrificed for economic gain. The fact that this situation has become a taken-for-granted, even natural, situation is something this paper seeks to challenge.

Migrant Insulation

From the above, it should be clear that the alienation of the working class takes on a particular form when this working class is of migrant origin. What is also clear, however, is that migrants are able, through their agency, to partly insulate from their alienation. We are specifically interested here in

how low-wage migrants demonstrate agency in a spatial (through the 'dual frame of reference' concept) and a temporal (through the concept of 'liminality') sense.

The 'dual frame of reference' is now a widely used concept in migration (for a review see: Magaña Lopez and Rye, 2024). It relates to differences between sending and receiving countries (such as different standard/ cost of living, different labour market conditions, different wage rates, different house prices, etc.) and migrants' use of these differences to improve their circumstances. Migrants realise 'arbitrage' (Jakobsen et al., 2023; Potts, 2019) by exploiting the differences between home (lower-income) and host (higher-income) countries. For example, they send wages back home; they invest in property back home; and they access labour opportunities in the host country that would not be available in the home country. Wells et al. (2014) detail how, in Canada, horticultural migrants regularly send money home to Mexico to help their families meet basic needs, such as food, accommodation and health care. In our own research (discussed below), we find evidence not only of remittances to meet basic needs but also of investments in property as a result of migrants exploiting the economic gradients between home and host country.

In addition to spatial manifestations of agency, there are also time-based (temporal) dimensions to agency. Specifically, migrants often see their low-wage work, and the alienation that comes with it, as a 'liminal' in-between life/ work stage (Scott et al., 2022). It may be unclear to migrants how precarious employment is escaped, but many will nonetheless perform low-wage work with an eye on it being temporary. The social mobility journey migrants are on (or hope they are on) may involve them moving from seasonal to permanent work, it may involve exiting precarious work altogether, it may involve them returning to the home country to work, and/ or it may even revolve around migrants investing in their children's education and careers. As such, the migration project is – from the perspective of the migrant – motivated by plans, hopes or at the least dreams of social mobility (Rye, 2019).

Whether one looks at agency in a spatial or temporal sense, it is clear that the low-wage migrant work ethic is often ephemeral. Over time, there will be a tendency for migrant workers to assimilate and converge with the local population (Chiswick, 1978). Dawson et al. (2018), for instance, use quantitative evidence to show how the initially low absence rates among migrants normalise over time. Similarly, Baxter-Reid (2016: 348) talk about migrants being 'as good as they needed to be' in low-wage jobs just until they can progress upwards and outwards. Thus, willingness to work in low-wage occupations generally decreases as migrants become established and, commensurate with this, migrant work ethic diminishes (or normalises) over time (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Piore, 1979).

The migrant-specific alienation that occurs is associated with a strong low-wage work ethic partly because spatial and temporal forms of agency develop alongside. Capital is aware, in this respect, of the role of both the 'carrot and stick' in the production and reproduction of good migrants. One must consider alienation, then, together with insulation and the spatial and temporal agency strategies underpinning it. Without insulation, the alienation migrants experience is likely to eventually become too exhausting and counterproductive in the creation of low-wage work ethic.

Methods and Approach

The paper is based on a comparative international case-study of low-wage horticulture in South-Eastern Norway and Western England. We carried out 36 qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews (lasting 45–90 minutes) with migrant workers, employers and community stakeholders during 2018–2019. These 36 interviews include: 14 with migrant workers (six in Norway and eight in the United Kingdom); 10 with employers (five in Norway and five in the United Kingdom); and 12 with community stakeholders (seven in Norway and five in the United Kingdom). All of the

migrants we interviewed came from the Central and Eastern European 'accession' countries of 2004 (known as A8 countries) and 2008 (known as A2 countries). They had all moved as part of the 'freedom of movement' principle given the United Kingdom was then still part of the EU at the time (though not part of Schengen) and that Norway is party to the EEA (European Economic Area) agreement with the EU and also part of Schengen.

The approach to our horticultural research was what O'Reilly (2024) describes as 'iterative-inductive'. This means that we were iterating between being inductive and deductive; and though our approach was certainly more inductive overall, as qualitative research is, it did engage in deductive strategies especially as our project developed and matured. For example, by the time we came to write this paper (in 2023), we were engaging in what Bingham (2023) calls 'deductive coding' whereby many of our codes when re-analysing and re-coding our transcripts were developed a priori from our knowledge of the field and especially of the literature and theory.

It may be true then to characterise qualitative research as overall inductive, but the work of O'Reilly (2024), Bingham (2023) and others underlines the importance of not over-simplifying. The theories, concepts and preconceived ideas we inevitably carried with us on our research journey were held lightly (we were guided by them rather than fixed to them) to allow for openness and to let the research breathe. However, and especially later in the research project, when re-analysing and re-coding the interview transcripts for this paper, we oscillated between inductive and deductive positioning (and they informed and influenced each other). The way in which we use theory in this paper then is largely motivated by the empirical findings and our extensive experiences in the field – it is largely an inductive bottom-up approach to the alienation–insulation dynamic – but this is not to say that our approach was solely inductive.

Migrants' Alienation

Beyond the Marxist framing of alienation, we argue that migrant work ethic is underpinned by specific additional forms of alienation that take us outside the workplace and beyond conventional managerial control (Burawoy, 1979; Rainnie et al., 2010). We will now explore three aspects to migrant-specific alienation: transnational family arrangements, living at work and guestworker visas regimes. Together these underline, to paraphrase Max Frisch, capital's desire for workers more than people to perform precarious work.

Transnational Families

Most of the low-wage workers in European horticulture are migrants and most of these migrants are temporary rather than permanent: circulators rather than settlers. As one UK horticultural employer put it:

> It's not migration. Yeah, it's labour. They're coming in for six months and then . . . they're going. They're not coming in to settle in this country. They're coming in for a short period of time to do a job and then to leave. That's what we need (Beth, female, 30s, UK, employer).

When work is temporary, migrants will tend to leave close family back in the home country and in-person family life will get put on hold while at work. This 'offshoring' (Jakobsen et al., 2023) of social reproduction is understandable from a temporary worker perspective as it simply does not make sense to settle permanently in the host country while work is extremely precarious. Migrant alienation emerges through the loss of in situ close family, as illustrated by the following testimony from migrant workers in the United Kingdom and Norway:

> The bad thing is . . . The only thing is my parents are in Bulgaria. That's painful. I see them only one time a year. And the other is only good things here . . . The clock is moving. People are growing old, growing old and after two, three years you lose your family. And for that, for me it's important to see my family once a year (Anthony, male, 30s, UK, migrant worker, Bulgarian).

> [My wife] she has to stay at home and take care of the kids. And I have to earn for that. But my Norway life is [similar to] for the most of the peoples. They just come for earning, for work and money. And family it is the price for that . . . Now it is easier because of internet and technology, but when I started it was, we had to talk by the phone, and we would send letters and contact was not that good as now. But it is . . .I would say that that is the hardest part of that kind of life. To be away from the family and . . . (Gaspar, male, 30s, Norway, migrant worker, Polish).

> I have a young family. Young children so . . . everyday without them is . . . you know . . . its . . . it won't return, you know what I mean. And children get older and it won't return so . . . I do not know. Maybe the people who have older children or have adult children have other problems, I think so, but for me the most problematic is the separation with the family. And the good thing is . . . hmm . . . [silence]. . .good things . . . only the money. Nothing else (Gorski, male, 30s, Norway, migrant worker, Polish).

The sense of loss when migrants leave family behind was palpable. However, family separation was discussed alongside the financial gains from migration and the way in which family back home often benefitted from remittances. Alongside Gorski's mention of 'the good thing is. . . only the money', the following quote is illustrative:

> It's a decent amount of money which you are taking. But we're going to help the family back in Romania . . . . Like menial salary, average [monthly] salary back in Romania, it's like £300. And here they can earn, like, like £1,100 to £1,200? So it's quite a big difference, you know what I mean? But here, from some of the money which we are taking, we need to pay the rent, need to pay the food, and all this stuff. So it's going down and down, but still better than your country. So you can help back over there (Adam, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Romanian).

It seems then that what migrants lose socially and emotionally, through their distance from family, they compensate for financially and in this sense alienation is cushioned somewhat, something we will reflect on in more detail later in the paper.

Crucially, migrants' separation from family appears to suit employers as workers will be much more committed, at least over the short-term, towards the immediate requirements of the work. This need for workers rather than human beings was alluded to by one employer:

> So it's very difficult to work around families . . . This is growing. It hasn't got time for somebody to, pick the children up from school. The focus needs [to be on] picking there and then, and it's so time precious, we don't know from one day to the next what days the shifts are going to be. So with the guys working here, living here, they are a lot more flexible. They kind of give the hundred percent of their time and their life to the farm once they're here . . . Cause they haven't got their children, they've not got their family and the thing other than work to do . . . They haven't got that all, 'I've got to go tomorrow to go watch my daughter's play' or whatever that. So they are a hundred percent committed to the job (Beth, female, 30s, UK, employer).

In fact, many of the employers we spoke to who provided workers with onsite accommodation appeared to have rules preventing non-working family members from being present in the shared accommodation they provided. Essentially, it was prohibited to have children living on farms and unfeasible to have caring responsibilities onsite because of the working day. The result was that

only workers were housed within the tied accommodation. Similarly, many guestworker visas limit family migration with a focus very much on the wage-earner only. It seems, then, that it is capital first and foremost driving the separation of workers from their families and that while workers may benefit financially from migration there are significant social and emotional costs (e.g. McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Living at Work

The alienation of migrants can be about more than the physical, social and emotional separation from family left behind. It can also be about the separation from the wider host community migrants move into. Most horticultural workers, for example, live onsite at their place of work in shared accommodation tied to the employer. The picture painted by a UK employer was indicative, with around 90% of their workers living onsite: 'So today, we have roughly 300 harvest workers. So they all 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, male, 40s, UK, employer).

The onsite living arrangements do suit migrants: they are generally cheaper than living within the wider rural community; they do not involve the same bureaucratic hurdles (deposit, references, UK bank account, etc.) as private renting does; the workers are within walking distance of work and so do not need a car; and contracts are flexible and last only as long as the season. In addition, workers felt that the intensity of the working day meant that they had little time, inclination, or energy to be living/ socialising away from the workplace:

> Especially after eight, nine hours, which one you're working. You're not interested, just have shower, eat and sleep (Arthur, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Romanian).

> We stay on the farm. We just work, and sleep and rest. It is a simple life, but boring also. So we . . . yeah. It is hard to make relationships if we do not go anywhere and we have no time for that (Gaspar, male, 30s, Norway, migrant worker, Polish).

The result of living at work is that migrants' contact with the wider community is very limited, usually focussed only on a regular weekly grocery shop. As Beth (female, 30s, UK, employer) explained: 'they do their shopping, they get back on the bus and then they come back to the campsite'.

Within precarious horticultural work a minority of migrants appear to move away from the workplace and establish ties within the local community. We interviewed some of these and they reflected, very illuminatingly, on previously living at the workplace and the social alienation in this:

> Because, yeah, we bought the house and I got baby, because you're not allowed to have babies here. [so we] need to move out . . . But before when you were living with these people who you're working, you only talk about work nothing else. Only work, work, work, work . . . There is some permanent living here but mostly permanent move out because you need to have your private life, because here you sharing . . . There's no private. But here it's like you're private. Mostly permanent living off-site (Annie, female, 30s, UK, migrant worker, Lithuanian).

> A few years ago, I was living here on the site, but this year we, me and my wife, bought house here in *, so we live in house . . . When you are living in the city, it's different because you can go out to, even on the gym, swimming pool, cinema or whatever, or pub or restaurant. Here . . . it's just work and waiting for another day to go to the work, yeah (Abraham, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Polish).

> 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. So this is what pushed me to rent a house (Alistair, male, 30s, UK, migrant worker, Polish).

This reflection around the 'need to have your private life', getting away from 'just work and waiting for another day to go to the work' and living onsite as 'not like a life you would expect' all demonstrate the difficulties migrants face around balancing the financial gains of onsite living with the basic human need for privacy and a wider and autonomous social life. The alienation experienced by migrant workers who leave their family behind and live at their place of work is something that is difficult to bear for a prolonged length of time. This is why those who return season-after-season so often strive to secure permanent employment and move into the local community away from the workplace.

Guestworker Visa Regimes

Horticultural employers looking to fill temporary low-wage vacancies want workers adhering to the following logic and rhythm: 'They come, they pick, they go home' (Barbara, female, 40s, UK, employer). Increasingly, guestworker visas enable this type of migration to flourish, especially in a low-wage sector like horticulture. They are made up of, *inter alia*: restrictions upon residency in the host country; tying workers to particular employers; restrictions on welfare entitlements; and exclusions from political participation (Scott and Jakobsen, 2024). Thus, guestworker visas legitimise and enable a specific type of precarious worker devoid of family/ social commitments, moving on a temporary basis (a circulator rather than a settler) for as long as work is available, and tied to a particular employer both in terms of their job (and thus visa) and also in terms of their accommodation.

Increasingly, guestworker visas are being used across high-income countries to bring in low-wage workers, mainly from lower-income countries, on a temporary basis. They facilitate, indeed demand, a specific form of alienated labour (Bridi, 2022; Smith, 2019). This alienation is thus both a product of employers and governments: who together see migrants primarily as labour rather than as human beings with social needs and wants. Elsewhere, Scott (2022) has shown how, in UK horticulture, a guestworker visa regime has remerged in the United Kingdom following Brexit through the entanglement of employer and state interests. However, in Norway, the impact of guestworker visas is still more limited with a reliance on EU labour continuing under a 'freedom of movement' principle. While alienation makes economic sense for low-wage employers and for host states – this is why guestworker visas have become so popular for low-wage workers in higher-income economies – migrants may benefit economically too, but guestworker visas do carry a social and psychological cost. They also divide the working class, as guestworkers are set apart from local labour. For some, these trade-offs are defensible, for other, they are not (see Ruhs, 2013).

Taken together the three main forms of migrant alienation discussed above are associated, to different degrees, with 'the problematic separation between a subject and object that belong together' (Leopold, 2022). Specifically, migrant alienation is seen as having consequences along political, cultural and social planes (see Table 1). It comes at a cost and creates 'social and psychological ills' (Leopold, 2022), yet it is still largely accepted as a normal, even taken-for-granted,

Table 1. Migrant alienation and the main forms of estrangement.

	Political estrangement	Cultural estrangement	Social estrangement	
			Communal	Familial
Transnational family arrangements			✓	✓
Living at work		✓	✓	✓
Restrictive visas/citizenship	✓	✓	✓	✓

situation within higher-income societies. This is likely to be because alienation is both an outcome of the ubiquitous wage labour relationship and also because it is a key to understanding the link between labour mobility and labour power (see also Vidal, 2022). Overall, migrant alienation is clearly not analogous to Marxist alienation, though it is rooted in the capitalist wage labour process, and has distinct political, cultural and social consequences.

Migrants' Insulation

What is particularly interesting about the migrant-specific alienation profiled above is the distinction between alienation as an objective phenomenon (ostensibly encountered by workers) versus alienation as a subjective phenomenon (actually felt by workers) (see also Vidal, 2022). In this respect, we found evidence of migrants being well placed to use their agency to insulate against alienation. We argue, therefore, that it is not just the alienation of low-wage migrants that underpins migrant work ethic; it is also migrants' ability to insulate from this alienation. This insulation occurs in a spatial sense (through migrants having a dual frame of reference) and in a temporal sense (through migrants' liminality). We now discuss these two dimensions to migrant agency in the face of precarious work.

The Dual Frame of Reference

The impact of a spatially uneven and unequal global economy on migrant workers has been articulated particularly skilfully through the concept of the 'dual frame of reference' (Magaña Lopez and Rye, 2024). Through this concept, we see the ways in which low-wage migrants can use differences across space, especially unevenness and inequalities between home (lower-income) and host (higher-income) countries, to their benefit. Such 'arbitrage' (Jakobsen et al., 2023) has been widely profiled and certainly existed among those horticultural workers we researched. We encountered instances of workers remitting money home: to support families left behind; to invest in property and conspicuous consumption back home and to save for periods of rest and worklessness back home during the off-season.

As one of the migrant workers we spoke to summarised: 'most of the people are saving money for some of their targets in their countries. Small percentage actually saving the money here to start living or buy the house actually here' (Alistair, male, 30s, UK, migrant worker, Polish). Most obviously, migrants found the alienation they experienced manageable because of their ability to make their wages stretch further when remitted back, across an economic gradient, to their home country. The strategy was often about investment in property:

> Well, let's say the money I'm taking here for a week, I was taking there (in Bulgaria) for a month, so I prefer to stay here. Well here all the stuff is a lot more expensive, but even on the minimum, I can still save some money. In my country, if I'm on the minimum, I'm struggling hard . . . [Here] I'm spending money and I'm saving a bit and then when I go home I'm making some, I don't know, I have a house so I have to rebuild it a bit (Andy, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Bulgarian).

> I make a house, a brand-new house . . . Yeah. I move the money from UK to Romania, and do that (Arthur, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Romanian).

The employers we spoke to also emphasised how the work they provided, when considered within a transnational 'dual frame of reference', actually paid reasonably well:

> And that is all economics. You do not work where you do not consider the wages appropriate, that is something very understandable. If you earn well compared to your own country's incomes, then you do it . . . and the wages in Norway have been good compared to Poland (Harald, male, 40s, Norway, employer).

As part of this, they stressed how migrants approached horticultural work with a spatial outlook that prioritised the home country: 'Everything seems to be working here to get things done at home or to have opportunities at home' (Brian, male, 50s, UK, employer). The spatial outlook of migrants, with an emphasis on the home country, is part of the key to understanding how and why the alienation experienced does not have as negative an impact as one might expect. Put another way, spatial manifestations of agency create a distinction between objective (as ostensibly experienced) and subjective (as actually felt) alienation.

Liminality

Worker agency also manifests itself over time. Precarious horticultural work is tough and can make motivation difficult:

> It's a good beginning, a good start. But you need to be serious and motivate you because you're going to have a lot of moments where you're going to ask yourself, 'What the hell am I doing here?' Life in the farm, it's, it's hard. It's not what they are presenting on the . . . on the TV . . . everything's okay. There are a lot of things which they're not showing. Tough conditions, so you need to work. Mentally, you need to be prepared when you're going (Adam, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Romanian).

As Adam acknowledges, though 'it's a good beginning, a good start' rather than an end-point. This is a key acknowledgement. It underlines the fact that migrants tend to see temporary horticultural work as an initial stepping-stone in a longer-term albeit quite ambiguous life strategy. It is this temporal – 'liminal' (Scott et al., 2022) – framing of work that, alongside the dual frame of reference, helps to insulate migrants from the alienation faced.

Our sample of migrant workers erred towards those with extensive and long-term experience of horticultural employment, and it became clear that temporary work had become less appealing over time and less realistic for workers as they aged. In short, such work represented an in-between (liminal) stage in migrants' life and career. The migrants we spoke to reflected on their moves into more secure employment:

> I started on the field like a picker. After that, when I came here, I work on the asparagus three, four, five months, something like that. When the season finish, you start again picking strawberries and I take decision, because one rainy day, it's cold and nobody gave us break to stop rain, we couldn't work like that in this weather. And I think I need to change my job and I change [to team leader] (Anthony, male, 30s, UK, migrant worker, Bulgarian).

> I came here 2002, it was first time. Four seasons. We work three months. Four years. Three months each year . . . 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 [then] eight months and last six years I am here full year (Gabriel, male, 50s, Norway, migrant worker, Lithuanian).

One of the workers actually emphasised the importance of this shift as underpinning 'a normal and decent life':

> Well, it's about stability first of all. You know that you have like certain incomes, your life is secure so you are not worry about how many hours you are going to work next week. It's okay. I mean you can have like a normal and decent life (Adam, male, 20s, UK, migrant worker, Romanian).

In other words, migrant workers recognise that their engagement in precarious work involves considerable alienation and, it is hoped, this is only a temporary liminal phase.

Employers also recognised the journey their workers were on, or expected to be on:

> So you know, they are here for two or three years and then they might move on to other things. So we, we move. We expect to get new people (Bobby, male, 50s, UK, employer).

> I mean this whole farm used to be just Polish. We predominantly, I mean I'd say it was for my understanding of it, it was something like 80% was Polish. I think now we've got I think eight. We've had eight Polish people in the season. And so they are following exactly in that steps. They are going into the sectors, they're setting up families, they're going home. They don't want to work in agriculture (Beth, female, 30s, UK, employer).

Thus, there was a sense among workers and employers that precarious work was unsustainable over the medium to long-term. Employers picked up on the impacts of this through a 'revolving-door' form of employment and the associated need to continually find fresh sources of labour to maintain the low-wage migrant work ethic.

The above underlines the point that, as well as having spatial agency (through a dual frame of reference), low-wage migrants also have temporal agency (through their liminality) while engaged in precarious work. Together, and the two are clearly intertwined, the above helps us to appreciate the difference between alienation as objectively experienced versus alienation as subjectively felt by migrants. They also point to a differentiated working class according to whether, and where, one moves to find low-wage work. Most obviously, migrants from lower-income countries may be particularly exposed to alienation when they find work in higher-income countries; but they are also likely to be insulated from the impacts of this alienation through migrant-specific spatial and temporal agency. Thus, in trying to understand the relationship between labour power and labour mobility, and the resultant migrant work ethic, it is important to consider an alienation–insulation dynamic.

Conclusion

How labour mobility helps capital to better activate and realise labour power is an extremely important though complex question. We have sought to partially answer this question in this journal already via a mobility-immobility dynamic (Scott and Rye, 2023) and this paper adds a further dimension to our answer. Alienation has not, to date, been considered with an internationally mobile working class at its centre. The paper has addressed this gap and has argued

that low-wage migrants experience three particular forms of alienation, associated with: transnational family arrangements, living at work and the operation of restrictive guestworker visa regimes. These lead to political, cultural and social estrangement (Table 1). However, it is not sufficient simply to conclude that migrants are uniquely alienated. Instead, migrants' spatial (dual frame of reference) and temporal (liminal) agency means that they are also somewhat insulated from the alienation that occurs. One must, therefore, distinguish between alienation, as an objective feature, versus alienation as subjectively felt by workers. Moreover, insulation is to some extent a double-edged sword. On one hand, it works to disguise the effects of alienation in contemporary capitalist production. On the other hand, it also offers a real and tangible benefit to migrants in otherwise highly restrictive and constrained precarious labour markets.

Through the alienation–insulation dynamic we also see that the migrant and local immobile working classes become differentiated. This situation appears to serve the interests of capital first and foremost. It makes economic sense – manifest in the much-heralded migrant work ethic – for employers to move low-wage workers over considerable distances and economic gradients; not only does this facilitate greater alienation, but also it produces workers who are better placed to survive, and even work hard within, such alienating environments by virtue of their agency. Insulation – evidenced in the dual frame of reference and liminality concepts – is not only beneficial to migrant workers for sure, but it is also a boon to employers and helps to explain why low-wage migrants have been so coveted within higher-income countries of late.

Overall, then, this paper has sought to unveil the labour process by examining the ways in which labour mobility can underpin labour power. Alongside our discussion of the mobility-immobility dynamic (Scott and Rye, 2023) in this journal, the above articulation of the alienation–insulation dynamic is a key additional step towards understanding and explaining why migrant workers work as hard as they do, even in the context of precarity and low wages. The next task is to further explore the complex relationship between labour mobility and labour power and to critically examine employers' search for, construction of and reliance upon, the migrant work ethic. In addition, it is also important to continue challenging the normalisation of workers' alienation and to do so from within and beyond a Marxist standpoint.

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