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"Informalisation in Low-Wage Labour Markets: A Case-Study of the UK Food Industry"

Abstract

Informalization is a process that involves the lowering of the floor for pay and working conditions, sometimes legally and sometimes illegally, and it may occur in both formal and informal labour market settings. This paper examines what informalization looks like in practice in the UK context. Drawing on the experiences of 62 low-wage migrant workers, employed in the UK food industry, the paper identifies five facets of 'informalization', namely: job insecurity, work intensification, worker expendability, worker subordination and employment intermediation. The identification of these five facets of informalization is important in its own right. In addition, the UK case study also serves to emphasise the fact that the degradation of work is not something that is simply confined to the margins but is evident in the mainstream (beyond irregular workers and beyond the informal economy).

Key Words: Exploitation, Informalisaion, Labour, Low-wage, Migration, Worker

Introduction

Whilst there was never a golden age of employment (Sennett, 1998; Uchitelle, 2006) it is clear from the literature that, post 1970s, changes have taken place that have put even those workers in the formal economy in ever-more precarious positions (Sassen, 1991: CH9; Standing, 2011; Theodore, 2016). It is against this post-Fordist and neo-liberal backdrop of employment degradation that the motivation for this paper first emerged.

An important term in this respect is 'informalization'. 'Informalization' has been used in the US and European literature but with varied meanings outlined or implied (DeFilippis et al., 2009; Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013; Sassen, 1997, 1998; Slavnic, 2010; Theodore, 2007; Visser, 2016). Sassen (1997, 1998: CH8), for instance, is one of the early users but tends to relate it to employment within the informal economy. Some scholars, however, have applied the term more loosely to cover a broader downgrading of employment conditions, irrespective of whether occurring within the formal or

informal economy. It is this latter use I adopt, following the work of Zoran Slavnic in particular (Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013; Slavnic, 2010).

Thus, whilst informalization often involves the expansion of informal economic activity, it can also be used to refer to the loosening of regulatory regimes and associated downgrading of pay and conditions, within the formal economy, such that the boundary between formal and informal work becomes increasingly blurred. Visser (2016: 5), for instance, develops this point by advocating a "continuum of informality" encompassing both the informal and formal economies, that she stresses are certainly not separate spheres. Informalization, can, therefore, be an economy-wide process affecting all forms of work and so is distinct from the study of the informal economy *per se*. This distinction effectively means that the paper moves away from a relational and outcome-based definition of informality, premised upon where and how states draw the moral-legal line between the formal and the informal economy, to a process orientated definition whereby informalization, regardless of where it occurs, is the social problem and the object of analysis.

Key within this process orientated approach is the idea that informalization involves a shift in power from labour to capital and that, in the process, state regulatory oversight with respect to work and employment has weakened (though the neo-liberal state may well seek to impression-manage this weakening). As Sassen (2000: 5) has observed, the post-war period up until the early 1970s saw unprecedented incorporation of workers into formal labour markets in advanced economies. Following this regulatory peak, however, there has been "a decline in a broader institutional framework that shaped the employment relation" (Sassen, 2000: 5). In other words, many workers have become less sheltered and more exposed to the 'free' market since the 1970s (Sassen, 1997; Theodore, 2016). This applies most obviously to low-wage labour but it also applies to the increasingly squeezed middle-classes (Sassen, 1991: CH9).

In the paper that follows, three main arguments are advanced: 1) Informalization is a process that occurs across the economy, both in formal and in informal labour markets (that should not be viewed as mutually exclusive); 2) Informalization affects workers in different ways, though it is possible to identify key facets to the phenomenon; 3) Informalization within the mainstream formal economy is, by definition, veiled and

often even legitimized. These arguments are developed through both a review of the extant literature and via the analysis of in-depth interview evidence from 62 low-wage migrant workers employed within the UK food industry. The evidence was collected as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) funded research project entitled 'Experiences of Forced Labour in the UK Food Industry' (Scott *et al*., 2012). The majority of the migrant interviewees were working in the UK legally and within the formal economy.

Informalization

Informalization is being driven by what might be described as 'post-Fordist' and 'neo-liberal' restructuring (Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013; Sassen, 1997, 2000; Slavnic, 2010; Theodore, 2007, 2016; Visser, 2016). Broadly, this involves the fragmentation (though not democratization) of capital such that employment types and employment norms shift. Central in this respect is the move away from secure and stable employment within firms and often towards outsourced and sub-contracted forms of employment in small or micro enterprises. In terms of sub-contracting, a close relationship has been noted between this particular economic strategy and labour exploitation, especially of migrants (Allain *et al*., 2013; Le Baron, 2014; Wills, 2009). There is also a more general and associated connection made in the literature between rising labour market flexibility and growing levels of low-wage immigration (Castles and Kosack, 2010; Ruhs, 2006).

Corresponding with the economic restructuring there has been the related erosion of welfare state provision with respect to the unemployed and an associated problematisation of those outside of employment. The state, in response to the Fordist crisis, has been following a neo-liberal path and: "abandoning its traditional role as decommodifying agent and replacing it with the role of the commodifying agent" (Slavnic, 2010: 6, 11). This means that both workers and would-be workers are more exposed to the downward competitive pressures of the market. This exposure has been in response to growing labour market precarity and the need to ensure that welfare benefits do not become relatively more attractive as employment conditions and experiences deteriorate (Standing, 2011: 45).

Post-Fordist economic restructuring, and the neo-liberal ideology underpinning it, has clearly impacted upon the nature and norms of employment within the formal labour markets of advanced capitalist economies. Beck, for instance, (2000: 1) talks of the "Brazilianization of the west" and identifies a change in employment associated with a redistribution of risk away from the state and economic actors towards the individual worker in general (see also Supiot, 2001). Similarly, Wills *et al*. (2010: 3) observe how in the UK over the course of the 1980s: "millions of workers were being disciplined through exposure to the pressures of competition" and note a commensurate decline in organised labour. Thus, capital found new ways, via post-Fordist and neo-liberal paradigms, to control workers following the crisis-ridden 1970s. These control strategies have affected the lives of all but the most privileged workers. Nonetheless, certain segments of the labour market have been more affected than others.

Despite the trends being broad, much of the early informalization literature focused on polarization (Sassen, 1991, 1997, 2000) and the idea that there is "an expanding high-profit professional economy at the top and an expanding low-profit informal economy at the bottom" (Sassen, 1997: 20). In the US, for example, there is a body of literature looking at irregular migrant labour in the informal day-labour economy (Theodore, 2007; Visser, 2016). However, the outcomes of state and capital neo-liberal restructuring are not just concentrated within the informal economy or amongst an expanding informal economy; they may also be changing the very nature of 'normal' and 'acceptable' work within the mainstream so-called formal economy of the developed world (Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013; Slavnic, 2010).

This recognition is particularly important in contexts where the size of the informal economy and the scale of irregular immigration is relatively limited. Thus, whilst it has been estimated that the majority (1.8 billion) of the world's 3 billion workers are employed within the informal economy (Jütting and Laiglesia, 2009) and that the informal economy is growing even in developed countries (Portes *et al*., 1989; Schneider *et al*., 2010), in most advanced economies the scale of informal economic activity is relatively limited (Samers, 2005a, 2005b). In the UK, for example, the shadow economy constitutes only around 10 per cent of GDP (Schneider and Williams, 2013). The crucial question, then, is less about informal economic activity *per se*, as

an outcome, and more about informalization as a process: that may occur anywhere in the labour market and often blurs the boundary between formal and informal work.

Informalization and Low-Wage Labour Migration

Labour market segmentation is a concept that can help one to understand the link between informalization and immigration. Most famously, Piore (1979) produced the classic 'Birds of Passage'. This seminal text argued that jobs were increasingly divided between primary and secondary forms of employment and between stable and flexible labour markets respectively. Known as the 'dual labour market' thesis Piore argued that secondary labour markets were where the risks of the capitalist system were transferred onto (migrant) labour via low-paying and insecure forms of employment. In contrast, the primary sector is characterized by secure employment and favourable pay and working conditions (see also: Cohen, 1987; Goos and Manning, 2007; Standing, 2011; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).

Labour market segmentation of this kind helps us to understand how macro-economic restructuring translates into labour market outcomes and how capital maintains its hold over labour, and its profitability, even in the face of apparent crisis. Moreover, the theory is directly relevant for understanding informalization given that secondary forms of employment blur the boundary between formal and informal work. As Piore (1979: 39) remarks: "the secondary sector constitutes a means of evasion: a sector of the labour market that is not subject to restrictions on layoff and discharge to which the unstable portion of demand can be transferred".

Interestingly, migrants are often favoured by employers for filling secondary labour market vacancies (Scott, 2013a; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003) and it is clear that post-Fordist restructuring "seeks to expand the supply of cheap labour" (Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013: 678) in whatever way possible. As Piore (1979: 39) notes: "the institutional distinctions that permit escape from job-security arrangements closely parallel the distinctions between the jobs of migrants and the jobs of natives". An early example of this turn towards low-wage migrant labour is documented by Castles and Kosak (1973). They studied the mass post-war migration to countries like France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK and argued that the need by employers (and the state) to recruit

workers into low paying jobs with relatively poor working conditions was key (for a more recent study, see Wills *et al*., 2010).

The use of migrant workers to fill secondary labour market vacancies can be understood more clearly through the lens of David Harvey's 'spatial fix' (Harvey 1981, 1982, 2001, 2003). This emphasizes the crisis prone nature of capitalism and argues that in order to maintain or expand profitability capital must engage in constant geographical exploration. Crucial to this is the search by capital in core economies for opportunities to exploit in peripheral economies. The spatial fix, then, involves "some form of geographical expansion" (Harvey 2001: 300). According to Harvey, this expansion may involve both *ex situ* (finding new markets and production sites) and *in situ* solutions (importing and/ or improving labour).

The *in situ* 'spatial fix' solution tends to involve capital making gains from labour by recruiting across a periphery-core economic gradient. Very simply, under intense competitive pressure, suitable native labour becomes too expensive for employers and so they therefore look to recruit abroad, from more peripheral economies, for certain tasks. It is in the secondary segments of the labour market where the need for an *in situ* spatial fix is pronounced (Scott, 2013b). Indeed, it is the very operation of this spatial fix that helps to produce and reproduce secondary forms of employment.

In summary, one can understand informalization through reference to macro-economic shifts and, in particular, the move towards post-Fordism and the associated neo-liberal ideology. Beyond this, Piore's (1979) dual labour market thesis helps one to understand the links between certain types of (secondary) employment and mass immigration, whilst Harvey's concept of the 'spatial fix' establishes the economic rationale underpinning low-wage migration and its periphery to core geography.

The UK Policy Context

In many countries, migrant workers are rendered vulnerable by virtue of either their location within the informal economy and/ or by the fact that their status is irregular. The UK, however, has sought to limit both the size of the informal economy and the scale of irregular immigration. Through a 'managed migration' paradigm (Scott, 2016) it is clear that the government has sought to enable certain forms of labour migration,

on the one hand, whilst clamping down on illegitimate economic activities and irregular migration on the other. The policy of managed migration has in the event been expansionist (Freeman, 1995) and market-led (Favell and Hansen, 2002).

Most obviously, the numbers of working-age foreign-born residents in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to 6.6 million in 2014. Over the same period, the share of foreign-born people in total employment in the UK rose from 7.2% to 16.7% (Rienzo, 2015). Alongside this dramatic rise in the number of foreign-born workers, it is estimated that 2 million (16%) of the 13 million low-skilled jobs in the UK are now held by migrants, with 60% coming from outside and 40% from inside the EU (MAC, 2014: 2).

At the same time as low-wage migrant workers have entered the UK legitimately, there has been heightened regulation to prevent informal economic activity and irregular immigration. Since 1996, for instance, it has been possible to prosecute UK employers for hiring irregular immigrants. These sanctions were strengthened in 2004 and again in 2008. The result of this so-called 'civil penalties' regime is that employers now: face up to a £10,000 fine per illegal worker; face the possibility of up to two-years imprisonment; and have their details made public if found guilty. The 2008 legislation was a particular watershed in terms of the level of government enforcement activity. Following this legislation, the number of immigration workplace enforcement staff rose dramatically (from 564 in the early 2000s to 7,500 by 2011) and employer prosecutions also grew sharply (from 37 between 1997 and 2006 to 3,709 between 2008 and 2010) (IPPR, 2011: 4, 87). The 2008 legislation is part of a wider and ongoing policy to create a "hostile environment" for irregular immigrants and those who employ them (IPPR, 2011: 11).

The UK, then, is characterized by strong state intervention to maintain formal labour markets and to regulate immigration. At the same time, however, and somewhat paradoxically, mass labour migration has been allowed. Thus, the state has appeared tough, whilst also serving the interests of neo-liberal capital by increasing the supply of available labour, usually from more peripheral economies. This approach is a classic example of the way in which economic pressures for labour market flexibility have been accommodated by the state via formal means. Moreover, it demonstrates why it

is important to examine informalization as a process rather than to simply look at informal economic activity *per se*.

It is clear from the above that the UK state has acted as a broker between labour and capital. Concessions have been made to capital, via rising immigration and an underpinning informalization of employment, but the state has sought to 'impression manage' this by acting tough and preventing, as far as possible, informal economic activity and irregular immigration; trends that would be viewed by many as evidence of there being a social problem. State resources, in line with this argument, have been directed towards border enforcement rather than towards the maintenance or improvement of working conditions. Moreover, they have been directed towards border enforcement at a time of record legal immigration. Illustrative of this, the National Minimum Wage inspection team (based at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) had 93 compliance officers in 2009 and the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (regulating labour market intermediaries in the food production industry only) had only 25 inspectors. In contrast, the number of UKBA (UK Border Agency) staff for the same period was put at around 7,500 (Anderson, 2010: 307).

UK Food Industry Case Study

Low-wage labour migrants in the UK food industry have certainly largely been seen as 'good workers' by their employers (Findlay *et al*., 2013; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Scott, 2013a; Thompson *et al*., 2013). However, the UK government's own 'Migration Advisory Committee' has also noted the following issues with this migrant stereotype:

> "It may be that it is the UK's flexible labour market combined with the low level of enforcement activities that have contributed to the increased employment of migrants in low-skilled jobs" (MAC, 2014: 179) … "We were struck on our visits around the country by the amount of concern that was expressed by virtually everyone we spoke to about the exploitation of migrants in low-skilled jobs" (MAC, 2014: 168).

Alongside this general concern around migrant worker exploitation, academics have argued that pay and working conditions may actually be worsening in the UK food industry (Brass, 2004; Champlin and Hake, 2006; Geddes and Scott, 2010; James and Lloyd, 2008; Rogaly, 2008). Against this backdrop of 'good' low-wage migrant workers and tendencies towards worsening employment relations, I decided to research

the experiences of migrants who were exploited whilst working in the UK food industry.

In total, 62 migrants were interviewed and Table 1 outlines the nationalities covered by the sampling strategy and the areas of the UK where interviewees lived and worked (see also Scott *et al*., 2012). Table 2 outlines the key socio-demographic characteristics of each of the 62 workers interviewed. Overall, the average age of the sample was 40 years, with 35 male and 27 female interviewees. Most were educated up to upper secondary level (36), though a significant number had a Bachelors or Masters degree (23). In terms of English ability, 40 interviewees admitted to having 'weak' or 'very weak' English and 22 had 'good' or 'very good' English. The average number of dependents was 1.1 with 33 of the 62 interviewees having dependents either in the UK or overseas. The average length of time spent in the UK was 5.2 years and most of the sample (45 of 62) were either 'A8' (the 8 continental European countries that joined the EU in 2004: Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic) or 'A2' (the 2 countries that joined the EU in 2007: Romania and Bulgaria) nationals. The average number of jobs done by migrants whilst in the UK was 3.9 and 36 of the 62 interviewees were in accommodation that was tied to their employment at the time of being interviewed.

In order to access the 62 migrant workers a network of 11 'peer' or 'community' researchers were employed (Edwards and Alexander, 2011; Ryan *et al*., 2011). The benefits of the peer/ community researcher methodology were clear: interviewers could be recruited with different language skills; in different areas of the UK; and, having a number of interviewers also reduced the risk of non-response by opening up a wider range of migrant networks to recruit through. The methodology did have some issues (see Scott and Geddes, 2015) but ultimately it allowed a particular hard-to-reach group of low-wage migrant workers to be sampled and met the aim of uncovering evidence of exploitation across the UK food industry, from field to fork.

The sample of 62 migrant workers was purposefully selective in the sense that the main aim in recruitment was to capture those individuals who, according to a set list of criteria, had in some way been exploited. 'Exploitation' was determined according to 19 indicators drawn up by the author using International Labour Organisation (ILO)

forced labour guidance (see Scott *et al*., 2012). If peer researchers identified migrants who had experienced any of these 19 indicators then they were advised to explore the feasibility of an interview: aware, of course, that potential respondents are unlikely to disclose the full extent of their exploitation in casual conversation prior to an interview.

Given the selectivity of the sample it is difficult to say how extensive or representative the evidence of informalization uncovered through the research actually is. This is a common feature, however, of qualitative research of this nature. What can be said is that the five facets of informalization uncovered are illustrative of an employment context that, for workers in the UK food industry, has already been well documented (Brass, 2004; Champlin and Hake, 2006; Findlay *et al*., 2013; James and Lloyd, 2008; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Rogaly, 2008; Scott, 2013a; Thompson *et al*., 2013). Finally, it is worth noting that the five facets of informalization emerged from the data rather than being imposed *a priori*. They represent the negative and retrograde features of employment as experienced by actual workers, most of whom were regular migrants employed within the formal UK economy.

Table 1: Case-Study Areas

Area	**No.**	**Nationalities**
South-West England	19	Romanian – 3 Polish – 9 Chinese – 7
Lincolnshire	22	Latvian – 8 Polish – 6 Lithuanian – 6 Estonian – 1 Belarusian – 1
East-Central Scotland	12	Polish – 8 Bulgarian – 3 Slovakian – 1
London	5	Chinese – 5
Liverpool	4	Ghanaian – 2

		Congolese – 1 Nigerian – 1
TOTAL	62	

Table 2: Summary statistics for 62 interviewees

No.	Age	Gender	Nationality	Education	English Ability	Dependents	Years in UK	Legal Status	No. Jobs in UK	Tied Accom.
1	41	M	Ghanaian	Bachelor	Good	2	6	Unknown	2	N
2	36	F	Congolese	Upper Secondary	Good	4	16	Unknown	4	N
3	29	M	Romanian	Primary	V.Weak	10	3	A2	3	N
4	24	F	Bulgarian	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	6	A2	2	N
5	32	F	Polish	Bachelor	Weak	1	2	A8	2	N
6	44	F	Polish	Bachelor	Good	2	2	A8	2	N
7	25	M	Romanian	Upper Secondary	V.Good	0	2	A2	4	N
8	31	F	Polish	Bachelor	V.Good	1	8	A8	3	Y
9	34	F	Chinese	Master	Good	0	10	Semi-compliant	6	Y
10	50	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	2	8	Irregular	9	Y
11	46	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	1	7	Semi-compliant	8	Y
12	42	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	10	Semi-compliant	7	Y
13	42	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	2	6	Semi-compliant	8	Y
14	61	M	Ghanaian	Primary	Good	2	20	Work Permit	3	N
15	57	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	4	A8	2	N
16	45	F	Polish	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	3	4	A8	3	N
17	45	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	3	5	A8	3	Y
18	43	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	Weak	3	7	Work Permit	4	Y
19	43	F	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	3	3	Work Permit	1	Y
20	40	F	Chinese	Lower Secondary	V.Weak	3	3	Work Permit	2	Y
21	44	M	Chinese-British	Lower Secondary	Weak	2	8	Work Permit	6	Y
22	43	F	Chinese	Upper Secondary	Weak	1	2	Work Permit	1	Y
23	30	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	2	Work Permit	1	Y
24	54	M	Chinese	Upper Secondary	Weak	2	7	Work Permit	2	Y
25	58	F	Polish	Bachelor	V.Weak	1	5	A8	5	Y
26	30	F	Romanian	Bachelor	V.Good	3	12	Irregular then A2	8	N
27	21	F	Bulgarian	Bachelor	V.Weak	0	3m	A2	1	Y
28	27	F	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	0	1	A8	1	N
29	30	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Weak	2	4	A8	6	Y
30	40	M	Nigerian	Master	Good	0	5	Student	1	N
31	25	M	Bulgarian	Bachelor	V.Weak	0	1	A2	1	Y
32	53	F	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	2	1	A8	3	N
33	26	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	1	3	A8	8	N

34	39	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	0	5	A8	5	N
35	34	M	Polish	Bachelor	Good	1	6	A8	15	N
36	26	F	Polish	Bachelor	V.Good	0	1	A8	3	N
37	27	M	Slovak	Upper Secondary	Good	0	7	A8	3	Y
38	54	M	Polish	Master	Weak	0	2	A8	4	N
39	45	F	Polish	Bachelor	Good	1	4	A8	5	N
40	50	M	Polish	Bachelor	Good	1	5	A8	3	Y
41	27	M	Lithuanian	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	6	A8	5	Y
42	56	F	Latvian	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	7	A8	2	Y
43	38	M	Latvian	Upper Secondary	Good	1	5	A8	8	Y
44	41	M	Lithuanian	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	6	A8	2	Y
45	50	F	Lithuanian	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	6	A8	3	Y
46	61	F	Estonian	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	6	A8	3	Y
47	37	F	Lithuanian	Bachelor	Weak	1	4	A8	1	Y
48	24	F	Lithuanian	Bachelor	V.Weak	1	2	A8	2	N
49	38	F	Lithuanian	Upper Secondary	Weak	2	2	A8	2	Y
50	32	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	2	A8	3	Y
51	54	F	Latvian	Bachelor	V.Weak	0	4	A8	4	Y
52	31	M	Belarussian	Bachelor	Weak	0	6	Work Permit then irregular	3	Y
53	25	M	Latvian	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	4	A8		Y
54	60	F	Latvian	Bachelor	V.Weak	0	5	A8	3	Y
55	59	F	Latvian	Upper Secondary	V.Weak	0	6	A8	2	Y
56	42	F	Latvian	Master	Weak	2	3	A8	2	Y
57	27	M	Latvian	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	6	A8	3	Y
58	44	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	9	Irregular then A8	10	N
59	56	M	Polish	Bachelor	V.Weak	3	3	A8	5	N
60	37	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Weak	0	4	A8	9	N
61	34	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	Good	0	5	A8	7	N
62	33	M	Polish	Upper Secondary	V.Good	2	9	Irregular then A8	4	N

Mapping and Mainstreaming Informalization

Informalization within the so-called formal economy is the adoption by employers, or their agents, of negative and retrograde employment characteristics and practices. It is a process that makes work (pay and conditions) less desirable over time and moves formal labour markets closer to the informal economy, often though without actually crossing the moral or legal definitional line. The paper will now present and examine the five facets of informalization that emerged from the empirical research outlined

above. These five facets to informalization are: job insecurity, work intensification, worker expendability, worker subordination and employment intermediation.

Job Insecurity

Insecurity was an enduring feature of low-wage migrant employment in the UK food industry. Migrants were often waiting anxiously for work and living from one pay slip to the next without any income (or indeed wider ontological) security. Clearly, employers, and their agents, had succeeded in transferring the vicissitudes of the market onto a sub-section of their employees: conforming to the model of segmented labour markets (Piore, 1979) whereby insecure secondary employment acts as the buffer between more secure primary employment, on the one hand, and the fluctuations of product supply and consumer demand (that are particularly acute in the food industry) on the other.

The main feature of this insecurity was that formal hour-wage employment relationships did not exist for many migrants, who instead were forced to exist in a precarious 'on call' situation. Under such circumstances time outside of paid employment was effectively time waiting for paid employment, thereby eroding the boundary between work and leisure time and public and private life.

One interviewee likened this 'on call' status to that of prostitution: "Workers every evening are waiting for a phone call or a message from the agency. They are dependent on the phone call...like a prostitute...like a prostitute…I call it that way" (Male, 31y, Belarussian). Many more simply lamented the way in which their employment insecurity precluded planning their personal lives:

> "We are finding out if we are working or not, only a night before. Sometimes if opposite your name is written 'stand by' you know that you have to be ready to go to work from 7:00am until 11:00am and you are not allowed to leave your room, just in case they call you for work." (Female, 37y, Lithuanian)
>
> "You cannot organise your private life because every day you have to be ready to work and you never know if you are going to work." (Male, 56y, Polish)

Such job insecurity is a classic feature of the post-Fordist economy and, in particular, stems from the just-in-time production systems so characteristic of the food industry. It is, then, a particular type of economic structure that creates a demand for a particular

type of labour. Where possible, local labour avoids this chronic insecurity: choosing instead more secure forms of employment, or in some case actually opting for residual welfare payments.

The imbalance between labour and capital in the food industry's secondary labour markets was further underlined by the initial promise of work being regularly reneged upon. Thus, many we spoke to had experiences of turning up to work only to be told that their employment had been cancelled or that they would have to wait on site until orders picked up. It was very clear from the interviews that the demand for flexibility in terms of production was directly contributing to extreme job insecurity:

> "They told to that Lithuanian person to organise 20 people for the morning shift and when they arrived and were standing outside that big gate they were told that they can go home because there is no work!" (Female, 44y, Polish)
>
> "In factory A you can come to work, work for 15min and then they tell you 'Thank you, you can go home'. In B factory, even better, you come to work, you sit in the canteen for 1 or 2 hours and wait. Finally they ask you to go to work. You sign in, work for 15min and then they tell you 'Thank you and see you tomorrow'…Usually they send home the newcomers, people they never seen before. Their reason always is the same 'small orders today'. Sometimes I don't understand it. If you have little orders today, why does factory request the workers from agency?" (Female, 38y, Lithuanian)

The insecurity of being 'on call', or of even being asked to turn up to work only to be told there was no work, is reminiscent of employment relations in the cash economy and, in particular, of day labourers (often in construction) waiting on curb sides to be hired. The fact that such informality permeates ostensibly legitimate businesses, usually via their use of labour market intermediaries, is significant. It is also important to recognise that migrants are particularly susceptible to this employment insecurity when their entitlement to welfare is limited and they have no alternative means of subsistence.

Work Intensification

Work intensification has been observed within the UK food industry (Rogaly, 2008) and the interview data collected broadly supported this thesis. More specifically, it was

clear that the pay and conditions on offer to low-wage migrant workers were either deteriorating *per se* (absolute intensification) or were becoming poorer relative to other sector of the economy (relative intensification).

The most obvious marker of workplace intensification was the use of piece-rate and/ or production-line speeds. In terms of the former, it was common in the field and pack-house to be paid according to unit output. This incentivises speed within the system and leaves little breathing space for worker. Piece-rates potentially offer pay above the minimum wage, but in reality they are used to increase productivity for those at or around the minimum wage threshold. The following sentiments and experiences are indicative:

> "They paid per box. We were paid per box...two pounds or something like that. So if we didn't pick enough boxes then we didn't earn. We didn't even earn enough to pay for an accommodation. As I said, the Romanians were there. There were only five Poles. The Romanians took possession of the farm. And unfortunately they were giving us the worst...so I couldn't pick the strawberries where I wanted. So I couldn't pick enough boxes and then I earned only £10. In the conditions there was mud up to knees. And after all day at work only £10. It was a swindle because they claimed that it was going to be work paid per hour. On the farm, they told us later that it was piece-work and that we were paid per box." (Female, 53y, Polish)

> "We worked on piecework. We were picking strawberries and raspberries. I was working as fast as I could, but I still was not able to earn even minimum wage. Sometimes we did not have many strawberries, but we still had to pick what was there and earned very little." (Female, 42y, Latvian)

In addition to piece-rate targets being used to intensify production, those working on production lines also felt the pace of work to be unnaturally high and that they were subject to excessive monitoring and surveillance in order to maintain this pace. To a large degree, managers and supervisors were transferring the pressures of the market onto their workers wherever possible and were rendering jobs more intense and demanding as a result:

> "They said I was slow, that I should have been working faster. They watched me with a stopwatch. That I should have tied up 3 chickens per minute, not 1 as I was doing. It was not true. They kept a record in a notebook to be able to prove

how many chickens I was managing to tie up. As far as I saw, they were measuring only my time" (Female, 27y, Polish)

"Supervisor all the time behind your back, and if somebody is working slowly or want to ask something so there isn't any talking at all, we are not allowed to talk…I felt his breath behind my back, it is very stressful, person stiffen hands straight away, all the time a person is under a threat, automatically there is no comfortable working" (Male, 57y, Polish)

"When you looked at the line you were dizzy. I think that that speed was forbidden when they turned it on, it was unlawful. We told them, but they said that we had to work faster. Yes, they hurried us up all the time. We were watched, told not to speak with each other, to work faster." (Female, 45y, Polish)

Workplace intensification, then, is about burdening those least able to resist with greatest pressure, and usually also least reward. It is a form of institutionalised bullying, occurring within the formal economy and condoned only because it is a central feature of capitalist accumulation.

Worker Expendability

It is in the interest of capital to demonstrate to labour how easily replaceable it is. The fear of being out-competed or out-manoeuvred by others in the hiring queue can have an important regulatory impact. This is why, all too often, employers and/ or their agents appear to consciously make it clear to workers, explicitly and implicitly, that they are expendable. The recruitment of migrant workers *en masse* is part of this process of trying to over-supply labour markets.

Expendability, as a process of workplace informalization, was produced and reproduced in two main ways. Firstly, workers were made acutely aware of the fact that labour supply was greater than labour demand and that barriers to labour market entry were low:

"They were saying 'if you don't like it go and look outside the gate, there is 20 or more people waiting to go on your place' and it was like a person subconsciously was telling himself that he has to do it because he is afraid to lose his job." (Male, 57y, Polish)

> "He was very critical (and said) that if I can't work faster then he has got people from Romania and from Bulgaria and much cheaper. So I was working like that in huge stress. I heard even some words from him 'don't play with me because for your place I have many others workers and I will send this work to somebody else to do!'" (Female, 58y, Polish)

In the low-wage food industry, where barriers to labour market entry are low, this emphasis on labour supply outstripping demand was very crude: though in other industries employers may be more subtle in relation to how employee expendability is expressed (such as via workplace restructuring and workers being asked to re-apply for their job).

Secondly, employers rapidly removed 'deviant' workers from the workplace in order to underline the futility of challenging authority and to stress once again how expendable employees actually were:

> "Some rebelled, but they were quickly got rid of. On the first farm, people rebelled. The piece-rate was too low and some of them did not want to go to work, the whole team rebelled. They were then dismissed and drove away from the farm for this rebellion." (Male, 56y, Polish)

> "They treated us like dogs. I was dismissed because I did not like that treatment. I was standing up for my rights. I was brave to say what I was thinking, so in the end they get rid of me. By doing so they set an example to other pickers, what will happen if you complain." (Male, 31y, Belarussian)

Deviance did not simply relate to questioning authority, workers were also dismissed and made an example of for things that included being unable to do overtime, taking holiday, and becoming pregnant:

> "I went to the agency as now, because I am pregnant, I cannot do heavy work. They gave me my last salary and another envelope (with P45 in it). But they did not tell me that they are dismissing me. I asked them directly 'What shall I do now? Have you dismissed me? Do I need to look for another job?'. To which they replied 'No, No. Everything is fine. We are looking for another job for you'. Afterwards I spoken to a Lithuanian line leader and she told me 'Do you know why you did not work?'. I said 'Why?' She said 'I asked the agency not to send

> you here, because this factory does not need people who are not well or pregnant.'" (Female, 24y, Lithuanian)

Whether aware of the multitude of workers in-line waiting for a job, or conscious of 'deviant' colleagues disciplined through dismissal, the message of worker expendability was loud and enduring. This ensured that the employment relationship low-wage migrants faced was very much one-sided with work akin to a gift offered to those in need by employers who, in response to their philanthropy, demanded gratitude and deference.

Worker Subordination

Worker subordination equated to everyday de-humanizing treatment to the extent that migrants felt they were treated as "numbers", "slaves", "livestock", "robots", "machines", "animals" and "objects":

> "Supervisors were treating us very badly. They shouted at us, sworn at us. They did not call us by names, we were called by numbers. They treated us like slaves, like slaves. It was very difficult to get used to this, we were treated like livestock. But we did not have a choice as we did not have our passport, no language knowledge and no money, but debts with interest on top. I did not know what to do." (Female, 42y, Latvian)

> "I got very tired mentally at the factory. It's so strict there, that you can't even scratch your nose or open your mouth while working. You have to work like robots without stopping. You feel like machine what they switch on to do bouquets." (Female, 38y, Lithuanian)

> "Those English who are supervisors are treating us like animals, calling us names, rushing us, like in a concentration camp…what they have in the end of their tongue, they don't have any barriers, a person is treated like...dung…a total cesspit, humiliation, there is only work, work, doing the most you can so there will be as much profit from it all. People are only working objects to (the supervisor)" (Male, 57y, Polish)

This de-humanizing culture that workers referred to was accompanied by evidence of bullying by superiors:

> "Polish and Russian employees were treated the worst. There was a girl Tina who was called names by the boss: 'You are useless, you should go and stand under a street lamp!' Every time she wore make-up she was called a bitch. She was told to go to stand under a street lamp." (Female, 32y, Polish)
>
> "We come here to work, to make a living…it's about survival. Sometimes I come across difficulties and feel bullied and suppressed, but I put up with it, and it will pass. Feeling bullied or suppressed is normal and unavoidable…You have to put up with it, because there are no alternatives." (Male, 50y, Chinese)

At times this subordination and suppression also meant that workers were vulnerable to experience clear rights breaches, especially around the denial of breaks and payment below the national minimum wage. When this outright illegality occurred, however, workers were unlikely to contest it because of their extreme vulnerability.

It is clear from the above that alongside indirect forms of worker control, where the workplace culture has an overall disciplining effect, direct forms of worker subordination are also used. Given the nature of this subordination it is highly likely that workers will carry psychological scars as a result or, at best, that their sense of self-worth will be compromised. It is also clear that employers felt that creating cultures of subordination was entirely acceptable, indeed for many it was the most visible and direct part of a broader system of control over workers that was vital in the production and reproduction of good workers.

Employment Intermediation

Use of intermediaries, either to help migrants travel to the UK and/ or to find work and accommodation, was common amongst those interviewed (see also: Rogaly, 2008; Pijpers, 2010; Sporton, 2013; Findlay and McCollum, 2013; Jones, 2014). These intermediaries, or agencies, were yet another dimension in the informalization process. They contribute to this process because: they make it harder for workers to have a direct relationship with their employer; they make responsibility for workplace exploitation more opaque; and, agencies are often directly involved in exploitation via low wages and/ or excessive deductions (for travel, for accommodation, and for finding workers employment or housing). Moreover, agency-based employment tends to be less secure than direct employment, and despite being a legitimate and significant part of the UK's

formal economy, has many of the characteristics of employment in the informal economy.

Some of the most common agency practices included illegally charging for work and excessive or unwarranted deductions:

> "He came to us and said 'If you would like to work more, you will have to pay me again. If you refuse to pay me, you would not get any work'. We did not pay the owner of the agency, but a Latvian woman who was the agency manager's wife. We were made aware if we pay them, we will have work in the future. If you pay them they have an expression: these are 'our people'. They will provide work in the first place to 'our people'. They provide work to those who paid them." (Female, 60y, Latvian)

> "The Lithuanian and Latvian supervisors were making business out of us. Once in an envelope we received a payslip – usually we did not receive payslips – and on payslip was written one amount but in the envelope was much less money. We asked why this was, they told us that there was a mistake and made a lot of excuses. The supervisors took our money. Farmer paid all of the money but they took our money and put in their own pockets." (Male, 27y, Latvian)

Across the UK food industry migrants' use of labour market intermediaries was commonplace though there were nuances to this. For example, those on farms were often reliant on picking and packing jobs via agencies because of the highly seasonal nature of their work, whilst those in the catering sector (especially the Chinese migrants we interviewed) were often reliant on agencies to actually get them to the UK. Many migrant workers also often relied upon agencies to find them accommodation and here too deductions were made that workers often deemed unreasonable and exploitative.

Conclusions

The evidence and analysis above underlines the point that neither the legal status of migrants nor their employment within the formal economy are necessarily bulwarks against informalization. Put another way, we should not assume that the process of informalization – the adoption by employers, or their agents, of negative and retrograde employment characteristics and practices that makes work (pay and conditions) less desirable over time – is something confined to the margins and extremes of the labour

market. Associated with this, we need to be more attentive to the "permeability of the borderline between formal economy and informal economy" (Slavnic, 2010: 2).

Over recent decades the boundary between formal and informal employment appears to have blurred as: "the relationships between employees and employers have become increasingly asymmetrical, at the expense of employees" (Slavnic, 2010: 15). It is no longer sufficient, therefore, to focus exclusively on the informal economy when investigating and conceptualizing informalization. Informalization – manifest in job insecurity, work intensification, worker expendability, worker subordination and employment intermediation – extends to mainstream workers and mainstream labour markets. Indeed, the very maintenance of the formal economy may in some contexts, paradoxically, be premised upon informalization, which in turn can become veiled and even legitimized by its very location within the formal realm. Put simply, the formal economy of the developed world has the desire and wherewithal to accommodate retrograde changes in workers' pay and conditions and the welfare and legal checks in place to prevent this are not always effective. Some of those at the sharpest end of this deficiency appear to be, in the UK at least, legitimately employed low-wage migrants.

In terms of moving discussion and debate forward, it would be interesting to examine whether in other advanced capitalist economies there are similar facets of informalization? Are low-wage workers, and migrants in particular, experiencing insecurity, intensification, expendability, subordination and intermediation or do their experiences differ? Moreover, where is informalization taking place? Is it mainly associated with the informal economy and irregular workers (Sassen, 1997, 1998, 2000) or is informalization a process that extends beyond this into mainstream employment (DeFilippis et al., 2009; Likic-Brboric *et al*., 2013; Slavnic, 2010; Theodore, 2007, 2016; Visser, 2016)? Finally, most of the informalization literature originates in the US, and to a lesser extent the UK, and it is surely time to examine the phenomenon and its associated post-Fordist and neo-liberal underpinnings in other developed world contexts. More specifically, where is it that the boundary between the formal and informal economies is becoming blurred, and, where is it that the power balance between labour and capital is growing more asymmetrical? Informalization may well be a common phenomenon, post 1970s, but there are still important

employment geographies associated with low-wage work in general and migrant employment in particular.

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