

Raia Apostolova Neda Deneva Tsvetelina Hristova

SITUAT- ING MIGRA TION

Sketches
from Bulgaria

Temporal, Structural,
and Conceptual
Transformations of Migrations

IN

TRANSI- TION

Situating Migration in Transition:
Temporal, Structural, and Conceptual
Transformations of Migrations.
Sketches from Bulgaria

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Sketches from Bulgaria



Sofia 2014

**Situating Migration in Transition:
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Sketches from Bulgaria.**

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Introduction

by Tsvetelina Hristova and Raia Apostolova

Transition can have many meanings. In the Bulgarian context, and generally in post-socialist contexts, Transition contains in itself the dialectic between a pleasure yet-to-come and the necessary painful path to it. The desired end in sight is often identified with utopian images of what constitutes liberal democracy as entwined in capitalist structures of production. The process of transition is seen as an almost religious ritual of purging from the social and economic sins of the old regime.¹ This hard and lengthy path to abolition explains the shortcomings of capitalism and representative democracy encountered along the way in the form of a yet impure “barbarian” capitalism. Capitalism, which comes with high rates of unemployment, loss of labour rights, emigration, unbearable poverty, increased homelessness, socio-economic and political inequalities. In these images of Capitalism, the barbarianism is always accompanied by corruption, a term reserved for the so-called “developing” countries which encompasses everything that cannot be explained in the otherwise functioning structures of capital accumulation and which serves as an excuse for them. The capitalist crisis that hit the world after 2007-8, shook the well-established boundary between Real Capitalism and Barbarian Capitalism. Instead of reaching the promised Real Capitalism, everybody around entered a Gramscian mode of interruption where all await for the new beginning and gaze at the monsters around us. Many started to realize that despite the different contexts of Capitalism, it nevertheless has similar effects.

¹ Eyal analyses similar tropes in the Czech context. Eyal, G. (2000) *Anti-Politics and the Spirit of Capitalism: Dissidents, Monetarists, and the Czech Transition to Capitalism*. In: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 49-92.

We go against such definitions of Transition. Instead, *Situating Migration in Transition* looks at Transition that is always already there. Transition without a telos.² In our work we have tried to situate *migrations* within such a framework – a framework that is always antagonistic and is in production of differentiated statuses and new politics.

What if we look at migration not simply as a social phenomenon but as a quality underlying the development of socio-economic models? Migration can serve as the lens, through which we can examine different types of transitions, escaping the “end of history” interpretations of the transition from state socialism to capitalism. Instead, we deconstruct it into a series of temporal and conceptual transitions that show, through migration, the changes in the social and economic order and challenge the totalizing view of established historical, political, and ideological oppositions. We can trace the relationship between capital and labour in a series of transitions between policies and categories. Such categories as benefit tourist or internationalist worker, or high-skilled labor migrant bent under politically charged interpretations of what surrounds us. They certainly respond and correspond to specific conditions of production and the way labour relates to capital.

We can see how some of the key concepts and policies are changing through and because of (labour) migration – internationalism, citizenship, and job security. The human mobility and the mobility of capital are always intertwined – as we can see in the example of foreign workers under really existing socialism who serve to substitute the transitional definition of internationalism: from a duty to uphold to a debt to be repaid. The overflowing between capital and labour in the contemporary image of mobility points to ambiguous and complex relations between them, as well as between state and capital. In the face of merges such as the one between labour migration, outsourcing, and mobility of capital we can see the restructuring of employment through geography securing zones of relative consumption comfort. We can think of migration as an underlying quality of contemporary processes – it is the quality of being in a constant state of transition – of movement and precarity being the essence of social and economic processes, without

² Mezzadra, S. (2011) The Gaze of Autonomy. Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles. In: *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, pp. 121-42.

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a definite goal in sight. Similarly to the current reinventional mode of capitalism, such transitional modes, the Gramscian interruptions from above, bring with them possibilities for radical interventions from the left. We would like to think that some of the analysis presented in this publication would supply these possibilities.

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This publication is the continuation of an initiative to re-think migration in the contemporary socio-economic context that took place in May 2014 in Sofia, Bulgaria. The main goal of the two-day workshop was to challenge the analyses and political initiatives that rely on and reinforce the established migratory categories in approaching migration on both political and academic level.

The first event of the project gathered activists and researchers at a two-day workshop entitled *Migrating in/migrating out: how to re-think 'migrant' struggles*. The framework of the workshop was aimed at deconstructing established oppositions, such as emigration/immigration, political/labour migration, legal/illegal migration through concrete analyses of case studies, processes, and institutions in the EU context and, thanks to our keynote speaker Victoria Squire, in the US-Mexican context as well. We look at migration as one of the core social processes set in motion by the development of early capitalism and, at the same time, setting in motion the development of late capitalism. We placed together in the same analytical framework the processes of migration management, the securitization of the borders, the precarization of migrant labour, and the development of institutionalized and everyday racism in order to challenge approaches which think through these as issues of their own right. One of the goals of the workshop was to gather people from different backgrounds and open the floor for a plurality of academic and political contexts. In this sense we see our work as the result of continuous and continuing collaboration in political research.

The talks and discussions at the workshop showed different approaches and concepts, which inspired and enriched the conceptual basis for our subsequent research. The first panel *Purgatory.eu: Inward migration through the external border of EU* gathered Petja Dimitrova, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, Roda Madziva, Schools of Sociology and Politics, University of Nottingham, Melina Antonakaki, History and Philosophy of Science

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and Technology, and Bernd Kasperek, University of Göttingen in a discussion over the category of the asylum-seeker. The somewhat new political figure of the social benefit tourist was the subject of intervention in the second panel *Sweatshop Europe: the EU migrant as an entrepreneurial victim*. Lisa Riedner, University of Göttingen, Irene Peano, University of Bologna, Lee Hielscher, University of Göttingen, and Spyros Marchetos, Greek Open University analysed the tropes and political challenges surrounding the EU social migrant. “*Economic*” or “*Political*” Migration?, the third panel in our discussion placed together Juliet Thondhlana, University of Nottingham, Tom Vickers, Northumbria University, Simina Guga, ADO SAH ROM Organization, and Veit Schwab, University of Warwick in a critical discussion over the economic/political migrants dichotomy.

Victoria Squire, University of Warwick delivered the keynote *Intervening in politics of mobility* and moved the discussion to a larger scale to encompass the U.S.- Mexico border. Her lecture explored the concepts and practices of migration activism and how they are affected and moulded by different political, economic, and social circumstances in Europe and in the US.

The workshop and the subsequent discussion on linking academic research and political activism, and creating international research networks remain the inspiration behind this publication, not only through the exchange of ideas but also through the shared enthusiasm for political and academic interventions in the field.

Raia Apostolova’s text “From Real Socialism to Real Capitalism: the making and dismantling of the Vietnamese worker in Bulgaria”, engages with labor migration in the period of really existing socialism between the early 1970s and the late 1980s. Following the debates between the socialist bloc and its capitalist counterpart regarding the production of illegality, the author demonstrates the centrality of labor migration for the economies of the Soviet-type and refutes the myth about the general state of immobility during state socialism. Focusing on the notions of debt/duty and internationalism, the author traces how the meaning of the foreign worker was redefined from being a socialist duty to be paid to becoming a debt to be repaid. The post-1989 economic and political restructuring brought the classic capitalist antagonism between “foreign” and “national” labor. The Vietnamese working force became the epitome of this antagonism and often a target of social anger.

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In “Changing Meanings and Practices of Work. The case of Bulgarian Roma Migrants in the EU” Neda Deneva explores the changing boundaries of work in the case of Bulgarian Roma low-skilled mobile workers in the EU, engaged in irregular, insecure, flexible, and underpaid labour between Bulgaria and the Netherlands. This type of work exposes them to exploitation both as citizens in Bulgaria and as mobile workers in the EU. This new form of extreme mobility of labour, while providing the chance of ‘making a living’ in multiple spaces, triggers extreme precarization of labour, which in its turn results in various forms of exclusion of such workers. Thus, the opposition ‘citizens’ versus ‘migrant’ is shown to be overridden by the issue of regular versus irregular labour as constitutive for the access to social rights and citizenship on both national and EU level.

Tsvetelina Hristova’s text “Outsourcing Destination Bulgaria: New Patterns of Labour Migration and The Rise of Call Centres in Bulgaria” follows a new kind of labour migration, triggered by the rise in information and communication outsourcing, which allows for labour to be transferred digitally from any point of the world. Supported by the state and framed along the lines of foreign direct investment and knowledge society, virtual migrant labour reinforces racial divides and flourishes in the context of economic crisis and education reforms aiming at better employability. The text examines how the call-centre industry is restructuring employment and migration flows through the eased mobility of capital and labour and essentially dispersing the West as a “focal point” for the concentration of labor. Such dispersion is possible by taking advantage of regulations and programmes that facilitate free movement, while also reframing the spatiality of labour by creating pink-collar employment zones, attracting workers from the core EU countries, where the service industry is shrinking under the pressure of lower wage competition in a globalized digital world.

From Real Socialism to Real Capitalism: the Making and Dismantling of the Vietnamese Worker in Bulgaria

by Raia Apostolova

This paper focuses on the Vietnamese workers who were sent to work in Bulgaria between the early 1970s until the beginning of 1990s. Even though I write about the Vietnamese workers, the developments explored here can be said to have been similar for the workforce coming from outside of Bulgaria at that time: Afghans, Cubans, Ethiopians. I focus on the Vietnamese workers because the myths surrounding their coming, staying, and going are the most persistent. Racist jokes, commentaries, and attitudes accompany the images of Vietnamese people to this day. The escalation of this rampant racism could be traced back to the very early 1990s when the country began to suspect what the post-1989 political and economic transition – the so-called “shock therapy”, will entail. For foreign labour, including the workforce coming from Vietnam, it meant expulsion accompanied often by physical violence and racist verbal attacks. Socialist internationalism from the past experienced its final defeat in the face of the “new” liberal values of civil society and truly free market. This is not to say however that we can delimit the “true” boundary between “real socialism” and “real capitalism.” As the reader will see throughout the paper, rationalities characteristic of capitalist economies accompanied the receiving of foreign labour and especially following the debt crisis from late 1970s and early 1980s. Surely, “real capitalisms” “can only be constructed from the transformation of preexisting social forms that inevitably influence the result!”

¹ Corrigan and Sayer (1985), cited in Creed, G. (1999) *Deconstructing Socialism in Bulgaria*. In: Burawoy, M. and Katherine Verdery (eds.) *Uncertain Transition*. Lanham-Boulder-New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

I turn my attention to the role and the figure of the foreign worker as delineated under the ethos of really existing socialism in Bulgaria. The goal of this short piece is certainly not to answer questions of the sort “Was there socialism in Bulgaria?” To do this is to historically erase thousands of pages of ardent debates on what constitutes “socialism,” what kind of modes should the Soviet-type economies adopt; the history of Soviet economic thought in general and its diffusion in Bulgaria. Moreover, to classify the regime in Bulgaria under a simple market/planned economy dichotomy would amount to turning a blind eye to numerous hybrid logics within Soviet-type societies, as well as to different periods of economic developments within the regime.² Instead, I attempt to describe and to analyze labour relations under really existing socialism as they relate to the foreign working force, which was received between early 1970s and late 1980s. I assume that the period under review here exemplifies perseverance of standard capitalist characteristics – of labour exploitation, division of labour, wage labour, and repression of workers’ autonomy, in the Bulgarian regime of actually existing socialism, albeit often under signifiers such as “internationalism” and “socialist fraternity,” which more often than not are linked to leftist thought.

My goal in this paper is to situate the imaginaries and the state’s sentiments accompanying the figure of the foreign worker during state socialism in Bulgaria. The pages that follow are only a preliminary attempt to engage critically with foreign labour movement under really existing socialism in Bulgaria. It has become a necessity that the critique of real socialism is undertaken by the left in Bulgaria.³ More than ever the left needs to employ analytical categories that are suitable for explaining *how* these regimes failed to realize anything (even) close to the materiality and essence of the communist idea. (The Right has failed tremendously in this task.)

In this essay, I attempt to give a preliminary overview of the ways in which the Vietnamese workforce came to Bulgaria, stayed

² For comprehensive critique of the dichotomy see, Tamas, G. Grundrisse Online. www.grundrisse.net/grundrisse22/aCapitalismPurAndSimple.htm. Accessed December 23, 2014.

³ On the necessity of such critique see Tsoneva, J. and Georgi Medarov (2014) *Towards an Archaeology of the Absent [Към една археология на отсъстващото]*. www.novilevi.org/publications/204-markov. Accessed December 23, 2014.

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over, and was sent back to the homeland in the early 1990s. To do this, I have made use of archival materials found in the Central State Archive in Sofia and the two main newspapers of these times, *Rabotnichesko Delo* (and its post-1989 successor *Duma*) and *Demokratiia* (the newspaper of the democratic opposition after 1989). Initially, I wanted to focus on two major periods, the 1980s and the 1990s. Instead, I decided to broaden my temporal limits and present an overall picture of the three major periods that show the change in meaning and redefinition of foreign labour force in Bulgaria. I do not claim that the picture presented here is all-encompassing. On the contrary, and unfortunately, the time limitations of my research have not allowed me to present a more detailed account. One of the largest gaps in this essay, besides the obvious difficulty to reconstruct a story as based solely on archival material, stems from the lack of conversational base with Vietnamese workers on the one hand and the so-called everyday on the other. A gap I intend to correct in the near future.

Socialism and labour mobility

Between 1973 and 1989 Bulgaria had created something like a pool of reserve labourers. To this day, workers coming from Vietnam are thought to be well-disciplined – a legacy stemming from the state perception of the Vietnamese during state socialism. Such legacy was usually created in comparison to the Afghan practitioners who were perceived to be more boisterous and worse in the educational process when compared to their Vietnamese counterpart.⁴ Acquiring language skills was an indispensable feature of the agreements signed between Vietnam and Bulgaria for the import of Vietnamese workers. That is why even today, there are Vietnamese citizens who know enough Bulgarian language so as to be employed in sectors which require low-skilled labour force. This played a role in 2008, for example, when the construction sector in Bulgaria turned its attention to outside labour force. Back than

⁴ CSA. 1980. Fund 607, Inventory 3, archival unit 859. Hereafter, data taken from the Central State Archive in Sofia will be cited as follows: CSA. Year. Fund/Inventory/ Archival Unit. Where year is missing, it means that it was not clear from the archival unit. I give approximate year as follows: ~YEAR. All translations are mine.

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Emilia Maslarova, minister of labour and social policies between 2005 and 2009, headed a delegation comprised of businessmen to Vietnam in order for construction companies to recruit labourers.⁵ As Ivan Boykov, a deputy head of the Bulgarian Construction Chamber at the time, said, “Vietnam is a desirable destination for labour [import] because of the accumulated experience with Vietnamese workers in Bulgaria.” In fact, Bulgaria has much experience with labourers from other nationalities as well, but the Vietnamese worker has left the most memorable trace in public consciousness. Yet, the innocent and nostalgic image of the Vietnamese worker is not the sole characteristic of public remembrance: the memories of the Vietnamese worker are entwined in racist stereotypes as well.

Part of the racist attitudes that many Bulgarians still share is the stereotype that the Vietnamese workers are a well disciplined and highly efficient workforce. These stereotypes are partly explained through the class composition of the workers who comprised the Vietnamese working force in Bulgaria during state socialism. Most of them were very young men, between 17 and 25 years old, who did not have the luxury of education or vocation back in Vietnam because of the continuous military conflicts in the country. Since WWII, Vietnam was embroiled in military conflicts with powers such as Japan, France, USA, and China. These military conflicts demolished the country, which in turn had detrimental effect on the economy, employment, education, and social security. In 1975 the communists were able to unite South and North Vietnam and eventually, in 1978, Vietnam joined the Comecon. Nevertheless, Vietnam had a generation of veterans who were not able to acquire professional skills and/or education.

In addition, these young men and women had fallen victim of chronic unemployment that engulfed the country in the late '60s and continued to plague young people until the '90s. Being young and uneducated, in addition to the politico-economic crisis, proved

⁵ As Bulgaria was already part of the EU at the time, the country could not sign a bilateral agreement with Vietnam as this was against EU laws. Instead, if a country in the Union desires to hire labour from the outside, this is a direct relation between capital and the state where the work force comes from. Of course the intermediary role of the state is preserved by immigration laws. See www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2008/04/08/482241_firmite_sa_gotovi_da_vnasiat_vietnamski_rabotnici/. Accessed December 2, 2014.

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to exert certain disciplining power. Rumors have it that many of the people who came to Bulgaria had to bribe the state bureaucracy back home to be selected for labour migration as otherwise they would be subjected to homelessness and severe poverty. As such, the Vietnamese had no choice but to flee Vietnam and become part of the internationalist socialist working force that was traversing the socialist part of the globe long before it became fashionable to speak of the "global proletariat on the move."

In this respect, it is important to refute the myths that there was a general state of immobility in the socialist camp. On the contrary, workers' mobility was as important for the Soviet-type economies as it was for the capitalist world then and now. There is one major difference, however, in respect to how workers' mobility was defined in the socialist era. First of all, capitalists defined it mostly as a relation between capital and labour, where the state had the role of a mediator and had to "bless" the establishment of recruitment offices in the sending country. The role of the trade unions was to make sure capital paid the same wage to foreign labour so that the national labour force was protected. That was, of course, prior to the late 1970s when the ideology of freedom of movement, as we know it today, started taking deep root and was increasingly influencing the debates surrounding the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1985. As we shall see in the short section that follows, this relation between capital and mobile labour, with the state acting as a complicit mediator, eventually turned "illegality" into a major European issue.

Labour mobility was a qualitatively different notion in the socialist countries. It certainly went through its own definitions, just like its capitalist counterpart, but generally, the moving labour force was conceived of as part of internationalist duty and was therefore protected by the state.⁷ As capital was the state, the relation of foreign labour to capital was necessarily also a relation of labour to the state. But here I want to emphasize that the so-called immobility of Bulgarians and the restrictions placed on exit (and entry) movement

⁶ Although the idea of free movement of capital and labour has been part of the Treaty of Rome of 1957, the gradual abolition of border controls became possible only with the signing of an agreement between West Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, France, and the Netherlands in 1985.

⁷ I develop the argument about internationalist working force and its relation to the state further in the paper.

were not solely founded on the fear that labour would escape the country as many anti-communists claimed. The relation between the state and labour was much more complex than that. In the Cold War debates over labour mobility, the socialist bloc took the stance that the state had to protect its labour and that the sending and receiving of labour had to be done with the exclusive permission of both the sending and the receiving states so as to avoid the creation of conditions for overexploitation. In fact, the West was often attacked for its irresponsible attitude towards mobile labour and the creation of “illegal” labour, and hence, unprotected labour. As Schwenkel notes, “Under socialism, the term *Gastarbeiter* carried connotations of capitalist exploitation of foreign labourers and was considered offensive⁸.”

This is not to romanticize socialism but to argue against viewpoints that think of Bulgaria’s “closed borders” solely in terms of some grandiose plan to torture people inside. Socialist officials knew that *freedom of movement* is not free. Freedom of movement under capitalist structures comes with its own conditions and consequences, one of which, as we have seen in the case of EU “mobile labour”, is often illegality and irregularity. Both are conditions that brings about favourable conditions for overexploitation. And even though socialist countries understood well the stakes for labour as embedded in the concept of free movement, they, nevertheless, could not get rid of wage labour. As such, mobile labour under socialism was also subjected to exploitation.

West European guest-worker programmes and the ideological battle over “illegal” labour

I will present here an overview of the guest worker programs in the West, attempting a comparison, despite the seemingly different labour relations under really existing socialism and Western capitalist societies. I do this in order to attract the reader’s attention towards the rationales behind hiring foreign labour on both sides of the Iron Curtain and elucidate the relation of this labour to state

⁸ Schwenkel, C. (2014) Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany. In: *Critical Asian Studies* 46(2), pp. 235-258.

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and capital and the fears stemming from the appearance of “illegal labour.” “Illegality” was a major battlefield for the two hegemonic sides, equally important for both of them. Namely, the ideological positions of socialist authorities presupposed that the absence of both states in regulating the movement of people would inevitably lead to illegality and, hence, establish conditions for labour overexploitation. On the other hand, capitalist officials assumed that the market regulated the movement of people and that labour would leave on its own or at least be easily removed once capital’s rate of accumulation is in decline.

The concentration of capital in Northern and Western Europe after WWII necessitated the recruitment of large number of labourers in order to sustain the economic boom, triggered by post-war recovery efforts and to a great extent by the US Marshall Plan. The period between the 1950s and the 1970s saw the largest expansion of capitalist output in the West⁹, which in turn had consequences for the international division of labour, turning Western Europe into a “center,” where foreign labour was one of the major supplies needed in order to supplement the growing Western economies.¹⁰ Capital turned its attention to one of the “traditional” labour pools and started recruiting labour power from the *outside*. The so-called “guest-workers” programs, or temporal import of labour, were initiatives meant to overcome such shortages at the time and countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France placed significant effort into the design of such systems. Bilateral agreements were signed with Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain, whose labour force was later to be replaced (and to some extent supplemented) with labour power coming from Yugoslavia and Turkey. Germany is certainly one of the principle examples in the guest-workers’ schemes not solely because of the large number of foreign labour that was recruited but because of the continuous dependency on “outside labour”

⁹ Armstrong, P. and John Harrison (1984) *Capitalism Since World War II: The Making and Breakup of The Great Boom*. Vol. 5794. Fontana.

¹⁰ For the “contemporary spatiality of capital” and the dispersion of the center, see Hristova’s essay in this volume.

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throughout the country's capitalist restructuring: 1871-1932, the Nazi era, and the post-WWII epoch.¹¹

During the so-called "economic miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*) between the 1950s and the late 1960s, Germany's capital grew substantially because of dependence on German products during the Korean war, the pouring of American and British capital into Germany, the subsequent increase in the industrial capital stock, and, last but not least, because of the large number of disciplined refugee labour returning to Germany.¹² Despite the large amount of labour force provided by women, refugees, and expellees, however, the German government did not want to risk bulky shortages and instead resorted to foreign workers in order to lower the risks of a potential economic hold up.¹³ In 1955, the German Federal Republic set its first recruitment offices in Italy, where German employers wishing to take advantage of foreign labour paid a fee to the Federal Labour Office. The perfect labourer had to meet three qualities: s/he had to be healthy; fit for performing certain occupations; and without a criminal record. According to Castels¹⁴, the German "guest worker" programs were the "most highly organized state recruitment apparatus in Europe – the pinnacle of the guest-worker system."

Guest-worker programs usually relied on the so-called triple R principle: return, rotation, and remittances.¹⁵ The triple R principle meant that workers were to be admitted for a certain period of time (initially with 2-year contracts with the possibility to extend them to 5 years), workers would rotate and allow their fellow nationals to replace them, and, finally, their remittances back

¹¹ Rhoades, Robert E. (1978) Foreign Labour and German Industrial Capitalism 1871–1978: The Evolution of a Migratory System. In: *American Ethnologist* 5(3), pp. 553-573.

¹² For a detailed account of this period see Kramer, A. (1991) *The West German Economy: 1945-1955*. Providence, RI: Berg.

¹³ Chin, R. (2007) *The Guest Worker Question In Postwar Germany*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Castles, S. (1986) The Guest-Worker in Western Europe – An Obituary. In: *International Migration Review*, pp. 761-778.

¹⁵ Martin, P. (2006) Managing Labour Migration: Temporary Worker Programmes for the 21st Century. At: *International Symposium on International Migration and Development*.

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home would allow for their families and co-nationals to develop stronger economies in the sending country. This scheme was well integrated with utopian expectations of never-ending “economic growth,” where underdeveloped countries such as Spain and Italy would eventually catch up with the boom as experienced in Germany and in turn make migrants return to their home countries in order to take part in developing their homelands. However, if economic downturn was to happen, the short-term contracts would ensure that the foreign labour force would return to her country of origin, making space for “national labour” to undertake the jobs vacated by the migrants. In addition, the equal-to-German-labour-pay system ensured prevention of wage dumping and sealed the support of the trade unions. As many sources have shown however, the assumptions behind the triple R principle were short-lived as employers found it easier to rehire the same workers instead of rotating them. The workers themselves found their return in only 2 or 5 years to be disadvantageous and, certainly, the remittances they were sending home did not meet initial expectations. Moreover, the general framing of the foreign workers as blocks of labour power that could be moved around depending on the performance of the economy infamously collapsed under the mass of foreign workers’ strikes and the active refusal of the “guest workers” to go back home. The effects of the underlying assumptions inherent in the programs would come fully to the surface in the mid-1970s.

1973 could perhaps be considered a tipping point in the articulation of what constitutes a foreign worker in Western Europe. Growing anti-immigrant sentiments and economic stagnation that took place in the aftermath of the oil crisis resulted in measures against further entry of foreign labour in France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. November of 1973 marked the desired end of the “guest-worker” programs in Germany, where the government ordered a moratorium on the programs, prompted by the economic decline.¹⁶ Despite expectations to the contrary, many foreign workers remained in the host countries, in turn becoming part of large reserve armies and later constituting a major part in the “irregular” and flexible labour to supplement European economies to this

¹⁶ Göktürk, D., David Gramling and Anton Kaes, eds. (2007) *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration, 1955-2005*. University of California Press.

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day. 1973 effectively changed the meaning of what constitutes a “foreign worker”: while the guest-worker was framed as a “necessity to the economic miracle,” the economic immigrant was (and continues to be) defined as a “burden to the labour markets.” This shift in meaning signified also the political appearance of what today is known as the “illegal immigrant”.^{17 18}

Considering the developments above, it is not surprising that in 1973 the International Labour Organization pressed strongly on the agenda the question of international labour migration and the rights of labour migrants. That same year ILO member-states were invited to submit their motivated answers to a questionnaire formulated by the ILO on the subject of migrant labour force. The answers to this questionnaire were to form what is today known as the C143 Migrant Workers Convention of 1975. Where the previous convention on migrant labour from 1949 focused on “non-discrimination in wages, benefit and social security, and union activities” and criminalized those who “promote clandestine or illegal immigration,” the convention of 1975 appealed to member-states to “seek to determine whether there are illegally employed migrant workers” on their territory.¹⁹ In addition to the institution’s intention in promoting fair wages and access to social security for the “unauthorized employees,” ILO called for implementing sanctions for employees and traffickers involved in such deeds. The question of “illegality” took on a central role in the 1970s, effectively and completely dethroning what was left out of the crumbling sentiments of internationalism. Moreover, the promotion of “illegality” as a central theme of concern in regards to labour moving across national borders set the scene for later developments under (neo)liberal

¹⁷ Mezzadra, S. (2011) *The Gaze of Autonomy. Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles*. In: *Squire, V. (ed.) The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, pp. 121-142.

¹⁸ For an extensive overview of “illegality,” see DeGenova, N. (2002) *Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life*. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, pp. 419-447

¹⁹ ILO. www.migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=2964_0_5_0. Accessed December 19, 2014.

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capitalism that actively deny the role of immigrants as producers of value and instead conceive of them as “welfare scroungers.”²⁰

Defining the foreign worker under socialism

As mentioned earlier, the “foreign worker” became a ground for hegemonic struggles between the West and the socialist countries in the 1970s. During the first discussion rounds regarding labouring migrants as set by the ILO in the beginning of the 1970s, Bulgaria, as many other socialist countries, insisted that:

The problem of “labour migrants” is foreign to the socialist society. The organized and planned state (sic!) does not create conditions for surplus of labour or deficit of certain labour force. The conflict between capital and waged labour is foreign to the socialist society.²¹

First of all, there were “labouring migrants” in Bulgaria at the time as the first ever labour exchange contract to be signed was in 1967.²² There was labour exploitation²³; there was also both surplus and deficit of certain labour, otherwise Bulgaria would not have started to anxiously seek after foreign labour in such large numbers. The main shortages of labour were in the construction and the agricultural sectors. In fact, it seems that the shortages were strongly felt as Zhivkov himself was interested in the work of those

²⁰ The role and the (un)making of the migrant worker, the refugee, and the asylum-seeker under the ethos of different periods of capitalist development in the West is well examined. Inter alia Castles, S. (1986) *The Guest-Worker in Western Europe: An Obituary*. In: *International Migration Review*, 20(4), pp. 761-778; Chin, R. (2007) *The Guestworker Question in Postwar Germany*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Koopmans, R. (1999) *Germany and its Immigrants: an Ambivalent Relationship*. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 25(4) pp. 627-647.

²¹ CSA. 1974. *The Labouring Migrants* (Common Discussion). 607/3/677.

²² CSA. 1973. 136/73/330.

²³ I use the Marxist category of exploitation and do not invoke any humanitarian assumptions underpinning the concept or understandings of exploitation as a breach in an otherwise “fair” contract. Wage labour is a form of exploitation.

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who were responsible for the supplement of workers²⁴. However, what needs to be clarified here is that this argument from the discussion was used as a trope against Western types of recruitment of migrant labour and the creation of “illegal” labour under such practices.

Framing the ILO as an institution built by the modern bourgeois state in order to “mellow the conflict between [employer and worker]”, Bulgaria insisted that instead of crafting yet another Convention, the questions concerning the measures to be taken against the “discrimination and abuse” of migrant labour needs to be written down in the form of a contract.²⁵ Furthermore, the Forum was advised to work on a model contract which would regulate “precisely the work of states that enter bi- or multilateral agreements [...] and will serve better the practices [of labour migration] by giving a concrete form for union activists, state authorities, and employers.” Two rationales stood behind such suggestion. Firstly, that migration falls within the exclusive jurisdiction of the state and those who participate in “hidden” migration, both perpetrators and third parties, need to bear criminal responsibility. Such rationale, which is also in use today, effectively criminalized migrants and did not seek to address problems of structural character either in the sending or in the receiving country. As if “illegality” existed despite state policies or international conventions. The second rationale sought to compensate the migrants who have fallen victim of “adverse travel conditions,” namely conditions that have undermined the well-being of the migrant during her “recruitment, travel, and arrival²⁶.” The socialist countries strongly believed that the way to avoid “illegal” migration is to regulate it by the help of bi-lateral state agreements, where national and foreign labour will have the same social and economic rights. Taken together, these two rationales formed a peculiar form of internationalism – an issue I turn to in the next section.

²⁴ CSA. 1973. Statement of Protocol number 47 of the meeting of the Council of Ministers from August 29, 1973.

²⁵ CSA. 1974. 607/3/676. Bulgaria as represented by a delegate at the discussion during the 59th session of the International Labour Commission which took place in 1974. Unfortunately, finding the name of the Bulgarian delegate in the archival documents proved impossible.

²⁶ CSA. 1973. 607/3/676.

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Internationalism and its socialist paradox

In the words of Perry Anderson,²⁷ internationalism is defined in the following way:

Few political notions are at once so normative and so equivocal as internationalism. Today, the official discourse of the West resounds with appeals to a term that was long a trademark of the Left. Whatever sense is given it, the meaning of internationalism logically depends on some prior conception of nationalism, since it only has currency as a back-construction referring to its opposite. Yet while nationalism is of all modern political phenomena the most value-contested—judgements of its record standardly varying across a 180-degree span, from admiration to anathema—no such schizophrenia of connotation affects internationalism: its implication is virtually always positive. But the price of approval is indeterminacy. If no-one doubts the fact of nationalism, but few agree as to its worth, at the entry to the millennium the status of internationalism would appear to be more or less the reverse. It is claimed on all sides as a value, but who can identify it without challenge as a force?

The sending and receiving of foreign workers in Bulgaria was always accompanied by vehement statements of internationalism, solidarity in fraternity, and socialist cooperation. The notion of internationalism, in the socialist context, was tightly linked to the development of planned economies and reorganization of economic models.

Internationalism, conceived as an important aspect of the economic reorganization of new socialist countries, was often framed as a “duty” and “prestige.” Vietnam was one of the countries that became an object of this type of internationalism. Throughout the 1970s, the Bulgarian newspaper *Rabotnichesko delo* was often making remarks about the situation in Vietnam. The latter was a “fraternal country” and the Party defined its solidarity with it through three major political statements: anti-imperialism (both against Washington and Beijing), opposition to Maoist movements, and the construction of real socialism. Vietnam was con-

²⁷ Anderson, P. (2002) Internationalism: A Breviary. In: *New Left Review*, 14, March-April.

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structured in the Bulgarian press as a heroic nation capable of defeating the enemy forces of imperialism and the “Western hegemon.”

The foreign worker: debt and duty

The 1973 Agreement

In the early 1970s, Bulgaria started looking around to bring foreign labour to be employed in the expanding industry. Aware of the labour shortages in construction and agriculture, Bulgaria was looking for efficient ways to bridge these shortage gaps. Simultaneously, Vietnam was calling on socialist states to accept Vietnamese citizens for vocational schooling and training as the country was trying to rebuild after decades of war. The agreement from 1973, signed between Bulgaria and Vietnam for the exchange of labour, was different, as we will see, from the one signed later on in 1980 in one major respect, namely, the power Vietnam exerted over Bulgaria in the name of socialist internationalism.

The negotiations with Vietnam regarding the signing of an agreement for receiving Vietnamese citizens for professional training and practice started and ended successfully in January 1973. The agreement, affirmed by Bulgaria in July 1973, was signed as an “expression of fraternal solidarity and mutual aid.”²⁸ According to it, the number of people to be sent over to Bulgaria was 3 000 between 1973 and 1975. As the future agreements signed between the two countries postulated, this one also stipulated that the Vietnamese practitioners had rights and obligations equal to those of their Bulgarian counterparts, as written in conforming to the Bulgarian labour and social legislation too, with the exception of family benefits. Similarly to the capitalist world, Bulgaria and other socialist countries thought that once the contracts were over, the Vietnamese workforce will simply go home. The Vietnamese practitioners however, unlike the ones coming in 1980, were to spend their time as follows: up to six months of language classes and acclimatization; from two to three years of vocational training in factories; and two to three years of productive labour in order

²⁸ CSA. 1973. 259/43/283. Agreement between People’s Republic of Bulgaria and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for the receiving of Vietnamese citizens for professional training and practice in the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.

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to increase their qualification. Vietnam had to send “[male and female] youth (mainly male) between 17 and 22 years of age ... who have finished seventh or higher grade, in good health, and lacking profession.”

The negotiations between Vietnam and Bulgaria did not go precisely as planned, though. During the January negotiations, Vietnam presented to the Bulgarian delegation a draft agreement that was different than what Bulgaria initially envisaged. The major difference came with defining the purpose of the agreement. Where Bulgaria wanted to have *workers*, Vietnam insisted on *practitioners*. The archives show that Vietnam insisted on the latter definition of its citizens and fought for it until Bulgaria stepped back from its initial plans. In the view of Vietnam, its emigrants would have been protected if it was clear from the beginning that they were not sent to simply work in Bulgaria, but also to be educated. The *practitioner* exerted more symbolic power than the *worker*. Misho Mishev, minister of labour and social care, wrote to prime-minister Stanko Todorov that “the two projects were identical to a great extent... In the title of the Agreement, the word ‘work’ was omitted consciously, however, so that it is not used prejudicially by somebody.”²⁹ Bulgaria made a great deal of concession.

Vietnam was virtually recommending emigration as the “social question” in the country was gaining more and more political significance internationally. The state was firm when it came to the naming of its emigrating subjects, however. Although, at the end of the day 50% of the Vietnamese citizens were to stay in Bulgaria and work for at least two to three years³⁰, how these citizens were to be classified was an important step in understanding what internationalism was to stand for. It was an internationalism which did not envisage sending and receiving labour solely for the purpose of the extraction of surplus value. The idea to train Vietnamese citizens in the building of socialism through gaining valuable industrial and agricultural knowledge is an intrinsic part

²⁹ Title of document to be found in the CSA: Report regarding the Contract between People’s Republic of Bulgaria and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam regarding the receiving of Vietnamese citizens for professional education and practice in People’s Republic of Bulgaria. By Misho Mishev. 30.05.1973.

³⁰ CSA. 1973. 259/43/283.

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of the 1973 agreement. Internationalism, to a large degree, was the praxis of learning of how to build socialism. The acts of internationalism, in the view of Vietnam, involved symbolic gestures that guaranteed the dignity of practice and the possibility for return of the socialist worker. It was an internationalist duty not to harm these symbolic gestures. The latter was to crumble under economic pressures later on.

Chasing after debt

Todor Zhivkov, state leader and head of the Bulgarian Communist Party, visited Vietnam in September 1979, and the visit was covered by *Rabotnicheskio Delo* newspaper in detail. Titles ranging from "In the name of friendship and solidarity,"³¹ "Vivid display of fraternal friendship and solidarity in the fight," and "Fraternal solidarity, absolute unity" accompanied the covering of official events. The three-day meeting between Bulgarian delegates and their Vietnamese colleagues ended with the signing of a Contract for friendship and cooperation between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) was the third socialist European country to sign such a contract, which, according to *Rabotnicheskio delo's* correspondent, was a significant step towards the "deepening of the economic cooperation" between the two countries.

The stakes involved in maintaining Vietnam's direction towards aligning with the USSR and in the meantime building the base for "real socialism" were high on the political agenda throughout the Eastern bloc in the 1970s. The non-capitalist part of the world was firm in showing anti-imperialist solidarity with Vietnam, while extending it not only to rhetorical gestures, as many anti-communists would have it, but also to humanitarian, economic, and military aid. People's Republic of Bulgaria also participated in these anti-imperialist efforts. The country was sending massive financial and technological aid to Vietnam. The biggest part of this aid was under the form of loans that were to be paid back; there was also large gratuitous assistance as well. In an Inquiry from December 1975 issued by the Party, one can see that the economic and trade relations between the two countries dated back to 1956. While commodity exchange and credit transactions were insig-

³¹ *Rabotnicheskio Delo*. September 29, 1979.

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nificant prior to 1966, this changed when Bulgaria started lending interest-free loans and providing gratuitous aid. For a period of nine years, Bulgaria had given Vietnam 70 000 000 rubles in loans and in gratuitous aid.³² Throughout the 1970s, Vietnam and Bulgaria continued signing trade agreements.

Such aid however was not unidirectional. Vietnam in turn was exporting significant amount of coffee, tin, peanuts, and other commodities to Bulgaria. Schwenkel argues that socialist practices of mutual aid “reaffirmed geopolitical membership in an international communist community and served to bolster a socialist vision of global humanity as rooted in ideologically persuasive notions of postcolonial solidarity.”³³ Schwenkel observes that the definition and praxis of internationalism in socialist countries was qualitatively different from its counterpart as found, for example, in the capitalist states initiative for a global Common Market and Competition. Still, the socialist definition of mutual aid and solidarity was soon to crumble under the persistence of exploitation, wage labour, and increased internal pressure for boosting the national income.

The 1979 official visit of Todor Zhivkov to Vietnam did not consist of ideological speeches only. The language used by Zhivkov did send a political and ideological message, albeit a contradictory one. A document from April 10, 1980 mentions that one of the major missions of the Bulgarian delegation was to “conduct negotiations and sign a protocol regarding the deadline and the manner in which loans are to be repaid.”³⁴ The Bulgarian ministry of external trade at the time had been trying to make Vietnam sign protocols that would ensure the repayment of the accumulated debt. As a result of the official visit, the delegation succeeded in making Vietnam sign an agreement to repay part of its loans that were acquired in 1973 and in 1974. Thus the visit of the Bulgarian delegation to Vietnam was not confined exclusively to the expres-

³² CSA. ~1985. 259/4/625.

³³ Schwenkel, C. (2014) Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany. In: *Critical Asian Studies*, 46(2), pp. 235-258.

³⁴ CSA. 1980. 259/44/281. Report to Hristo Hristov from Konstantin Todorov, secretary of the ministry of external trade.

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sion of fraternal solidarity; it also had the purpose of discussing and restructuring Vietnam's debt.

By the time foreign workers started arriving en masse in Bulgaria, the political elites in socialist states had already adopted the Stalinist redefinition and distortion of internationalism – his doctrine of socialism in one country. The paradox of internationalism under really existing socialism was hidden in the simultaneous and continuous efforts of the political elites to reconstruct nationalist notions of the people. Internationalism in this way provided for a methodology of how to build socialism without the subject of socialism per se, namely without labour. In addition, by the 1970s, major socialist countries – Yugoslavia, the USSR, China – have entered irreversible conflicts. By the 1980s, as Anderson suggests, “The result was an ever more accelerated disintegration of the internationalism of the classic Communist movement, as Communist states multiplied.”³⁵ Yet, Anderson is incorrect in his analysis that the forces of production under real socialism were less internationalized than those in the capitalist world. Means of labour and labour power were traversing the socialist world constantly. Yet it is important to distinguish between the diverse articulations of internationalism under different periods of socialism. It is also central to recall the ways in which internationalism was practiced, who was its subject so to say, and where the boundaries of internationalist struggles were placed. As will become clear in the next section, one of the practical reconceptualizations to take place consisted in internationalism being redefined from a duty to be paid to a debt to be repaid. In the socialist paradox of internationalism, labour turned out to be the biggest loser.

Moving away from the mid-1970s and prior to signing of the second agreement that would seal the sending and receiving of Vietnamese labour force to Bulgaria in 1980, there were intense conversations between Vietnam and Bulgaria in regards to the former's debt. As the conflict between China and Vietnam was intensifying, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam found it harder to pay back its loans to Bulgaria. In 1975 for example, China ended the construction of 93 industrial plants, stopped the export of essential commodities such as barley, and limited the movement of

³⁵ Anderson, P. (2002) Internationalism: A Breviary. In: *New Left Review*, 14: March-April.

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Vietnamese students and workers, effectively impeding Vietnam's steady reconstruction efforts. As these trends deepened by the day and later on extended to other socio-political spheres, Vietnam was pressured into seeking even more aid from the rest of the socialist countries, which resulted in significant debt increase. In July 1978, Lê Thanh Nghi, deputy minister in Vietnam's Council of Ministers, informed Bulgaria's ministry of external trade of the problems faced by his country and asked Bulgaria to increase the amount of exports as laid down for the next year. His request was accompanied by a verbal insurance that China's aggression would not impede Vietnam's "socialist development".³⁶ By 1978-79, however, Bulgaria was increasingly becoming anxious over Vietnam's impossibility to repay its debt.

In a report issued to Andrey Lukanov, Hristo Hristov, the minister of external trade, warned the Council of Ministers that it was becoming nearly impossible to balance Vietnam's debt payments with import received from the country. The impossibility came partly because of previously accumulated debt but also because of the continuous reconstruction problems Vietnam was facing. Hristo Hristov stated:

Another unresolved issue is the repayment deadline for the provided loans, which came with the trade agreements dating 05.08.1973 and 09.14.1974, a total of 18 900 000 rubles. In these agreements, it was stated that the two countries will further agree on the time and the manner of repayment. Because the Vietnamese side annually raises the issue of new commodity loans and grants, we have so far not insisted upon firm negotiation of the period and the manner of repayment of these two loans. We do believe that the question of determining the time and manner of repayment of these loans has to be placed on this year's agenda...³⁷

Simultaneously, Bulgaria was accumulating a significant amount of debt on its own, which prompted the country to seek ways, if

³⁶ CSA. 1978. 259/44/283. Memorandum regarding the meeting from 5.07.1978 between Petar Bashikarov, deputy minister of foreign trade of Bulgaria, and Hguen Van Dau, deputy minister of foreign trade in Vietnam.

³⁷ CSA. 1979. 259/44/281. Report by Hristo Hristov, minister of foreign trade.

needed through reforms, in order to relieve the situation. As Bueno shows, 1979 was an important reformist year in Bulgaria.³⁸

The objectives, as they were defined by the economists of the Committee of Planning, envisaged: “to establish a better balance between decentralization and centralization; to extend the scope for the initiative and the independence of the economic organizations (particularly in the decisionmaking about management and production process); to promote the conformity of the production with the market environment...; to assure the self-financing of the economic-productive activities through accountability; to introduce new financial relationships between the State and the economic organizations and among and inside such organizations; and to offer the workers and managers incentives connected to the improvement of the results of the economic organization³⁹” The aim was to introduce a technological change in the economy, increase productivity, improve quality of the products and increase competitiveness on foreign markets in order to eliminate the external debt that kept growing.

In “False Economy” McQuillan⁴⁰ relies on Derrida’s notions of “gift” and “sacrifice” in order to engage with the currency of the banking crisis of 2008, which he defines as a “debt crisis.” It would certainly be unjustifiable to compare the magnitudes of the socialist debt crisis with the one taking place at this very moment. Firstly, because of the different economic processes in the base of it, but also because of the extent of what is being sacrificed today, the current crisis has no comparison in human history. However, as it has been already proposed, “debt is a necessary condition of economy, albeit one that takes on different forms at different times (ibid.)” Here I will make a short detour in order to look at one specific interpretation of the notion of debt so as to invite the reader to think through some of the aspects of the debt crisis under socialism, namely, the effect this crisis had on the concept of “worker”: Certainly, I am not in the position to universalize my

³⁸ Bueno, R. (2006) Development and Crisis of the Central Planned Economy in Bulgaria. In: *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies*, 56 (2): 45-62.

³⁹ The quote is taken from Kaser (1981). The Industrial Enterprise in Bulgaria. In: Jeffries, I. (ed). *The industrial enterprise in Eastern Europe*. New York: Praeger.

⁴⁰ McQuillan, M. (2013) False Economy. In: *Postmodern Culture*, 23(3).

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claims either temporally or conceptually; my hopes are to only open the door for further discussion and interpretations.

For McQuillan⁴¹, following Derrida, one of the functions of the “gift” is to indebt, which in turn turns into a proliferation of exchanges. This places the giver in a situation of “relation of sacrifice.” Yet sacrifice, according to Derrida, is the business of the sovereign and it “proposes an offering but only in the form of a destruction against which it exchanges, hopes for, or counts on a benefit, namely, a surplus-value or at least amortization, protection, and a security.” This prompts McQuillan⁴² to conclude that “in the context of systemic debt... securitization disarticulates sacrifice; namely it turns a sacrifice from a gift into an offering that expects a return.” In the context of a deepening debt crisis, which was accompanied by shortage of labour in Bulgaria, the sacrifice made by the country, namely the loans given to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the name of internationalist duty, turned into an uncompromising search for return. The offering made was an intensified exploitation of foreign labour.

The Bulgarian word *дълг* [dalg] has a double meaning. On the one hand, it translates into English as duty, and on the other, as debt. The convention signed between Vietnam and Bulgaria in 1980 in regards to the sending of labour force was a turning point in the relations between the two countries, but also in the redefinition of foreign labour under the later decades of really existing socialism. Gradually between 1980 and 1989, the Vietnamese labour force that resided in Bulgaria was reclassified from internationalist workers’ force to a debt paying machine. The ways in which Vietnamese labour in Bulgaria was conceptualized exemplify a sliding precisely between this double meaning of *дълг*: from a duty to a debt. In the period under examination, we have the leftovers of the ghost of the internationalist duty that had to be attained to, but also the beginning of a socialist world that was to crumble under a grotesque debt crisis. The foreign worker was entrusted with a double function: on the one hand, to produce the surplus value necessary for the construction of real socialism, but on the other to ease the debt both for the giver and the receiver. The foreign worker became the *дълг* itself.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

The 1980 Agreement

In March 1980, the Council of Ministers in Bulgaria gave its permission for the beginning of renewed negotiations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam regarding the receiving of workers for professional training and work. As it becomes clear from a report drafted by Krastio Trichkov and Andrey Lukanov, “the Vietnamese side is willing to provide [Bulgaria] with 30 000 workers.”⁴³ The latter statement comes as a direct response to the official visit of Todor Zhivkov in Vietnam in 1979. After the visit, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party agreed on conducting a research on the necessity of additional labour force, which showed that 34 000 people would be needed besides the “national” labour. The branches with the largest deficit of labour were construction, engineering, and metallurgy. Lukanov and Trichkov, however, advised the Council of Ministers not to undertake such a decisive step and to consider partial relief of Bulgaria’s labour shortage. The reasons behind this caution were the following: “in the next few years, a release of labour from the production and service sectors is expected ... [and] the realistic possibilities to accept, accommodate, and train such an amount of people.”

As already demonstrated, the 1973 Convention defined the Vietnamese citizens coming to Bulgaria as “practitioners” – a category which was insisted upon by the Vietnamese government. This definition is absent from the newly adopted 1980 Convention. Instead, the latter was signed under the title of “sending and receiving of Vietnamese qualified *workers* and engineering-technical *workers* to work in order to increase their qualification in the organizations in People’s Republic of Bulgaria⁴⁴ (emphasis mine).” As one can see, the internationalist signifier – increasing qualification – is kept intact, whereas the previous prestigious and less demanding *practitioner* is substituted by *worker*.

To recall the 1973 Convention, Misho Mishev’s reasons before Stanko Todorov for signing the document were that despite the seemingly different conditions offered by Vietnam, at the end of

⁴³ CSA. 1980.136/73/194. Memorandum.

⁴⁴ CSA 1980. 136/73/330. Agreement between the governments of PRB and SRV for the sending and receiving of Vietnamese qualified workers and engineering-technical workers for work and rising of their qualification in the economic organizations of PRB.

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the day, at least 1 500 Vietnamese citizens would remain in Bulgaria's factories for four years on average. Although not to the same degree, even back then, internationalism was mixed with a "national" interest. As Anderson⁴⁵ says, "[internationalism] only has currency as a back-construction referring to its opposite." Conversely, in 1980 this type of internationalism, the internationalism of duty towards fraternal Vietnam, was brushed aside and a new type of socialist foreign worker was constructed: one whose purpose was to produce value both for the sending and the receiving country.

The negotiations that took place in 1980 did not have to battle over how to define the subject of the Convention. The *worker* replaced the *practitioner*. This time, around 17 000 Vietnamese citizens were to be shipped to Bulgaria between 1981 and 1985. Their stay in the country could not be for less than five years. From these 17 000 workers, 10 000 were to work in construction; 4 000 in agriculture, 1 000 in engineering, 500 in metallurgy, 500 in transportation, 500 in forestry, and 500 in other branches of the economy. The number of women was to be "up to 15%". The reproduction of the socialist worker was much better secured as compared to what migrant workers were experiencing in the capitalist world: plenty of vacation days, free health care, cheap transport, and subsidized housing were not limited to "national" labour. The conditions of the contracts were severely altered from previous years, however. Language training, for example, was reduced from six to three months in 1980. Where the former was oriented towards learning "Bulgarian culture and traditions," the latter focused solely on issues concerning the labour process. Similar processes took place in Czechoslovakia: Alamgir suggests that Vietnam essentially supplied the country with a tax-paying workforce.⁴⁶ In Bulgaria, the Vietnamese labour was thought of as an asset that would "recover the costs incurred" **and** "accordingly create national income for the country."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Anderson, P. (2002) Internationalism: A Breviary. In: *New Left Review*, 14, March-April.

⁴⁶ Alamgir, A. (2013) Race Is Elsewhere: State Socialist Ideology and the Racialization of Vietnamese Workers in Czechoslovakia. In: *Race and Class*, 54(4), pp. 67-85.

⁴⁷ CSA. 1980. 136/73/194.

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The foreign workers came to be seen as mere mediators in credit payments between the Vietnamese and the Bulgarian states. As Vietnam's debt was once again restructured and related payments postponed, Bulgaria insisted that the transactions collected from Vietnamese migrants were made available to the Vietnamese state in order for the latter to pay off its credit.⁴⁸ Little by little, from 1980 to 1987, a substantial redefinition of internationalism has taken place. The "moralism of socialism" – solidarity and fraternal duty – was supplanted by mere economic logic. As such, Paragraph V, article 3 (V.3. hereafter) from the new Convention stipulated that "During his (sic!) work in PRB, the Vietnamese labourer is obliged to transfer 20% from his monthly wage in favor of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and his family after income tax deduction." By 1986, the funds raised due to the application of V.3. and VIII.1 – which postulated that Bulgaria pays Vietnam 300 BGN annually for each worker, in order to compensate for the accumulated work experience and subsequent social benefits such as pension and health insurance – were now to be included in the payment balance between the two countries. Each Vietnamese worker was now obliged to pay no less than 10% from her/his salary "in favor of the government of Vietnam". The latter simply meant that the Vietnamese workers were paying off the Vietnamese state debt towards Bulgaria⁴⁹.

Over the years of their presence in Bulgaria, the "need of Vietnamese workers" was reconceptualized a few times, each corresponding to particular political and economic developments. When the socialist regime fell in 1989, there were already signs of the upcoming dystopian scenario to unfold before the eyes of Bulgarian workers. Unemployment, homelessness, and increased levels of social insecurity were the first symptoms to accompany the so-called transition. As in every capitalist system, antagonism between "foreign" and "national" labour emerged strongly on the political scene in the country. The epitome of this antagonism was the Vietnamese worker.

⁴⁸ CSA. 1984. 259/4/625.

⁴⁹ As we learn from CSA 136/89/656, 12 998 941,38 BGN from 1986 to 1990 and 2 433 577,17 BGN for 1991 alone have been transferred for the repayment of Vietnam's debt, a sum accumulated based on the 10% charges mentioned above.

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Chasing foreign workers out

In the summer of 1991, if one was to open the short “criminal” section of the newspaper *Demokratsia* (Democracy) – a newspaper of the Union of Democratic Forces, the anti-communist opposition in Bulgaria – s/he would have stumbled upon the following⁵⁰:

The Vietnamese fly away as scheduled. In the fortress of “Krasna polyana” their number remains the same. Most often than not, they present their names to be Pak Sam Tuk (I am here yet again).

This short anecdote, which is meant to be humorous but instead hints at a specific form of racialisation of Vietnamese workers in Bulgaria, is an expression of a social antagonism that emerged strongly with the disassembling of the socialist regime in Bulgaria and the uncritical salutation of free markets and liberal democracy. Lurking behind this anecdote is a particularly dark chapter of the history of foreign labour in Bulgaria, when thousands were scheduled for expulsion, their contracts sacked, and social security discontinued. On the one hand, there are the Vietnamese workers who were scheduled to leave the country in bulk. Many anti-communist commentators in Bulgaria today justify these flights with “the working contracts which expired anyway” but this is not the case by all means. The beginning of the 1990s, which is also the beginning of the shock economic reforms in the country intended to develop an authentic free market, exemplifies the emergence of severe interclass antagonism where often the Vietnamese were framed as migrants who take away jobs and commit crime. I will turn to this antagonism and to the expulsion of foreigners from Bulgaria in the early 1990s later on.

The end of June 1989, just a few months before the 10th of November Plenum when Zhivkov was made resign, marked the beginning of what will eventually become a “normal” enmity toward foreign labour. That same month two incidents took place. On June 20th, over 100 Vietnamese workers were arrested and subjected to police search and painful interrogation. Just a few

⁵⁰ *Democratsiia* (1991) Krasna Polyana is a quarter in Sofia, where Vietnamese workers' dormitories were situated. The quarter became a metonymy for the “Vietnamese question” in the very late 1980s and the early 1990s.

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days afterwards, on June 29th, another instance of police brutality against Vietnamese workers took place. In the evening of that day, in the “Bulgaria” plant in Sofia, an argument broke out between Vietnamese and Bulgarian workers after one of the Vietnamese had made use of a forklift without permission. Upon a remark made by the head of the shift, Bulgarians and Vietnamese started quarreling in the assembly line hall but soon after that both groups went back to their duties. The militia [милиция], however, had already been called and upon entering the plant started beating the Vietnamese workers. It is not clear how many the victims were, but from a letter written by Kosta Andreev, secretary of the Central Council of the Bulgarian Trade Union, it appears that all of the Vietnamese who were in the plant at the time were subjected to the violent attack.

The next days were intense both in the plant and in the central trade union. While the Vietnamese workers declared a strike and stopped working for 14 shifts, the Union was trying to work out things with the Vietnamese embassy. Archival materials show that the Union considered the case under scrutiny extraordinary and unusual, an obvious break from the customary everyday. Throughout Andreev’s letter, one can read a genuine disappointment and puzzlement because of the actions of the militia. He fully agreed with the Secretariat of the General Confederation of Labour in Vietnam that this case could potentially harm the “friendship between the working people in both countries.” Andreev ensured his Vietnamese comrades that June will be the last month to witness such cases. The correspondence between Vietnam and Bulgaria regarding the incident ended with insurance on the part of the Bulgarian authorities that they would fully cooperate in order to protect the interests of the Vietnamese workers in Bulgaria. Just a few months later, such incidents became “normal,” albeit not in the factories but on the streets. The rampant racism directed towards Vietnamese citizens, the irregular work and currency trade that many (former) Vietnamese workers had to participate in so as to survive, and the numerous street fights, three of which ended with the murder of Vietnamese citizens by the militia, came to be known as the Vietnamese syndrome.⁵¹

⁵¹ In Bulgaria, the illegal currency trade that took place after 1989 is thought to be something peculiar to Vietnamese citizens. In fact, currency trade was a means of survival for many Bulgarians as well.

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1989 brought unseen rates of unemployment in Bulgaria. Where in April 1990, the official number of the unemployed was 20 000, in July that same year there were already 68 000 unemployed; whereas their number reached 77 300 people by the beginning of January 1991⁵². As other countries in the Eastern bloc, Bulgaria resorted to the “necessary” chasing out of foreign labour power. As Duma⁵³ writes, “Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia are trying to fix the problems [stemming from unemployment] by returning in the shortest terms possible the remaining foreign labour, most of whom are Vietnamese.” To decrease social pressure, Bulgaria undertook swift measures to get rid of one of the most immediate capitalist contradictions, namely foreign labour.

On July 26, 1990, the Council of Ministers, at the time under the leadership of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, passed Decision #163 “for creating conditions for an accelerated return of the contingent of Vietnamese workers.”⁵⁴ The decision came just after the May 1990 meeting between Bulgarian and Vietnamese delegations, which were discussing the problems at hand. At that time, 23 000 Vietnamese citizens resided in Bulgaria. In a letter to Andrey Lukanov, Boyko Dimitrov,⁵⁵ the then minister of interior, presented the problem in this way:

For many of [the Vietnamese workers] speculation has become a major source of income... as a result, there is an increased discontent among the public. There are numerous critical materials in the mass media. The negative attitudes against the Vietnamese workers in the given socio-economic situation could easily lead to more serious incidents. We cannot underestimate the potential danger stemming from exploiting the problem in the course of the election campaign.

Lukanov’s cabinet decided to send off the Vietnamese citizens as soon as possible and scheduled for the first returns – around 4 500 people – to take place before December 1990. In addition, those who have been fired from their jobs would be compensated with 100% of their salaries the first month, 90% the second, and

⁵² *Democratsiia*. January 7, 1991.

⁵³ *Duma*. July 20, 1990.

⁵⁴ CSA. 1990. 136/85/347.

⁵⁵ CSA. 1990. 136/85/347.

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80% the third month. It was also stipulated that those workers who were waiting for their flights were allowed to remain in the dormitories and that the Bulgarian state would defray their leaving. As Lukanov resigned in December that same year, the cabinet never executed this plan in its entirety. The coalition cabinet of Popov and its successor, the cabinet of the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF) – the first democratic government of post-1989 Bulgaria, completed the return scheme.⁵⁶

The Vietnamese workers were not the only group to be subjected to expulsion from Bulgaria in the dawn of liberal democracy. The foreign worker, in the 1990s to be “promoted” to just the foreigner, was among the most dangerous enemies of the liberal democrats. On August 5, 1991, the Council of Ministers took Decision #246: to “carry out measures in order to prevent potential complications of internal and international nature stemming from the large group of foreigners residing in the country.” In it, the citizens of 80 countries were listed as potentially dangerous.⁵⁷ It is important to mention here that expulsion from the country was not executed without resistance. Visible protests were organized by Vietnamese citizens who had just acquired the status of “unemployed” in February 1991.⁵⁸ Similarly, reacting against Decision #246, Nigerian citizens, now stamped by the seal “illegal,” threatened to bomb the plane if they were expelled.⁵⁹

Defining foreigners as danger was in junction with and in a response to the ongoing liquidation of industries and subsequent rise of unemployment and “illegal” work practices. The Transition quickly brought forward the conflict between foreign and national labour, typical for capitalist economies. As division of labour under state socialism created a mass of low-skilled foreign labour that was now considered superfluous and useless, companies in the early 1990s thought it wise to apologize for being “forced” to hire this labour. As the CEO of a chemical factory in Vidin shared in an

⁵⁶ Certainly, many Vietnamese remained in Bulgaria either irregularly or because of marriage arrangements.

⁵⁷ CSA. 1991. 136/87/556.

⁵⁸ *Duma*. February 28, 1991.

⁵⁹ *Duma*. August 12, 1991.

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interview after a protest against the hiring of foreign labourers organized by the newly established trade union Podkrepa⁶⁰:

Until now we had 250 Vietnamese workers but they are going away. We announced the new jobs in Vidin but nobody wants them. We solve the labour question by hiring Soviet workers for a year. And this is absolutely lawful since there are no [Bulgarian] candidates.⁶¹

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It remains crucial that labor migration during really existing socialism and the logics underpinning the regulation of these movements are closely examined. This is so because the emergence of new racisms and social inequalities have to be challenged in radical ways and hence, treated historically. As I showed, “illegality” – one of the major political categories today – was a central issue of debate between the socialist and capitalist blocs. To understand the production of “illegality” therefore, we need to understand the political stakes and battles involved in its underpinning. So it goes for any political category. We must defeat the uncritical invocation of categories such as “illegal immigrants,” “bogus asylum-seeker,” “social benefit tourist,” “poverty migrant,” “faked self-employed,” “Roma migrants,” “climate refugees,” etc. The emergence of these categories is determined by class struggles. The naming of these categories often interiorizes the historical re/production of certain types of labor and labor fragmentation. In the essay above, I attempted to open the door for a timely discussion and namely, the role of movement during state socialism. A discussion, I hope, that will not limit itself to a specific historical moment but that will be able to transmit a message to the current political moment.

⁶⁰ *Podkrepa* was founded in February 1989 as an opposition to the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Central Trade Union in the country.

⁶¹ *Duma*. January 23, 1991.

Conflicting Meanings and Practices of Work. Bulgarian Roma as Citizens and Migrants

by Neda Deneva

“Poverty migration” is one of the leading tropes in the current moral panic discourse entertained by numerous Western European politicians and mainstream media. This discourse describes the “influx” of Eastern European migrants who supposedly ‘abuse’ the already stretched welfare systems of the Western states. The migrants do so by applying for social benefits, while simultaneously getting engaged in irregular labour. The image of the ‘abuser’ is that of a low-skilled and poor migrant who tricks the affluent Western state by milking social benefits without contributing by way of taxes and regular employment. In this way, the ‘abuser’ is violating the main principles of citizenship by using rights contained in a citizenship status (EU citizenship) without contributing, and indeed behaving, like a citizen. This sort of rhetoric is particularly strong in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands, the countries that have recently lifted labour restrictions for Bulgarians and Romanians in January 2014. When Eastern European migrants are not contrasted against the local citizens, the moral divide is made between the wanted and unwanted migrants. Then, the distinction is built along the lines of legal and regular work versus welfare exploitation.

The same undertones are to be observed in the local Bulgarian mainstream media and the discourses of the political elites. The figure of the lazy, non-working abuser, relying on social benefits, is the opposite of the proper, diligent, hardworking citizen. In the Bulgarian context, the so constructed moral opposition comes with a racializing move. The opposite of the proper citizen is the Roma. Both when referring to good versus bad migrants, and more generally good versus bad citizens, the division goes along the ethnic-racial line of blaming the Roma. In the Bulgarian context, the Roma are those who do not want to work and misuse the welfare

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system by not paying any taxes or social contributions, but instead birthing numerous children for the sake of benefits. This stereotype is so deeply entrenched in the public imaginary that no data proving the opposite can shake it.¹ In both contexts, the common thread in constructing a moral distinction between good and bad migrants/citizens is the narrow understanding of work as regular employment, which is then defined as the only legitimate way of becoming a worthy citizen. Everyone outside this narrow category is then placed in the category of the welfare abuser/benefit tourist and rendered an unworthy citizen.

Over the last decades, work has become more flexible and precarious with many categories of work not fitting the definitions of productive labour and standard employment both in the post-socialist countries and in the post-industrial Western Europe. This has created the conditions for an omnipresent irregularity of work, especially at the level of the low-skilled. The work that is available to the category of the low-skilled, impoverished, and ethnically discriminated does not allow them access to standard employment, both in their position of citizens and of migrants. This paper traces the experience of the irregular workers as citizens at home and as migrants within the EU, in order to show the blurred boundaries between these statuses in the current work regimes. In this way, I seek to show the intrinsically intertwined processes of changing content and meanings of work and the implications this has for access to citizenship in the context of intensive migratory practices. There is interdependency, I argue, between a particular narrow understanding of legitimate work as paid and regular employment and the exclusionary mechanism, which creates non-worthy citizens irrespective of their status of EU migrants or full citizens

Drawing on the case of Bulgarian Roma from the region of Shumen migrating to the Netherlands, I explore the different forms of low-skilled, irregular labour and other means of making a living and the meanings that are invested in these forms of labour by various actors – the Roma migrants, the institutional stakeholders and local government, the mainstream media discourses, and

¹ Zahariev, B. (2012) *The Roma in the Pension System and in the System for Social Support* [Ромите в пенсионната система и системата за социално подпомагане]. OSF, Sofia. www.osf.bg/cyeds/downloads/roma_social_benefits_feb_2012.pdf. Accessed December 19, 2014.

the political elites. Thus I seek to understand the mechanisms by which transformations of work result in excluding certain categories of workers from access to full citizenship, both symbolically and practically. The main focus is on the changing work practices and their interpretations by the workers themselves, which are evolving in the background of the radicalizing exclusionary discourses and definitions of the institutions and various publics both in Bulgaria and in the Netherlands.

My ethnographic research took place mainly in three villages in the Shumen region in the North East of Bulgaria. I have conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews during five research trips over the period of one year in 2013 and 2014 with villagers in active working age, most of whom are Roma. I have also conducted interviews with institutional actors like social workers and local government officials. The three villages are in close proximity of the town of Shumen and all have significant Roma population. I have collected migrant stories about the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. The majority of the migrants, however, were going most often to the Netherlands. For the purposes of this paper, I focus only on the work practices in the Netherlands, even though many of the people had experience in the other two countries as well.

Irregularity of work and reconfigurations of citizenship: interconnections in the context of migration

The paper is situated at the intersection of three conceptual fields: citizenship, migration, and work. It focuses on the changing meanings and practices of work in the context of migration and investigates the processes of re-configuration of citizenship. There is a striking gap between studies of irregular migrant labour and studies of precarious labour conditions of local citizens. The concepts of regularity and irregularity have been widely discussed in the migration literature. However, a large part of this research replicates the view of migration management policies in adopting a pre-given distinction between legitimate and illegitimate mobility. It thus discusses irregularity through an objectivist perspective

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defining it as a pre-given status of illegitimacy.² 'Irregular', 'illegal', 'clandestine' or 'undocumented' migration is commonly framed in a discourse of securitization and criminalization describing illegitimate forms of international migration in which the irregular migrant is perceived as a non-citizen who enters or resides in a nation-state without authorization, or works without authorization. This approach positions the migrant in opposition to the 'regular' subject of the nation-state, i.e. the citizen or the authorized migrant, through categories crafted by the state.³ Such emphasis on status produces vulnerability in terms of access to rights and provisions⁴, propensity to exploitive conditions of work, precariousness,⁵ and coping strategies in the interplay between provisions and exclusion.⁶ This understanding fails to capture the in-between state of various types of irregular conditions of work within a regular status, which might affect migrants and citizens alike. The case under scrutiny here presents workers who experience irregular working conditions despite their regular status as citizens and EU migrants. Unpacking this requires a conceptualization of irregu-

² Squire, V. (2011) *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Politicising Mobility, Mobilising Politics*. In: Squire, V. (ed.) *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*. London:New York: Routledge, pp. 1–25.

³ Jordan, B., and Franck Düvell (2002) *Irregular Migration: The Dilemmas of Transnational Mobility*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

⁴ Willen, S. (2007a) Exploring "Illegal" and "Irregular" Migrants' Lived Experiences of Law and State Power. In: *International Migration*, 45(3) pp.2–7.

⁵ Bloch, A., Nando Sigona, and Roger Zetter (2009) *"No Right to Dream": The Social and Economic Lives of Young Undocumented Migrants in Britain*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation; Calavita, K. (2005) *Immigrants at the Margins: Law, Race, and Exclusion in Southern Europe*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Chimienti, M., and Ch Achermann. (2007) Coping Strategies of Precarious Migrants in Relation to Personal Health and Health Structures: The Case of Asylum Seekers and Undocumented Migrants in Switzerland. In: C. Björngren Cuadra and S. Cattacin (eds.) *Difference sensitivity from an organisational perspective*. Malmö: IMER, pp. 65–74; Coutin, Susan B. (2003) *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants' Struggle for US Residency*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Ellermann, A. (2010) Undocumented Migrants and Resistance in the Liberal State. In: *Politics & Society*, 38(3), pp. 408–29.

larity as a process and condition that is produced and contested, resisted or appropriated through struggles and negotiations.⁷

The other conceptual thread that this paper builds on is concerned with transformations of citizenship, in which there is a growing discrepancy between formal (legal status) and substantive (practices and enactments of rights and obligations) citizenship. Coded as a 'disaggregation of citizenship'⁸ or 'mutations of citizenship'⁹, this is the process in which citizenship rights (political, social, civil, cultural etc) – once bound together as an ensemble and depending on legal status and a territorial bond in a nation state – are being fragmented and detached from each other. One effect of this disaggregation is the prevention of certain individuals with formal status from enjoying full citizenship rights. In this way formal citizens can be excluded from access to social rights for example and become what Margaret Somers calls the 'internally stateless'.¹⁰ This process has been described by her as 'marketization of citizenship', in which the relationship between citizens and the state becomes contractual and based on the value of the citizen as a tax-paying productive worker, thus wiping away the universality of rights conditioned by holding a status. In this framework, the 'unproductive' individuals are deemed undeserving and are at risk of being excluded from access to their rights and entitlements as citizens.

EU citizenship in particular favours the understanding of the citizen as a worker¹¹ and relies on a narrow conception of work

⁷ This is the approach offered in studies such as: Bloch, Alice, and Milena Chimienti (2013) *Irregular Migrants: Policy, Politics, Motives and Everyday Lives*. Routledge; Nicholas, P. (2002) Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31:419–47; Squire, Ibid.

⁸ Benhabib, S. (2004) *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Benhabib, S. (2007) Twilight of Sovereignty or the Emergence of Cosmopolitan Norms? Rethinking Citizenship in Volatile Times. In: *Citizenship Studies*, 11(1), pp. 19–36.

⁹ Ong, A. (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

¹⁰ Somers, M. (2008) *Genealogies of Citizenship: Knowledge, Markets, and the Right to Have Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Hancock, L. (1999) Citizenship on the Margins: The Case of Divorce in Western Europe. In: Holmes, L. and Philomena Murray (eds.) *Citizenship and Identity in*

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as regular paid employment, which excludes a large number of work categories like part-time work, care work and reproductive labour, non-standard forms of employment, and irregular work from access to citizenship entitlements.¹² In this way citizenship provisions become conditional rather than universal, in a similar process of marketization and contractualization as described by Somers¹³, which favours an individualistic view of the citizen as autonomous agent and regular worker. While scholars have researched this process in the context of migration, my contention is to point at new contexts and show how this narrow definition of citizenship, depending on a particular type of work, effectively excludes citizens and migrants alike from access to rights. It also renders certain categories unworthy and illegitimate, positioning them outside the domain of recognition and access to entitlements based on their position as non-workers.

Empoverishment, racialization and dispossession of Roma in Bulgaria: the case of Shumen

The region of Shumen is in the North East of Bulgaria and ranks among the poorer regions in the country. The share of urban population is lower than the average for the country – 62.6% (with 73% for the country). The structure of the economy differs from the rest of the country with agriculture having a considerably higher share at the expense of the service and industry sectors. Agriculture is mainly specialized in cereal and industrial crops which are highly mechanized and need very little manpower. Currently, the officially registered level of unemployment for the region is the highest for

Europe. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, pp. 97–119.

¹² Ackers, L. (2004) Citizenship, Migration and the Valuation of Care in the European Union. In: *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 30(2), pp. 373–96; McGlynn, C. (2000) A Family Law for the European Union. In: Shaw, J. (ed.) *Social law and policy in an evolving European Union*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 223–42; Stychin, C. (2000) Consumption, Capitalism and the Citizen: Sexuality and Equality Rights Discourse in the European Union. In: Shaw, J. (ed.) *Social Policy in an Evolving European Union*, Hart, London. Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 259–76.

¹³ Somers, *Ibid*.

the country with 26% (double than the national average of 12.9% for 2013).

During state socialism, and particularly in the period of the late 1970s and the 1980s, the Roma from the region of Shumen have been engaged in regular state employment either as low-skilled workers in heavy industry factories or in the state run agricultural cooperatives. Before 1989 employment was full and mandatory. From the vantage point of the socialist state, Bulgarian workers derived their worth and value exclusively from their work. In the period after 1989, de-industrialization, restructuring, and privatization resulted in processes similar to the rest of the country¹⁴ and other post-industrial areas¹⁵, such as high number of layoffs and general deregulation and flexibilization of labour, which led to long-term unemployment and substantial impoverishment of the population. By 1992, most of the heavy and mining industry collapsed, while the agricultural cooperatives were dissolved and privatized. Worst affected were the peasants and the low-skilled workers.

The Roma across the country suffered the most severe drop in employment – it decreased by 37-66% after 1989.¹⁶ In the period 1990–2001, there was a permanent increase in Roma unemployment and in duration of unemployment. In 2007, the average unemployment period for the Roma was eight years and 28% of the Roma had never been employed for more than six consecutive months.¹⁷ What made the Roma situation even worse in comparison to the low-skilled and rural ethnic Bulgarian or Turkish population was that they did not own land or animal stock before the collectivization in 1945-1958. In addition, according to the new Land Law only ex-owners of land could become members of the new agricultural cooperatives, which automatically excluded the

¹⁴ Kofti, D. (2013) *Everything Is New but Everything Is the Same: Transformations of Labor in a Factory in Bulgaria*. PhD Thesis. London: University College London.

¹⁵ Dunn, E. (2004) *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Mollona, M. (2009) *Made in Sheffield: An Ethnography of Industrial Work and Politics*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

¹⁶ Tomova, I. (2009) The Roma in Bulgaria: Education and Employment. In: *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 2*, p. 49.

¹⁷ Tomova, I. (2011) Different, but Equal? Ethnicity and the Construction of Inequality [*Различни, но равни? Етническите неравенства В България*]. In: *Naselenie*, 1-2, pp. 93–121.

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Roma. In the following years, a new law was introduced allowing landless villagers to receive up to 5 decares (50 ares) of land to cultivate without paying rent. However, the impoverishment and unemployment of the recent years made it impossible for most of them to buy seeds and fertilizers, to rent machines for cultivation, and to wait for the harvest and the returns that is why most of them did not take up this opportunity.¹⁸ Thus, in the process of dissolution of the old cooperatives and land restitution, the rural Roma became the ultimate losers.

According to the last census in 2011, the share of people who identify themselves as ethnically Roma in the country is 4.9%. In the rural areas this share is 8%.¹⁹ According to expert estimations the share is even higher with an average of 9-10% across the country.²⁰ For the region of Shumen the ethnic distribution in 2011 shows 8.24% Roma and 30.3% Turks (with 8.8% average for the country). The majority of the Roma in the region master Turkish, along with Romani and Bulgarian language, and many of them identify as Turks in statistical surveys, trying to avoid more extreme ethnic discrimination. In the villages where I have conducted fieldwork, ethnic Bulgarians have decreased substantially over the last decades with younger people outmigrating to Shumen, other cities or abroad. Bulgarian neighbourhoods (*mahalas*) are now mostly populated by the elderly. Thus in all three villages, there is a clear generational and ethnic division between the 'young' Roma and the 'old' Bulgarian inhabitants.

As a response to the widespread unemployment and poverty in the region of Shumen and in the country as a whole, the Roma of this region have been massively migrating to Germany and the Netherlands after 2001, when Bulgaria was removed from the EU negative Schengen visa list and Bulgarian citizens were able to travel freely without visa restrictions across the EU for up to three months. After 2007 the rates of labour migration continued to be high, irrespective of the restrictions to free access to the labour market of some EU countries (like the Netherlands). Additional factors such as ethnic discrimination on the domestic labour market operate to hasten their decision to leave Bulgaria. The marginality

¹⁸ Tomova (2009) Ibid.

¹⁹ www.censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/1/2/R7.aspx. Accessed December 19, 2014.

²⁰ Tomova (2011) Ibid.

of their class positioning and ethnic discrimination are entangled in further conditioning their low position in the present structures of power and inequality.

The Roma migration profile neatly fits and fuels the stereotype of the ‘poverty migrant’. Some work irregularly in short-term jobs ranging from domestic services, construction work, road repairs, and factory work – in arrangements bordering legality. Others find a source of income in regularized forms of begging, selling street newspapers or playing music in designated street spots. In addition, most of them rely heavily on various forms of social benefits, sometimes participating in fraud schemes. Back in Bulgaria, they live in a region where the few available activities are extremely precarious, flexible, and in most cases irregular: gathering and selling of herbs, working seasonally in agriculture, cutting trees, and other short-term seasonal jobs, all paid per piece, without any contracts or even day wages. For these Roma, making a living is a transnational endeavour combining short-term irregular labour migration, small irregular jobs in Bulgaria, and social assistance from various sources both in Bulgaria and abroad. In the next section I look in more details at the varying labour arrangements and the interpretations and meanings invested in them by different actors.

Practices and meanings of work: performing labour vs. being employed

According to the Bulgarian Labour Code and the Law for Healthy and Safe Labour Conditions, a ‘working person’ is “every person, who has been employed by an employer, or works for him\herself”²¹ Whether being bound by contract with an employer or self-employed, the ‘working person’ is obliged to pay income tax and social contributions, as defined in the Social Insurance Code.²² This definition of ‘working person’ restricts work to the domain of contractual and regular employment and ties work to social contributions and tax. The categories of informal employment

²¹ Labour Code, www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/1594373121 and Law for Healthy and Safe Labour Conditions, www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134178305. Accessed December 19, 2014.

²² Social Insurance Code, www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/1597824512.

Accessed December 19, 2014.

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or irregular work are not mentioned in the law as such, with one exception in the Labour Code, which specifies that 'a worker, who provides his/her labour force without a labour contract'²³ shall be subject to a fine. The lack of such categories in law and policies leaves informally employed workers or irregular workers without any legal protection from exploitation or violation on the part of the employer.

Moreover, the absence creates a dichotomy that renders a wide spectrum of labour practices outside of the domain of formal employment as invisible and even non-existent.²⁴ In this dichotomy, the only legitimate work is the one that falls under the category of formal employment, which qualifies the rest of the labour practices as non-work. The result is that those who are involved in such practices fall out of the category of the worker altogether. It is in this dichotomy that state institutions and their representatives in Bulgaria operate when relating to irregular workers. The media and the political elites take it further in a moralizing move, in which the dichotomy overlaps with the opposition between the good worker and the bad, undeserving non-worker who abuses the welfare system.

While the Netherlands do offer some form of legal protection for irregular and undocumented workers – thus acknowledging the presence of informal employment, their existence as cheap and exploitable labour force needed by the labour market remains hidden. These labour practices are muted and the conditions which make them possible are ignored in the public discourse. The Dutch and other Western European media and politicians obscure the existence of a variety of labour practices along the spectrum of

²³ Until 2012, only the employer was fined for hiring workers irregularly, i.e. without contracts. Since 2012, the responsibility is shared by the employee as well.

²⁴ Informal employment has been broadly defined as a labour activity which is licit in every sense other than being registered or declared to the state for tax or benefit purposes (see European Commission (1998) *Communication of the Commission on Undeclared Work*; ILO. (2002) *Decent Work and the Informal Economy*. Geneva: International Labour Office). Despite the many problematic uses of the stark opposition between formal and informal employment, the category contains in itself the potential for acknowledging such labour practices as employment.

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formal/informal or regular/irregular employment²⁵. In this move, similarly to Bulgaria, work that does not fit the narrow definition of regular employment is made invisible and a new opposition is crafted, where irregular work is substituted by welfare abuse. The workers is opposed to the welfare abuser in what becomes a moral dichotomy between the good local citizen versus the migrant, or the good working migrant versus the bad 'benefit tourist'.

In what follows I discuss in more details the types of work that Roma villagers from the region of Shumen have access to and engage in, both at home and as migrants. I trace the various strategies employed for making a living through the existing labour opportunities. I contrast these actual labour practices and the meanings that are invested in them by the Roma villagers with the conflicting views and interpretations of state officials and of media images discarding and delegitimizing these same practices.

Day labourers

Construction work in Rotterdam

The low-skilled construction worker has by now become the stereotypical image of the Eastern European migrant. Many of the Roma villagers fit neatly in this image. They take up small temporary jobs for money way below the legal minimum wage, and they work irregularly with no contract, social benefits or taxes. Speaking Turkish is a major asset and is one of the reasons for choosing the Netherlands (along with Germany and Belgium) for a destination country. Using their knowledge of the Turkish language, the Roma migrants from Shumen insert themselves in dense networks of local Turkish middlemen and employers, who are usually

²⁵ The specifics of the Dutch law and the policies on undocumented workers and informal employment are beyond the scope of this paper, yet they are crucial for an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms whereby regulations are translated into bureaucratic attitudes and public behaviours. The main reason for leaving this aspect aside is that the Bulgarian Roma migrants have no knowledge of their rights as workers and rarely have interaction with the institutions on such matters. Being entrapped in informal networks, they remain outside the domain of social workers and organizations dealing with these issues. For this reason, the analysis here only focuses on the most widespread public discourses as reflected in the media.

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second generation migrants from Turkey, already well incorporated. Besides work, the Turkish middlemen also may provide accommodation and assistance with address registration and other information on social benefits. Most people I met did not learn Dutch having the support network of the Turkish middlemen. But this intermediary level also closed for them direct access to Dutch employers, employment agencies, or social workers, which reinforces capsulation and allows for dependency and exploitation.

Kircho²⁶, a young man in his late twenties, had just returned from Rotterdam a few weeks ago when we met. I asked him how he would usually find work:

"You hang out in the café with the other migrants. And you wait. And then, someone, who knows someone, who knows a local Turk, calls you and says: 'we need two extra workers for a small job. Find someone free and be at this and this address tomorrow at eight.' So I call another friend and we go. We usually work a week, ten days, we get our day wage (nadrnitsa) and then we are back in the same café. And we wait."

The café functions as the piazza for day labourers with no need for the employer to recruit in person. A network of acquaintances mobilized by phone works just as well. Once the job is finished, Kircho is back in the café, waiting for the next phone call. Sometimes he would not even see the Turk who hired him. He would join a team of workers renovating a flat, do his part of the job (say lay the tiles in a bathroom), get his money from the team leader, and move on. The money he got per day was about 40 Euro for ten hours work (almost twice lower than the minimum daily wage set by the government to 69.31 Euro for eight hours per day, and three times lower than the one defined in the collective agreement for unskilled workers in construction, which is 11.8 Euro per hour).²⁷ Generally, his engagements lasted between a couple of days and a week. If he was lucky, he would only stay in the café for a few days and get a new job.

²⁶ All names have been changed in order to keep the anonymity of the respondents.

²⁷ The minimum hourly wage is 8.64 Euro/hour. www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/minimumloon/vraag-en-antwoord/hoe-hoog-is-het-minimumloon.html. Accessed December 19, 2014.

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Kircho was staying in one of the 'immigrant flats' rented by Turks, paying five Euro per night for a bed in a room with another three men, sharing the flat with 10 people. Several times over the year no one called with jobs for weeks, Kircho ran out of money and had to go back home, catching the first minibus. Back in Bulgaria, depending on the season, he would go in the forest for herbs, walnuts or wild mushrooms to make ends meet, until he would get fed up and go back to Rotterdam to 'try his luck again'. Eventually Kircho took several tasks one after the other for the same Turkish middleman who offered him a job as a driver for the construction materials shop he owned. The wage was per week, slightly better than what he got as construction worker. He continued working irregularly, with no contract. A few times his boss called him not to come to the shop, because there might be a check up of the workers' documents and contracts and he only wanted those with regular contracts there. He was not paid for the day he missed. Eventually, the Turkish boss got in some sort of trouble, closed down this part of his business and did not need Kircho anymore. After falling out of his construction work networks, Kircho found it difficult to find work as he used to earlier. A few weeks later, he found himself on a minibus back to Bulgaria, where I met him, without a clear idea where he will proceed in his search of work.²⁸

Working irregularly through Turkish middlemen was perceived as the only available option by most of the migrants also because until January 2014 access to the Dutch labour market was restricted for Bulgarians. The Turks offering irregular jobs were considered as the only possibility for working in the Netherlands and the conditions were not questioned by anyone. Yet, many of the people I talked to in the summer of 2013 learned from me that the restrictions would be lifted and they would, at least on paper, have access to regular jobs under better conditions. This would also allow them to approach Dutch employers willing to offer regular work directly or to require contracts from the Turkish em-

²⁸ Similar pattern of work can be traced among those who work in the back of shops, loading and arranging products, or in doner shops, employed again by local Turks. These highly precarious and insecure jobs are paid per day. Irregular workers may be asked not to come back at any given time. When there is a risk of check-up, they are told not to come at all, without being paid a daily wage for the days they miss.

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ployers. Not only did they hear this from me for the first time, but they were also not particularly impressed by this news. “*It won’t matter if we can work with contracts,*” Kircho told me, in what was a commonly reiterated view, “*since we won’t get such jobs anyway. Without speaking the language and always going to the Turks, how will we get jobs with contracts for the Dutch?*”

The connection through language with the local Turks and close dependence on these ethnic/language based networks is indeed a double-edged sword.²⁹ While it facilitates the initial fast entry into the labour market, it also predefines a very limited niche of the labour market with irregular jobs under exploitable conditions. This niche is closed and impermeable towards the outside and creates strong dependencies. In this context the change in status – from migrant with restricted rights to EU citizen with equal labour rights, makes little difference in practice, since there is continuous demand for cheap irregular labour and the only available jobs continue being organized through exploitative intermediary sub-contractors.

From the point of view of the Dutch state, Kircho and those working like him do not exist as workers. Their labour practices are not acknowledged as such. Kircho might enter the public interest only as a trespasser, if his employer gets caught, and as a welfare tourist (or abuser), was he to apply for housing or children benefits. The lack of public interest in him as labour force and the conditions under which he is compelled to work rarely constitute a topic for public discussion. In this way, Kircho is rendered invisible and his work – unrecognized as such. As a non-worker who might apply for some form of social benefits though, he will be qualified as one of the benefit tourists whose migration to the Netherlands is with the sole purpose to live off benefits. This view not only masks the workings/logic of the labour market which demands

²⁹ On this issue see Kloosterman, R., Joanne Van Der Leun, and Jan Rath (1999) Mixed Embeddedness: (In)formal Economic Activities and Immigrant Businesses in the Netherlands. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23 (2), pp. 252–66. Also, compare with Deneva, N. (2013) *Assembling Fragmented Citizenship: Bulgarian Muslim Migrants at the Margins of Two States*. PhD Thesis, Budapest: Central European University on how Bulgarian Muslim migrants in Spain get access directly to the Spanish employers and what negotiating powers are available for them based on this direct relation.

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workers like Kircho, but also fails to acknowledge the making of an indispensable subject of the market whose exploitability depends on him being simultaneously made illegitimate as a worker and hence as a 'presence' in the country.

Agricultural work in the Shumen region

At the central square in the village of Salmanovo a middle aged, heavy man with the looks of a boss was sitting with his coffee and his pack of cigarettes at a table in the café. It was around five in the afternoon. The square was empty; the café did not have any other visitors. The owner invited me to sit with him and the man. I wanted to meet with people who have been abroad and was told to wait for the women working in the fields to return from work. The women started coming, one by one, passing by our table. The heavy man would take a wad of banknotes out of his pocket and hand each of them 10 leva (five Euro). Two of the women, middle aged, tired, with headscarves guarding them from the heat, sat with us, invited by the shop owner. They have both been to the Netherlands together with other members of their families, but now both were working on the field, picking peppers. We talked of life and work in the Netherlands, while sipping from our coffees. When we stood up to go meet their relatives, the man gave them each their daily wage of 10 leva and asked whether they were coming the next day. They both nodded and we left. On the way to their house, they complained how tough it was to work all day long in the sun, constantly bowing. *"At this age,"* said the one, *'your lower back simply doesn't hold the same way as before. But... what choice do we have when we are here. That's the only work available.'*

Seasonal agricultural work is scarce in the region due to the transformations in agriculture that took place over the last decades in Bulgaria turning it into a highly mechanized large scale enterprise focused mainly on cereal and industrial crops. The few smaller scale agricultural owners grow peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and employ mostly elderly women for the work in the fields. The day wage amounts to less than the minimum salary of 300 leva (150 Euro) per month, and like every seasonal work, it is only available for a few months per year. Women usually combine this work with migration in the winter months or rely on other family members through remittances, in case they are left to take care of a child from the extended family. At this age, it is difficult for most

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of these women to find any other job in Bulgaria. The few jobs available in small workshops and factories or in the service sector in Shumen only take younger workers.

On the way up to her house, one of the two women tells me that she joined her son and daughter the previous year in the Netherlands for a few months in the winter. *'I worked there for a bit and made some money, better than what I can get from the social benefits here. At least I didn't stay completely idle all day long.'* The work was selling newspapers on the street together with her daughter. This year she did not plan to return there, because her grandson was going to high school in Bulgaria and someone had to take care of him. She was going to get the child benefits money (35 leva per month), combine it with some social benefits for heating, and rely on her relatives abroad for making ends meet.

"We go and we come back. All the time, all the time. That's what the kids do as well. Now they are here for two months in the summer. They go around and play at weddings. Then, in October they will go again to Holland, work as musicians on the street there. ... The daughter-in-law came back in December. It was too cold for her to sell newspapers on the street. But she went again in March."

The elderly women engaged in this kind of agricultural work have little opportunities for finding other types of jobs. The few places in local workshops or in the service industry are occupied by much younger workers. They are also not in a position to register as long-term unemployed and receive the meagre minimum guaranteed income which the state provides, because of the pattern of their irregular work. In order to qualify, a long-term unemployed person should have been registered with the unemployment bureau for at least six months. After that the person gets registered for a workfare programme which grants 70 per cent of the guaranteed minimum (which amounts to 47 leva or 24 Euro per month) and requires 14 days of part-time communal work. Signing once a month in the regional unemployment bureau (which is in the regional centre, i.e. in Shumen) is also mandatory. The 47 leva per month are obviously not an amount of money that one can live off. Working 14 out of 20 days aims at making it impossible to combine this with irregular work, i.e. the seasonal work or the short migrant trips that actually allow them to make ends

meet. The requirement for 6 months prior registration is a further hurdle for seasonal agricultural workers to receive the benefit in the months in which they have no work. And the monthly trips to the city for signatures cost 6 leva out of the total of 47 leva. All these normative regulations position workers like the agricultural irregular workers simultaneously outside the domain of legitimate employment and outside the domain of unemployment.³⁰

The social worker in the unemployment bureau is one of the institutional stakeholders that I approached to talk about this issue. Her interpretation of the general situation in the rural area of Shumen was the following: *'The only ones left there are the Roma. And they don't want to work. They don't want to be helped. We offer them this support [unemployment registration and the guaranteed minimum]. But they don't even come to register. Imagine, if they don't want to work 14 days part-time, how would they work full time, if they were to find employment? ... it all comes down to laziness and wanting to get everything without efforts (nagotovo).'*" I confronted her with the example of the women who work 8 to 10 hours a day under very difficult conditions, asking her whether this did not qualify as work. Confused, she first agreed that this is indeed work. But then quickly added: *"But this is not real work. This is seasonal. And also, like this, without any contract, they can always choose not to go one day, or for a whole week. They have no responsibility. So it is not real work."*

The rest of the institutional representatives I interviewed had a similar understanding. Everyone knows of the agricultural work where mostly elderly women are engaged. And everyone knows that the employers and their middlemen are the local bosses. Just as everyone knows that none of these women are employed with a contract regularly, not because they are trying to avoid taxes or benefits, but because they are not even offered this possibility. And nevertheless, the labour of these women is not recognized as work by any of the state officials. They are either lumped together in one indistinct and general category with *'all these Roma villagers who do not work and only live off benefits'*, as described by an employee in the Regional Directorate for Social Support, or dis-

³⁰ The problem of access and use of social benefits is much more complex than the scope of this paper. I use this example here only to hint to the conflicting realms of work, employment, unemployment and welfare that are in constant interaction.

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carded as *'seasonal workers who are only willing to engage in short term work, but then lie [izlezhavat se] all winter long'* by the social worker responsible for social benefits in one of the villages. In that way, even the labour practice which is recognized as such is cast away and made invisible or non-existent through the category of non-workers, who are also qualified as lazy and relying only on benefits. This new reality that is created by the institutional representatives easily corresponds to the widely spread stereotypes of the non-working Roma and makes the actual work performed seem unreal.

The frozen vegetables factory

Industry in the region is very limited. There are very few factories still functioning, most of them highly mechanized and employing only a small number of workers. The Roma peasants rarely have access to these jobs. The formal requirement for most jobs, even the low skilled ones, is secondary education (12 years) and many of the Roma do not qualify at all having maximum 8th grade. Those who do have the necessary education and are qualified (e.g. mechanics and drivers) often report discrimination when trying to apply for a job. There are also the smaller food factories, like the frozen vegetables factory, about 15 kilometres from the village, which employs manual workers to pack vegetables.

A woman in her 30s with a severe cold in the middle of the summer tells me about the conditions, while holding her 9-months old baby, who also has a cold. She has been working in the factory for a few months. Every day a minibus collected her along with other women from the village and drove her for the nine hour shift in the factory. They worked in freezing temperatures, with no proper clothing, with four 15 minutes breaks throughout the day. The only 'equipment' they got were the sanitary gloves they had to wear when dealing with the vegetables. While talking, she shows me her hands. *"They get blue, the fingers, after a few hours of work. There are days in which I don't really feel them. Touching those vegetables all day long is really difficult."* The daily wage is 15 leva, paid cash at the end of each shift. There is no contract, no benefits, no security, and no arrangement with the employer. *'Sometimes he tells a few people not to go for a week. I guess, when there is not enough work. Sometimes, I decide not to go, like today, because I have the cold... I only warn my friend to tell the minibus driver not to*

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wait for me in the morning.” I ask her whether she could work with a contract there. “What contract? No one has a contract there. Maybe the bosses. But not us. No one gives you a contract here. They have to pay, if they do, and they also will give you less money anyway... ”

On my next visit, while discussing employment and unemployment matters, the mayor of the same village gave the example with the same employer – the frozen vegetables factory owner, as someone who was offering regular jobs to the villagers, but no one was willing to take the offer:

“The guy came to me and he’s offering 20 leva per day, with contract, with benefits, with everything. I gathered some people and told them. Only two or three went and gave up on the second day. And you know why? Because they don’t want to work. Here, the man comes and offers them jobs and they don’t want to take them. And then they go and cry that they are unemployed and the benefits are small. Because they want it the easy way, the fast way. Picking up mushrooms for three days and then spending all the money on partying. This is their way of living. What can I do about that?”

“They” are the Roma from the village, one of whom is the woman I talked to earlier. The mayor does not mention and is not aware (or chooses not to be aware) of the women who work for this same employer under different conditions than the ones advertised. He is convinced that the employer is right and the workers refuse to work simply because they are lazy and ‘think in a different way’. This discrepancy between the mayor’s and the workers’ version is not simply an example of the misinformation among the institutional representatives. It also demonstrates the racializing and moralizing discourse crafted by the institutions and various publics against the poor Roma.

These different types of day labourers work under very similar conditions albeit in different industries and in different countries. The construction workers, the agricultural workers, and the frozen vegetables factory workers all work irregularly, irrespective of their status and right to regular work. They are paid below the minimum wage, cash, day by day, without any security. They have no access to a contract which could secure not only their right as workers, but also access to social benefits. This blocks them from negotiating with their employers (in the case of the Netherlands not even always knowing who the actual employer is). But it also excludes

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them from any form of welfare – healthcare coverage, retirement based on length of service, maternity and sick leave, and risk coverage in the case of losing a job. Working under these conditions is not by choice. The Roma have no access to formal regular employment either as citizens in an impoverished de-industrialized region or as migrants accessing the labour market through a series of middlemen in the most low-skilled jobs.

Paid per piece, paid per hour

Working in the food and service industry in the Netherlands

The workers paid per piece or per hour are in an even more precarious position than the day labourers. In the Netherlands, these are the hotel maids paid per room, depending on how fast they work, but also, by how many rooms are there today to be cleaned. There are also the mushroom pickers paid per hour, depending on how many mushrooms grew this day in the artificially lit and humid halls.

Zhivka, a maid in a small town hotel, was complaining that there were weeks in which she only had one or two rooms to clean per day due to the lower stock of guests. The money in such weeks is hardly enough to pay for her rented room (similar arrangement like the one of Kircho, but for women). This kind of precarious work creates the most basic insecurity of daily survival.

“If you don’t pay your rent for a week, you are on the street. Sometimes I don’t eat, to be able to save for the rent. Even though this is very cheap rent for Holland. I know that. A few times I thought – I can’t do this anymore and came back to Bulgaria. I worked here in the field, with the other women for a month. But it was summer, so there was at least this work available. When I thought the situation in the hotel might be better, I went back... It’s been like this for a few years now. I keep coming and going, trying to make ends meet.”

Zhivka’s alternating between jobs in Bulgaria and jobs in the Netherlands is only one example of the type of intensive short-term labour migration trips that many of the villagers are engaged in. Just like Kircho, when the financial situation in the Netherlands

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becomes unbearable, she comes back to Bulgaria and combines her income there with small poorly paid jobs in Bulgaria.

The mushroom picker Valya is another woman in her 40s. She has been working for the same employer for seven years now. Depending on the day and the mushroom crop, she would work between 4 and 10 hours per day.

“Longer shifts are better, because you make more money. You get tired as a dog, but at least you know why you are there. When you work only for four hours, you don’t know what to do with your time after. Sometimes mushrooms just don’t want to grow. And then we have to go home after noon, day after day. I hate those days! I feel like packing my stuff and going home. And sometimes I just do it and stay here [in Bulgaria] for a few months. Just like this, working for much less money.”

Several times over these seven years Valya came back to Bulgaria. She worked in agriculture as a day labourer, stayed idle, and tried to start working in an aluminium products factory. But as a single mum with a young son and a non-working mother, she kept going back to mushroom picking in the Netherlands. Over the seven years she could not find any other job that would offer better conditions. She was aware of the change in the regulations on the access to the labour market for Bulgarians after January 2014. She even went and talked to her boss that she wanted to work with a contract. He offered her part-time contract, working in 4 hours shifts, in a different mushroom hall, with no possibility for extra hours. This would have meant for her to have access to welfare at the expense of earning less money, which she said she could not afford, so she declined the contract and continued working irregularly as before.

Shifting the risk from the employer to the worker makes the workers more vulnerable. Combined with the below minimum wage that these workers receive by working irregularly, the possibility for planning on the basis of a predictable monthly income shrinks to zero. The two workers above cannot afford to rent a room, sign a contract, and have address registration legally. This, in turn, does not give them access to the housing benefit that the Dutch state provides to all migrants, irrespective of their work status. The requirements though turn out to be insurmountable for migrants working under such conditions. They have to have been

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registered and paid rent (with a contract) for at least a year, before they can apply for a rent subsidy, which would cover up to half of the rent retrospectively and then on a monthly basis.³¹ While this, in principle, could lift a substantial financial burden, the workers paid per piece – under constant threat of not being able to pay the very low rent they pay per bed, can simply not afford to apply for this benefit. Unless there is fraud involved, access to this social right is restricted in practice for the most vulnerable workers. In this sense, it is not only their work that is not recognized as legitimate (as in the case of the rest of the irregular workers), but also their status as right bearing individuals.

Herbs and walnuts in Bulgaria

The most widespread activity for the majority of the Roma in Bulgaria is wild mushroom picking in the forest. Far from being lucrative or an exclusive source of income, the picking of forest mushrooms, herbs, and walnuts is indeed a common strategy of making a living among the Roma villagers. For most of them, this is one of the several work activities that they undertake in order to survive. The work is seasonal, highly dependent on weather conditions, and the buying prices are extremely low, especially given the fact that some of the herbs and mushrooms are regarded as highly valuable and expensive products on the market. Most of the people I talked to have been engaged in picking mushrooms or herbs at a certain point. When the weather permits it (after rain for mushrooms and when it is dry for herbs), almost everyone who is not otherwise engaged with work, heads for the mountains or the fields. Every village has a local buyer who buys up the collected yield. The prices are extremely low compared to any market prices outside the village. The villagers have no resources to sell their yield individually on local markets in the nearby town and they have no choice but to sell at the prices the local buyer offers. Yet, if one is lucky, the money made per day is three to four times higher than the daily wage in agriculture (e.g. a man told me that he could make up to 40 leva from linden flower collecting on a good day).

I knew the man who was returning from the forest with a big bag of walnuts on his back from my previous visits. He was one

³¹ www.belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/bldcontentnl/belastingdienst/privetoeslagen/huurtoeslag/. Accessed December 19, 2014.

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of the migrants who only stay abroad for a couple of months. He tried all sorts of jobs – construction, preparing doners, loading trucks. Every next job was temporary, poorly paid, and did not provide enough income to stay for a longer period of idleness until another job came up. In Bulgaria, he did not manage to find any day job. Picking herbs in the summer and walnuts in the autumn was his only way of making money. *“Today, I worked hard and I hope I’ll get some 10 leva for these walnuts. They buy them for 30 stotinki (15 cents) the kilo. Linden flower was better paid, but it’s over. The walnuts will finish soon too, and then I don’t know how we’ll go on. I’ll have to go abroad again.”*

While most people have been collecting herbs or mushrooms at one moment or another, this is not the main means of living for most of them. At the same time, high dependency on weather conditions and the short term seasonal character of the different plants define the uneven and irregular rhythm of this work pattern, which interferes with other work practices like daily work in agriculture or in the factory. With the irregular character of any of the other jobs that the villagers have access to, resorting to alternating between daily waged labour and paid-per-piece herb picking, which provides a slightly higher daily income, is a choice that many people are compelled to make. This is equally regarded as work by them, as any of the other activities described thus far. The stereotypical image of the indulgent Roma who wants fast money only to spend it just as fast on a night of drinking, is far from reality as it can be. This is just one of the sources of income available to the villagers who have very few choices in general.

Being paid per piece and per hour depending on the speed and the availability of harvest/work is the most precarious work which shifts any risk from the employer to the worker. The lack of contract only adds to the precariousness and to the extreme vulnerability of the workers. One of the main strategies that these workers employ is the constant movement between jobs and across political boundaries, which offers different types of short term, seasonal work of this type. Even more obvious than in the previous cases, the common labour space of the European Union, enabled by the open borders for EU citizens, encourages this kind of strategic bringing together of available work in different member-states, in a very condensed temporal framework.

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The image of the careless Roma interested in fast and easy profit who would never get a respectable job on a permanent basis is the most enduring and widespread stereotype about the income generation strategies of the poor Roma (along begging and stealing). The image of the Roma picking mushrooms or herbs in the forest is the ultimate opposite of the 'real worker'. There is an apparent conflict here. The commodity that the forest workers provide is highly valuable and when it reaches the market as a product, is rather expensive. The workers who provide it to the buyers though, are not simply poorly paid and exploited. They are refused the status of workers and are concealed from the supply chain. This activity is not recognized as work for a variety of reasons: it is irregular, there is no employer, it is not lucrative in a way that it can be a sole source of making a living, it is unreliable and dependent on weather. Instead of this being a list of bad labour conditions, this is a list of arguments against qualifying this type of forest work as legitimate work. Echoed in the words of the village mayor, this statement would be repeated over and over again by social workers, municipality officials, teachers, and other institutional representatives. All of these try to explain such practices with the 'mentality of the Roma', exaggerating the scope of the activity and completely ignoring the other conditions which turn such practice into a means of living.

It is in this delegitimization of a practice as work and transforming it into a result of 'mentality' that the opposition between worthy and unworthy, deserving and undeserving appears. The step from the discussion of forest work to the qualification of the Roma as unworthy is short and quickly made. No matter what kind of labour practices Roma engage in and under what conditions, their public image is of people who do not want to work because they are lazy. It is equally prevalent in media and politicians' statements as well as in the references of local state representatives. .

Street work or begging: musicians and newspaper vendors

In two of the villages where I have been doing fieldwork, the Roma communities are known as 'the musicians'. They play what is considered traditional Roma/Oriental music on accordions, clarinets, and drums. Some are famous, like Mincho and his brother who have a band of eight. In Bulgaria, they play at weddings and baptism parties all over the region. Both of them have musical

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notes and g-clefs tattooed on their arms. They alternate playing on gigs in Bulgaria with trips to the Netherlands and Germany. There they would play in groups of two to four in designated places on the streets, changing their spot every 15–20 minutes. The usual workday, Mincho tells me, is from 10 in the morning till 8 in the evening, sometimes shorter, if it is really cold outside. On an average good day, they would make 40 Euro each. Many other villagers from the ‘musicians’ villages’ migrate as street musicians. The usual pattern is to spend up to three or four months, usually from late autumn to early spring, playing on the streets of different Dutch cities, alternating it with stays in Bulgaria.

Talking to Mincho and trying to make sense of the way he makes ends meet in the Netherlands, I ask him whether he also works in construction or in one of those Turkish shops that others have mentioned. *“What? Why? Never,”* Mincho replies, puzzled. *“We are musicians. Our job is to play. I can’t work anything else, I need to keep my hands clean and in a good condition. You can’t play the piano or the accordion and go to hard labour on the construction site at the same time.”* Later he adds, *“There are people for every work. Some are construction workers [maystori], others are musicians like me. You can’t be both.”*

Another young man, Asen, tells me how he learned to play. When he turned 16, his brother who had been going to The Hague for a year already, took him along. The day after they arrived, Asen received an accordion from his brother who showed him where to put his fingers and how to open and close it and left him to ‘play’ alone for half a day, only instructing him to move his location every now and then. *“I had no idea what I’m doing there,”* Asen tells me laughing. *“I made these sounds. I don’t think anyone liked it. But people still gave me money. Maybe because I looked so young. But then, bit by bit, playing every day, I started learning. We sometimes played with my brother and the others. I picked up melodies, techniques. Now, I’m good. I can play at a wedding, if I am invited... And I know now, that when people give me money, it’s because they like my music.”*

These references to the skill and the quality of music performed draw the line between begging and work. Mincho and some of the other musicians I met talked at great length about the skills involved in such long-hours of playing, the improvisation techniques, but also the physical stamina required, the ability to play

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with cold hands, and the endurance of winter freeze day after day. In addition to that, they also discussed the strategic knowledge one needs in order to find a good location, to know how to alternate position, and how to guard one's own place.

A similar understanding is shared by the street newspapers vendors. Mincho's wife, Lina, was one of them, like many of the other women I talked to. She stands at the entrance of a big supermarket throughout the day offering street newspapers to the shoppers and gets as much as they are willing to give. Some pay the full price, others give her less money, but do not take the paper. "Some are very considerate and kind", Lina says, like the middle-aged woman who bought her a pair of gloves from the supermarket and returned the next day with an old coat.

Street papers are produced specifically for homeless and poor people in many countries around the world. They are sold at a small price (usually half the cover price) and then re-sold in public spaces. The meaning and character of the activity is highly contested.³² There is a clear rhetoric of labelling it as economic activity by mottos like 'Vending, not begging' / 'Working, not begging' employed by the organizations who define their activity as 'social business' and the vendors as 'micro-entrepreneurs, earning their own living'.³³ The opposite view treats street paper vendors as beggars loading the activity with negative moral attributes and sometimes resulting in outright hostile confrontations.

Street work is the most often evoked imaginary for loaded oppositions of legitimate work versus illegitimate non-work which triggers the rest of the stereotypical repertoire of moral qualities like laziness, criminality, and unworthiness. It is also the most obvious topos where the distinction becomes racialized and the dividing line is drawn between the proper majority and the criminal minority. Thus, what the Dutch media present as the good versus the bad migrant through the distinction of regular work, the Bulgarian media frames as the good Bulgarian versus the bad Roma. A long TV report on the national channel bTV is only one example of this consistent and systematically reproduced discourse by

³² Cockburn, Patrick J. L. (2013) Street Papers, Work and Begging: "Experimenting" at the Margins of Economic Legitimacy. In: *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7, (2), pp. 145–60.

³³ More on one of the networks of street papers here, www.street-papers.org/about-us/. Accessed December 19, 2014.

media and politicians. The report, investigating a case of social benefits fraud from 2013, carefully constructs the opposition between the good Bulgarian migrants who are working regularly in the Netherlands and the bad Roma beggars who spoil the image of Bulgarians altogether with their illegitimate practices.³⁴

Begging is considered as work by the Romanian Corotari Gipsies in Italy, and is recognized as a productive activity, which involves skills, specific knowledge, and physical stamina.³⁵ Other studies have also discussed the conceptualization of begging as work and as a productive activity. Tauber shows that for the Italian Sinti women begging is an activity of economic exchange³⁶, while Piasere argues that the Yugoslavian Gipsies in Verona in the 1970s understand begging as a mode of production through 'gathering'.³⁷ While Tesar's Gipsies sell a 'beggar's image' much different from their real image back at home, what the Bulgarian Roma in the Netherlands are 'selling' is music and newspapers. There is no shame involved in practising these activities. The street musicians and vendors qualified their activity as an economic activity of selling a service/commodity, pertaining to a number of skills and involving a specific talent (in the case of the musicians). The word begging (*prosiya*) was never used by any of them. The only way to refer to this was 'work' or 'making a living' (*izkarvam si hlyaba*). The musicians play, the street paper vendors sell. This view triggers an obvious tension with the alternative interpretations of these activities as begging, which is in the domain of non-work and is part of

³⁴ www.btv.bg/video/shows/hratkite/videos/kak-balgarski-romi-uspyaha-da-probiyat-holandskata-sotsialna-sistema.html. Accessed December 19, 2014.

³⁵ Tesar, C. (Forthcoming) Begging: Between Charity and Profession. Reflections on Romanian Roma's Begging Activities in Italy. In: E. Tauber & D. Zinn (eds.) *The Anthropology of the Public Space* [provisional title]. Bozen-Bolzano: University Press.

³⁶ Tauber, E. (2008) "Do you remember the time we went begging and selling"- The Ethnography of Transformations in Female Economic Activities and Its Narrative in the Context of Memory and Respect among Sinti in North Italy. In: *Roma-/Zigeunerulturen in neuen Perspektiven. Romany/Gypsy Cultures in New Perspectives*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, pp. 155-177.

³⁷ Piasere, L. (1987) In Search of New Economic Niches: The Productive Organisation of the Peripatetic Xoraxane in Italy. In: Rao, A. (ed.) *The Other Nomads. Peripatetic minorities in cross-cultural perspective*. Köln: Bohlau, pp. 111-133.

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gift-giving/charity, of getting 'something for nothing' rather than an economic activity.

While other researchers have framed such tensions in meaning production in cultural terms and have focused on the specificity of the Roma practices and conceptualizations, I would rather shy away from framing this as a specific Roma activity and emphasize instead the implications stemming from these conflicting interpretations of work. Conceptualizing street music playing as work redraws the lines between productive and unproductive labour and between work and non-work in a radical manner. Thinking street work through the lens of begging (unproductive labour) and charity places the street worker outside the realm of legitimate work and thus turns her into an abuser and violator *per se*. At the same time, both the musicians and the street paper vendors combine their street work in migration with other types of irregular work in Bulgaria. The musicians playing at gigs on weddings and parties in restaurants cannot be qualified as beggars anymore, since they play for a pre-defined price. The women who sell street papers in the Netherlands are usually engaged in some type of day labour while in Bulgaria – either in agriculture or in the small factories around. Thus, those who are street workers in the Netherlands, turn into a different category of workers, albeit still irregular, in Bulgaria. This requires a conceptualization of their work practices, which goes beyond the limiting view of Roma cultural specificity.

The discrepancy between the meanings invested in a certain activity as work by the workers themselves and the image of the illegitimate worker as viewed by the state institutions and shared by 'worried' politicians and the majority of the media is most strikingly visible in the case of street work. Yet, this discrepancy is apparent in all the other types of irregular work described above, albeit in more subtle forms. The practices described above are all qualified as work or making a living by those who perform them. Whether it is agricultural work in Bulgaria, playing music on the streets of Rotterdam, picking herbs or walnuts in the forest, working in construction or in a frozen vegetables factory, all these activities are strictly defined as work. They are a productive activity, in the sense of earning money by one's own activity, i.e. labour. Playing music or selling newspapers is not considered begging, because there is a product or service involved. In none of the above cases people identify themselves as idle, passive, or indeed,

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workless. Yet, none of these activities counts as legitimate employment from the point of view of state institutions, either in Bulgaria, or in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

In their transnational lives, Bulgarian Roma navigate between various statuses as EU citizens and EU migrants, irregular workers, and welfare beneficiaries. Although the Roma migrant villagers perceive and refer to these venues and sources of income as 'work', politicians and bureaucrats (both in Bulgaria and in other EU states) present them as breaking the law by working irregularly, as non-workers, and as undeserving exploiters of the welfare state. The experience of these poor low-skilled workers at home and in migration in terms of irregularity, flexibility, and precariousness is strikingly similar. As is the discrepancy between the different interpretations of the meaning of work presented by institutions and politicians on the one hand, and by the workers themselves on the other, in Bulgaria and in receiving EU countries.

With this paper, I have tried to delineate several types of labour practices for income generation that Roma villagers define as work. I have argued that the low-skilled poor Bulgarian Roma have restricted access to formal employment. The work that is available is low-skilled (irrespective of their actual skills), irregular – with no option for regularization, precarious, insecure, and paid way below the legal minimum. These types of work are the only ones available for Roma villagers both as citizens in Bulgaria and as migrants with limited rights in the Netherlands. I have further demonstrated that their citizenship status – of EU migrants and Bulgarian citizens – is not significant under the actual labour conditions and access to employment. What matters is a race-cum-class position that the Roma migrants occupy in both locations: in Bulgaria as poor Roma and in the Netherlands as the poor Eastern European (Roma). Both as migrants with limited rights and as full citizens, the Roma villagers are exposed to similar type of exclusion from regular employment, which subsequently limits their access to a status of worthy citizens and to actual social rights.

Outsourcing Destination Bulgaria: New Patterns of Labour Migration and the Rise of Call Centres in Bulgaria

by Tsvetelina Hristova

I am borrowing the title from a recent conference focusing on outsourcing and held in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It was the second such conference, both held in the same year, 2014, and dedicated to bringing together companies and state institutions in an attempt to promote outsourcing as a drive for national and local development. The title of the first conference, held in Sofia, read: *How to Make Bulgaria a Leading Destination in Outsourcing*¹ – a self-explanatory and rather descriptive title that clearly sets the agenda for the event and for further strategic collaborations. Both events were held at luxurious five star hotels, with guests from the ministry of economy and energetics, universities, and local municipalities – this comes to show the growing importance of outsourcing industry on the national level in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), job creation, and overall effect on the economy.

I will take a look at the development of outsourcing and, in particular, the rise of the call centre industry, in Bulgaria and

¹ It should be noted that in both cases, as well as throughout the article, “outsourcing” is only applied to ICT outsourcing. Bulgaria is also known as a country where production is outsourced, e.g. sewing factories. In a recent study done through the Clean Clothes Campaign it became clear that the work conditions in such factories in Bulgaria are worse compared to the ones in Asia, which are traditionally designated and condemned as ‘sweatshops’. While there is an obvious link between the outsourcing of menial and non-menial labour, drawn by the same favourable conditions – offering cheap labour and environment welcoming to foreign investment, the two have so far not been analyzed as two instances of the same phenomenon.

focus on a few aspects that are important for it. After briefly sketching the history of outsourcing and the state policies and public discourses surrounding its rise, I will turn to the specifics of call-centre labour; and then offer an overview of tendencies in the employment and its relation to migration processes.

The nature of my research methods calls for a rather self-analytical approach, as my observations are drawn largely from my own employment at call-centres in Bulgaria. While this naturally allows for an inside look that can hardly be achieved solely through interviews and observations, it poses limits, some of which I only came to realise when I started writing. While there are many examples of researchers analysing their own employment experience (to start with Braverman² and get to O Riain³, who reflects on his work as a software developer in Ireland), the jump from doing to reflecting (on) does not only involve a process of dissociation, but also much more mundane concerns related to dependencies and obligations imposed by corporative regulations. This is the reason why I have avoided the mention of company names in examples, unless taken from public media. My personal experience was supplemented with interviews and conversations with call-centre workers and representatives of the two unions formed at call-centre companies in Sofia, as well as with following up with the public discourse about call centres in the country.

The goal of this paper is to go beyond the specifics of call-centre work, which have been discussed at length, especially in research on Indian call-centres,⁴ and to take a look at how the industry is utilizing geography and mobility in the making of a

² Braverman, H. (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press, New York.

³ O Riain, S. (2000) Net-Working for a Living: Irish Software Developers in the Global Workplace. In: *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*. University of California Press, pp. 175-202.

⁴ Among the many others, two studies especially relevant to the current publication are the studies of Nadeem and Aneesh: Aneesh, A. (2006) *Virtual Migration: the Programming of Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Nadeem, S. (2011) *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing Is Changing the Way. Indians Understand Themselves*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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new type of global division of labour that leads to changes in the patterns of labour migration.

Connecting outsourcing and migration

Conceptualizing migration unavoidably goes along lines of divide and categorization that not only separate, but also rank migration flows on a mixed geo-socio-moral scale. Illegal and economic migrants constitute the aggregate of an emerging or imagined underclass that is essential in theorizing sovereignty, exploitation, security, and mobilization.⁵ The irregular migrant and the poverty migrant are the battleground for re-establishing the borders of the state: its power politics, social engagement, and dimensions of citizenship are all tested and established through these figures. This dualistic figure (the irregular migrant/refugee) also constitutive for the foundations of migration studies that still employ the patronizing integration/policy approach to migration (in NGOs and some research institutions), as well as visions that resist and defy the language of objectification.⁶

On the opposite end, the so-called 'mobile elites' feed into the imagination of a globalizing borderless world, forming a completely distinct conceptual framework – Bauman speaks of the ruptures in the globalized world through the images of the immobilized poor and the hyper-mobile elites.⁷ We can see, however, that

⁵ The positioning of irregular migrants within policies and migration research is discussed at length in Mezzadra, S. (2010) *The Gaze of Autonomy. Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles*. www.uninomade.org/the-gaze-of-autonomy-capitalism-migration-and-social-struggles. Accessed December 19, 2014. The list of authors analysing the relationship between founding dimensions of the nation-state, such as sovereignty and security, and the illegal migrant/refugee is long, among them Agamben, G. (1995) *We Refugees*. In: *Symposium*. No. 49(2), Summer, pp. 114-119, and Squire, V. (2009) *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶ See Papadopoulos, D., N. Stephenson and V. Tsianos (2008) *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Pluto Press, where the authors argue for a new approach to migration, which looks at migration as an autonomous social phenomenon and recognizes its subversive potential.

⁷ Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

mobility is a more ubiquitous reality that is experienced not only through migration per se, but also through its collateral effects, such as remittances, transnational families, economic and social changes, as well as through the relocation of capital and employment, or changes in social policies founded on the fear of the abusing 'other'. It looks as if different types of migration are held apart in their analysis: asylum seekers and refugees framed in a humanitarian-legal paradigm, irregular migrants seen in the framework of violent? state re-invention; economic migrants viewed through exploiting the fantasy of transnational mobilization; and the mobile elites that are in the basis of the optimistic theory of an open and unified world. While the subject relocating from the Global South to the North-West is easily labelled as 'immigrant', the flow in the opposite direction consists of 'expatriates' – a figure that is reminiscent of the old colonial travellers and their romanticized and/or missionary adventurism.

The mobility of capital and human mobility form interdependency that is at times complementary and at times parallel: while money travel easier and defy boundaries, labour redefines old geographies of human mobility. Think, for example, of the recent rise in Portuguese migration to the former dependencies of Angola and Cape Verde, which re-activates old ties, but also reinvents the relation between the two countries in a dramatically different setting – i.e. Portuguese workers looking for employment⁸, or return migration, where people turn old routes around and exploit deficits produced by migration (e.g. brain drain, lack of skilled labour, demographic downturns).

In this (in)voluntary collaboration between capital and labour, the mobility of companies, namely offshoring employment is not a tendency strictly antagonistic to labour migration. Apart from being susceptible to analysis through the lenses of migration, as brilliantly shown by Aneesh, it is also facilitated by and serving

⁸ One recent example of labour migration to the Global South is the migration of Portuguese to Angola and Cape Verde, which challenges us to re-think migration but also re-establishes old colonial ties in a new way and under different circumstances. The project *Moving South: Analyzing the Development Potential of the New Portuguese Migration to Angola and Cape Verde* is still ongoing and a short description of it can be found here: www.globalstudies.gu.se/digitalAssets/1476/1476825_the-new-portuguese-migration-to-angola-and-cape-verde.pdf. Accessed December 19, 2014.

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as a catalyst for the physical transnational mobility of work force. This collaborative mobility serves for the establishment of a kind of middle ground of the labour force – the ones that Standing calls the salariat. This stratum can bring the allusion of an emerging new middle class, but it is so soaked in precarity that the traditional middle class bourgeois would shiver in disgust at the comparison. This new stratum embodies mobility resituating itself or, rather, labour reinventing itself in situ in migration. As Nadeem shows in his study on Indian call centers, however, the new ‘middle class’ does not appear *ex nihilo* but is in reality a transformed old one – built on the social, cultural, and economic capital of the members of a well educated stratum, dependent on employment.⁹ Outsourcing, which in developmental studies stands in opposition to labour migration as an alternative employment option for potential emigrants, is rather a practice that creates niches of an acceptable wage/labour equilibrium digging around the globe and mobilizing workers to follow suit. The feared consequence of outsourcing – i.e. moving jobs abroad, is exactly that – while call centres are re-located to Bulgaria, in no way is call-centre employment reserved for Bulgarians only. Rather, it is situating service work in a zone that allows for lower wages without the danger of real consumerist deprivation that could lead to discontent. The booming virtual work is linked not only to changed migration patterns but also to changes in work practice and the perception of labour.

While outsourcing is typically regarded in terms of mobility of capital and in contrast to labour migration, I will argue for the necessity to place them in the common paradigm of mobility of labour, linking it to larger processes in labour and employment, such as the increased flexibility and precarity of the work force, on one hand, and the increased mobility of businesses and their interlinking to political and social processes, on the other. The increased precarity sweeps into the nature of labour itself through various deregulations, such as the zero-hour contracts, the urge for flexibility, and the loss of the social security characteristic for the times of the “second spirit of capitalism”¹⁰. What is becoming

⁹ Nadeem, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Which refers to the type of capitalism dominant until the 1970s and characterized by discipline, control, and loyalty, see Boltanski, L., E. Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London-New York: Verso.

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even more characteristic for the contemporary state of mobility and labour is the change in economic relations on a global scale, which alters the import/export relations through the introduction of outsourcing and offshoring practices. Instead of importing goods or labour, companies move parts of their production and services elsewhere or subcontract other companies to take over them.

Looking at outsourcing and self-service, Palm states that:

The mobility of work involves more than labour flowing to fixed capital or investment capital flowing to discounted labour. More specifically, the mobility of outsourced work does not reside in the workforce, or strictly within capital, but rather in the technological ease with which work can be fractioned into jobs, tasks, duties and obligations, and distributed across the globe.¹¹

The picture of corporate mobility presents an interplay of migration, investment, and a fundamental change in the nature of work that renders it far more mobile and transferable than before. It is however not only tasks that are being more easily transferred geographically; the nature of outsourcing develops jobs with the quality of global universality, meshing up cultures in a kind of corporate hybridity¹² and mimicry that moulds employees and places into mobile, interchangeable subjectivities. The result is the production of geographically conditioned employment zones that exploit preconditions of inequality, mobility, and consumerism. They are delineated by established routes of labour and capital but follow a different pattern and their existence is prompted by the disappearance of the middle stratum of employment.

Development of outsourcing in Bulgaria

The post-1989 restructuring of the national economy has led to transformations that brought Bulgaria closer to the economic profile of developed countries – with a strong tendency for dein-

¹¹ Palm, M. (2006) Outsourcing, Self-Service and the Telemobility of Work.

In: *Anthropology of Work Review*, XXVII/2, pp. 1-8.

¹² Palm, Ibid., although he talks of hybridity in the context of cultural identity and postcolonialism.

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dustrialization and a rising share of the service sector. The rapid liquidation and subsequent privatization lead to a drop in the share of industrial employment and to unemployment that was virtually suppressed during Communism through the state policy of full employment. The share of industrial employment has in recent years been taken over by employment in construction (due to the booming real estate business of the late 1990s and early 2000s) and in the service sector. In 2013, the services have contributed more than 2/3 of the national GDP (69%) and employed almost 2/3 of the currently active labour force (57.7%). Subsequent parliaments controlled by different political parties have shown their continuous commitment to the expansion of the service sector and to attracting FDI. The overall tendency of opening up the market and attracting foreign direct investment has led to a series of legislative initiatives that aimed at creating a welcoming business climate. In 2008, the corporate tax was decreased from 15% to 10% (which could reach 0% in regions with high unemployment rate) – currently the lowest in EU, and a flat income tax of 10% was introduced the same year (also the lowest one in the EU in terms of accumulated amount and much more beneficial to employees with higher salaries than to the ones in the lowest income spectrum). FDI ranked as premium investments (class A and B) could also benefit from shortened administrative procedures and direct financing of training initiatives to increase the qualification of the workers (as laid down in the Investment Promotion Act). The measures envisioned in this Act include reimbursing companies for the obligatory tax and social security fees paid for newly employed workers for up to one year.

Some of the larger investors approved as class A and B investors in accordance with the Act are representatives of the booming outsourcing industry. ICT outsourcing falls within the domains of three of the national and EU economic priorities – increasing the share of service industry, development of knowledge society, and attracting foreign direct investment and it, thus, receives especially favourable attention from institutions and businesses. The promotion of non-menial and high-skilled labour is one of the incentives of the EU as well, laid down in the Lisbon agenda for the development of knowledge economy, which serves to direct and reinforce the national economic agendas.

Despite being a relatively new industry in Bulgaria, outsourcing has experienced a major rise in the last few years. In 1999 the only company offering outsourcing services was the Bulgarian All Data Processing with just 10 employees, providing indexing services for Reuters. In comparison, in 2014 the number of companies has swollen to over 20 with more than 20 000 employees supplying various services in accounting, telemarketing, BPO (business process outsourcing); customer service and technical support; IT and design. It is predicted that by 2017 the number will more than double to over 45 000 employees in the industry and will reach 3% of the national GDP. According to data of the ministry of economy and energetics, the outsourcing companies in Bulgaria had made 1 bln BGN turnover in 2013. This makes them an important actor in the economy of the country and a major source of FDI. The growing number of outsourcing companies and employees has a substantial share in the overall economic growth in the country. According to EUROSTAT data, there has been a substantial growth in the GDP per capita in Bulgaria, and, more specifically, in the capital where the bulk of outsourcing companies is located from less than 47% of the average GDP for the Union in 2000 to 105% in 2011.

The seemingly uplifting economic effect of outsourcing has invoked considerable state support that is apparent in the presence of ministry officials at outsourcing conferences but extends beyond that. State institutions started officially advertising the country as a destination for call-centre investments in 2004 and the strategies employed in official advertising with regards to employment, education, and available labour force are worth analysing. While the general economic and social development of the country is targeted to achieving the image of a developed EU country, outsourcing poses a contradiction. On one hand, it corresponds to the strife for more service and knowledge based economy, while on the other, it places Bulgaria in the company of traditional outsourcing countries from Asia. In the area of outsourcing Bulgaria is competing not so much with other EU countries, but with the booming Asian economies in India, Singapore, China, and Malaysia. In view of this competition Bulgaria's special assets lie in its worst economic positioning in the EU – it offers the secure business environment of an EU country, plus

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low wages competitive to the ones in Asia¹³, and a relatively high number of labour force proficient in IT or foreign languages. The country has also managed to draw the attention of the outsourcing businesses, recently being ranked 9th most attractive outsourcing destination in the world in the A.T. Kearney ranking¹⁴ – the only European country in the top 10.

The advertising of Bulgaria as outsourcing destination exploits its ambiguous geographic and economic positioning through the concept of nearshoring: an alternative of offshoring that draws on outsourcing businesses to regions of geographic proximity. The incentive behind the practice is to combine business security and a more predictable and familiar context with low cost labour. One can easily see this combination embodied in the positioning of Bulgaria in various ratings. Though the aspiration on the Bulgarian side is to offer more high-skilled competition to India and specialize not so much in call centres as in IT software development, the ambition of becoming a “high-end India” is far from becoming reality and ratings show Bulgaria is behind in terms of qualification and skills of its labour (see diagram on next page).

¹³ One recent research on textile manufacturing outsourcing concluded that wages in Bulgaria are even lower than the ones in countries traditionally known for sweatshop labour, such as India and China. There are significant differences between textile manufacturing outsourcing and ICT outsourcing and, as mentioned earlier, wages in the ICT outsourcing sector are higher than the average salaries. However, put together with the advertisement for low-wage labour from state and business representatives, this indicates the image of a low-wage heaven within the EU, which is systematically constructed in discourse. The report is available at www.cleanclothes.org/livingwage/tailoredwages/tailored-wage-report-pdf. Accessed December 19, 2014.

¹⁴ Available at www.atkearney.com/research-studies/global-services-location-index. Accessed December 19, 2014.

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Overall Rank	Country	Overall Outsourcing Index	Cost Competitive Index	Resources & Skills Index	Business & Economic Environment Index
1	India	7.1	8.3	6	4.2
2	Indonesia	6.7	8.6	4.3	4.4
3	Estonia	6.6	7.5	5.2	6.9
4	Singapore	6.5	6.4	5.7	9.4
5	Bulgaria	6.4	8.8	2.9	5.2
6	China	6.4	7	5.6	5.6
7	Philippines	6.3	9	2.8	3.9
8	Lithuania	5.9	7	3.9	6.5
9	Thailand	5.9	8.2	2.3	5.9
10	Malaysia	5.8	7.9	2.2	6.9

Ranking of top outsourcing countries of SourcingLine.

The attempts to increase the attractiveness of Bulgaria as an outsourcing destination works on multiple levels and there are already talks and initiatives aiming at restructuring secondary and tertiary education to better prepare employees for the business. There is an example of a collaboration between the University of Veliko Tarnovo and the Belgian-owned EUROCCOR. It includes the hosting of a call centre at the university that not only provides office space but work force as well, recruited mainly from its department of foreign language education. The university has also introduced two new MA programmes, in collaboration with another call centre, to make students in the philologies more employable – they specialize in a combination of two foreign languages and administrative skills. Similar initiatives are being negotiated or implemented at the Technical University in Sofia, Plovdiv University, and the Mathematical High School in Plovdiv.

The motivation for outsourcing companies is, undoubtedly, to widen the pool of available labour force, but behind this, there is a strong narrative critical towards the current state of the education system. The criticism employs the common trope of the inability of schools and universities to teach students practical skills, but it extends to a more general critique of the kind of human subjectivity produced by the educational system compared to the *homo novus* of the corporate world. The clash between education and corporate needs was one of the central topics at the conference *Outsourcing Destination Bulgaria*. Paraphrasing the arguments from the con-

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ference, the participants from the side of outsourcing companies, managers, and owners, painted the portrait of the person that was desired and nourished at corporate milieus – a creative team player, who takes the initiative, is not afraid of making mistakes, and has good communication skills. In the words of one of the presenters, employee at a recruitment company, children should be taught communication skills that make them good service workers from an early age. This figure stands in stark contrast to the image of the person produced by the Bulgarian education system: docile, unimaginative, unable to take the initiative or communicate with customers. In this way the roles get reversed with the corporate world employing the very same critique that was once aimed at it.¹⁵ The projected image of the call-centre worker reinforces the predominant idea of the flexible, adaptable, and entrepreneurial worker of the 21st century. However, the nature of outsourcing industry requires the exercise of control over subcontractors and workers down the chain and this leads to an ambiguous interplay of conflicting ideologies and regimes.

Call-centres – the exemplary factories of a brand new world

Office space and discipline

The worldwide presence of call-centres and the nature of work there – workers providing support for other countries and companies and often impostors as native speakers, calls for a very standardized environment across all companies and countries. The rise in call centre industry is linked to the introduction of large open space offices (utilized in other industries, as well, for example logistics, think of Amazon), with rows of cubicles where the employees sit on their computers, wearing headsets to always be available for customer calls. This kind of open office allows for minimum private space with employees sitting next to each other with low partitions on the desks that serve to obstruct the view to their colleagues' monitor. No wonder that they invoke com-

¹⁵ This ironic turn that has become characteristic for the development of contemporary capitalism, which incorporates and puts in use anti-capitalist criticism is well presented in Boltanski, Chiapello (Ibid.)

parison with the factory production line of industrial times. This open space environment, adorned with surveillance cameras and posters instructing employees of the security rules of the company and appealing to their 'integrity' and collaboration in the event of security breach, is the embodiment of a Bentham-like fantasy of monitored employment force, docile through the knowledge of its own transparency to the management. The strict security rules are conditioned by the very nature of the business – since companies are outsourcing parts of their business to call centres, where employees handle company specific and sensitive information, the call centres have to assure their clients that this data will be kept safe. This leads to various restrictions, such as limited access to the Internet, ban on personal electronic devices on the work floor, and rules requiring the employees to put their bags and coats in lockers. All these rules are more or less universal and applied to call centres worldwide, although they can vary in intensity.

Employees are subjected to various restrictions and confined spatially through their limited work place and mobility (call centre workers are expected to remain seated at their desks during their work time, waiting for a call, chat, or an email, and sometimes bonded to the telephone via the headsets they have to wear at all times). The work is strictly defined not only spatially but also temporally – the punch in system operated through the telephone keeps a record of the daily activities of the worker. It is used for 'logging in', indicating breaks, as well as indicating what type of work the employee is doing at the moment: by dialling a special code, one can switch the status from 'auto in' (meaning available for calls) to writing emails, taking chats, receiving feedback, etc. The idea of being 'auto-in' is omnipresent in the work culture and observed rigorously and workers have only about 20-30 second between calls before switching back to it. This controlled division of time allows the employer to monitor and sanction employees for void time: for instance, one of the workers in a big international company who participated in the establishment of a union at the company was disciplined for not being at his workplace for two minutes and some seconds – a tiny detail that comes to show the worker the inequality in power relations and the superiority of the employer in terms of knowledge and means for control.

The rigidity of control is supplemented by the excessive presence of software used to manage and structure the work process.

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Apart from the computer-operated telephones, employees are required to use software to categorize and solve each interaction with clients. They depend on software to the extent to which the industrial workers were made dependent on machines through the Taylorist restructuring of manual labour. Call centre work is chunked into bits performed through specific programmes – the so called ‘back office’ software programmes set the parameters to what the worker can and cannot perform through algorithms and access restrictions. As analysed by Aneesh, this new governing order or rule, called by him ‘algocracy’ in comparison to the models of panoptic and bureaucratic regimes, is characteristic for the work at call centers but spreads to other service jobs, such as bank-tellers or administration. It consists of an all dominating rule of the software code and programmes that have not only become irreplaceable for work – they have come to define work practice in its every detail. The software is not only the means to perform a task but it also contains the guidelines for doing it – by choosing from predefined options the workers are restricted to only providing approved solutions to a work situation.

The knowledge economy restructures employment in ways that are very different from the utopian expectation of eradicating mindless and menial jobs through the advances in technology. There are indeed some strata that enjoy the freedom provided by the the ICT revolution and computing, in general, hopping between projects and coding. However, large multitudes of workers become supplements to technology, either filling in tasks that computers cannot yet perform precisely enough, such as the Amazon Turk crowdsourcing, where workers are literally being incorporated in a software algorithm and their work is organized and managed in ways similar to developing computer programme¹⁶ or the call-centre outsourcing jobs where labour is governed by the software used in outsourcing companies. These jobs, though not an integral part of the constructed image of the knowledge economy, are nevertheless an generated by it and sustaining its functioning to a great extent.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Irani, L., M. Six Silberman (2013) Turkopticon: Interrupting Worker Invisibility in Amazon Mechanical Turk. In: *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 611–620. ACM

Inciting initiative and participation: emotional labour and entrepreneurship

This controlling face of call centre work extends beyond practices to the emotional world of the worker – there is a constant demand for certain emotions to come through in the work process. Employees are expected to calm down angry customers, persuade customers to buy products, and retain an upbeat tone during all conversations. The myth of the customer being able to “hear you smile” is omnipresent at trainings and quality audits¹⁷ and employees are continuously instructed to not only smile but modify their voice intonation and emotional disposition as part of the job. As this is not simply a supplementary advice but might cost a part of the remuneration (in the form of unreceived bonuses), workers are generally and silently annoyed by this requirement. The frustration can be felt in the words of a male call centre worker in his early 20s: “They want me to sound cheerful. How could I, I am already dead inside – I mean, I work in a call centre.” The combination between repetitive tasks, little control over the work process, and emotionally demanding labour is extremely stressful and call centre jobs are known to be stressful and generally considered a temporary employment with high turnover.¹⁸ One of my interviewees was casually telling me stories of people losing their hair and being frequently ill because of work stress, while Nadeem is describing at length the exhausted look of his respondents.

Still, strenuous control over the worker is only one side of the coin. Call centre culture combines discipline, promotion of consumerism, and entrepreneurial spirit. As part of a strategy to avoid taxes calculated on salaries, call centres (and increasingly other businesses too) pay part of the remuneration in vouchers in the form of bonuses that the worker can lose if they do not reach the targets set for their job. Often located in the buildings of shopping malls, call centres attract future employees with promises of discounts and proximity to shops and restaurants. Labelled by

¹⁷ This trope is quoted by Nadeem (Ibid.) in his interviews with call centre workers and I have also encountered it myself more than once, reiterated by managers, trainers, and agents, all of whom firmly believe that customers can ‘hear a smile’ and even recognise a fake smile over the phone.

¹⁸ Kirov, V., K. Mircheva (2009) Employment in Call Centres in Bulgaria. In: *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, Vol 3, No. 1. Summer, pp. 144-157.

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Tsoneva¹⁹ hybrid labour regime, this kind of employment management combines excessive control with excessive encouragement of indulgence in consumerism and unrestrained pleasure. While hers is a far more extreme case – studying the online betting industry in Malta, where the life of the worker oscillates between being subjected to lie detector tests and lulled with alcohol in five star hotels, this kind of antagonistic duality sweeps across call centre work as well. While left with minimal control over their work, behaviour, and even emotional composure at work, employees are encouraged to take initiative in team building activities, corporate responsibility events, and even recruiting new workers. Companies are often deploying a “recommend a friend” schema for recruitment turning their employees into HR agents, who can earn up to 800 lv (400 EUR) per new hire. Such campaigns are often also advertised through stressing on the possibility to bring friends to work and create a more joyful environment this way. This strategy seems to be touching upon the right note, since quite a few of the employees I spoke to shared that they hated the job but really liked their colleagues and that was what made them stay and work hard, so they did not put a strain to their co-workers.

This kind of solidarity is exploited by companies and is probably one of the reasons for the surprising lack of unionization at call centres in Bulgaria, as workers are utilizing their solidarity and initiatives for finding ways to work better and in a more efficient manner. Of course, there are many more reasons why workers’ self-organization is virtually absent, among which companies doing their best to discourage unions – including open intimidation and dismissal of union workers, is the gravest obstacle, since employees would rather avoid such troubles. Tales of bullying into quitting the job are linked to all the few attempts to form a union at a call centre in Bulgaria and even when the union does not dissolve, the membership is limited and does not have the capacity to negotiate collective work contracts and terms of employment. Unionisation can be, counter-logically, also a very individualistic act that aims at alleviating the work conditions only for the members of the union, since they are protected by law. Thus, one of the workers who initiated a union, a well-educated middle-aged

¹⁹ Tsoneva, J. (2012) *Engineering and Accumulating Souls in the Offshore World: The Case of Malta*. MA thesis. Central European University.

man, who had experience in labour unions from a previous job as a teacher, used his membership in the union at the end to negotiate a considerable compensation in return for his quitting the job. Surprisingly, workers' stories of self-organization and solidarity focused not on unionising, but on finding strategies to do their work better and taking some sort of control over it.

Teleservices and racism

The nature of the outsourced industry feeds into racist relations, complementing the perceived inferior position of developing countries with the accepted inferior position of the service worker in regards to the customer. The fear of the "Indian call-centre worker" (which now spreads to other popular outsourcing destinations) is legitimated and turned into a pre-condition for organizing the work process and preparing the employees. For instance, the accent trainings offered to Indians to sound American²⁰, the pretend game making call-centre agents say they are situated elsewhere (in the country of the customer), and the acceptance of instances of outright racist insults from callers refusing to talk to an Indian or a Bulgarian point to a strange mesh-up of customer-friendliness and servitude that turns the fears surrounding the outsourcing of jobs and services into an opportunity for a politically incorrect pressure valve.

Overt racist remarks on the side of customers during the call are not only ordinary but also acceptable and a lot of work practices revolve around this issue. If workers are not required to hide their nationality and/or location, they often choose to do so themselves, in order to avoid harassment. One of the employees who used to work as customer support with German recounted how agents were allowed (sic!) to take on a German pseudonym if their accent was good enough, so they can avoid rude remarks, because the ones with German names had less problems with scandals with customers. "What one should never, ever do," he said, "is reveal that we are in Bulgaria." The hierarchies between customers and service workers, and Westerners and Eastern-Europeans/Asians intertwine and are readily reinforced through call-centre

²⁰ The practice is mentioned in multiple studies on Indian call centres, among others, Nadeem (Ibid.), Aneesh (Ibid.), Palm (Ibid.).

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work. Looking at the re-defining of gender and racial relations at Indian call centres, Mirchandani observes:

Encounters of rudeness and aggression are normalized through relations of production that simultaneously situate clients as whites, as Americans and as customers. This threefold social location overrides class boundaries that are being crossed with call center work, whereby highly educated Indian workers employed in middle-class, white-collar occupations often are serving lower-class, poorly educated American callers.²¹

Mirchandani point out that this type of transnational work re-structures employment in a way that is reviving racial and gender divisions, which she refers to as the “racialized gendering of jobs”²² and which involves highly educated men and women in the global South taking up de-skilled feminized jobs. The situation at Bulgarian call-centres is similar – the pink collar jobs that are not considered high-skilled occupations are performed by large by university graduates and professionals in the humanities. The significance of race in call centre job can easily be demonstrated by Western customers bluntly commenting on the accent of the agent, demanding they speak to somebody “better qualified” or simply “not from Eastern Europe” or joking about feeling nervous that their credit card will be wire-drawn by the Bulgarian scoundrels.

This intersection of racial and production relations is justified by the corporate principle of “customer first” and internalized by the employees, who take pains in achieving better accents and get frustrated by the rudeness of the callers. Thus, power relations based on production and the extraction of value are shifted and masked behind the tension caused by the junction of race and customer satisfaction. The practice of subcontracting and redistributing responsibilities and power down the outsourcing chain leaves the customer and the worker at the battlefield confronting each other in a phantom power fight. This allows the company and its corporate power structure to retreat in the background and withdraw from the field at which the battle is seemingly taking

²¹ Mirchandani, K. (2005) Gender Eclipsed? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work. In: *Social Justice*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (102), p. 113.

²² *Ibid.* p. 114.

place. This way, workplace antagonism is reinterpreted as the conflict between the rude Western customer and the Eastern-European service worker. The customer and the agent are brought against each other, despite sharing much of the same frustration and (self) exploitation caused by the transformation of work in digital capitalism that leaves both sides performing chunks of the work left after the dismantling of old service occupations. Palm sees outsourcing and self-service as two variants of the universal mobility of work that is made possible through the 'externalization of labour'²³. The work that the customer is doing while trying to reach a human voice on the other side, dialling and selecting options and clicking on links, mirrors the back office work done by the call-centre employee.

One of the hidden forms of workers' resistance is thus the emergence of feelings of solidarity with the customers. It can be enacted in the form of helping the customer more than one is supposed to, regardless of the time-limits imposed on customer-agent interactions, providing information that one is not supposed to give, advising customers about ways to cheat the company, advising them to buy the cheapest products or services or not to use them at all. These little acts of kindness are similar to the ones that Ehrenreich²⁴ describes during her experience as a minimum wage worker – waiters pampering customers with extra portions and adding more cream and sauce to their meals and drinks are acts of subversion through embracing the corporate ideology of always pleasing the client and the ubiquitous 'integrity'.

Apart from being torn between workplace discipline and the perceived freedom of consumer practices, workers are also subjected to conflicting expectations about the integral image of employee subjectivity they represent – on one hand, the corporate *homo novus* with their creativity and initiative and, on the other, the traditional docile worker, an object of constant supervision and surveillance, whose work is limited and guided through machinery and who is left with no real control over their labour. This is an eerie mesh-up between the "degradation of work" described

²³ The concept of externalization of labour is developed in Huws, U. (2003). *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

²⁴ Ehrenreich, B. (2001) *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Picador.

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by Braverman in 1974 and the literature on nourishing cadres analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello, which sifts down through the corporate hierarchy to touch upon ordinary office workers and stimulate them to take initiative and progress individually, through dare and ambition.

Constructing the call-centre worker through place and mobility

Employment at Bulgarian call centres is the embodied crossroads of mobility, stagnation, and flexibility. While there are no reliable statistics about the constitution of the labour force in call centres, outsourcing companies are citing young students and university graduates, aged 20 to 30, as the majority of their employees. These are the workers who are being seen as the “natural” candidates for low-skilled, temporary, and part-time labour while offering the benefit of their education. This social group is not only especially endangered by unemployment and difficult entry into the job market, but it is also considered more IT-savvy and a tabula rasa of sorts that allows for inscribing the specific corporate regulations and values²⁵. Huws sees them as an emerging reserve army of labour easily available worldwide through outsourcing and migration and easily replaceable on a global scale.²⁶ However, there are three other groups that increasingly find employment at Bulgarian call centres: older high qualified workers, return migrants, and foreigners.

The CEO of one of the big outsourcing companies in Bulgaria, Telus International Europe, Marcenac, explains that the company has proved to be a saviour for older educated unemployed, who would otherwise hardly find a job.²⁷ The majority of them have degrees in Linguistics and have been working as teachers or translators – professions that have been increasingly worse paid.

²⁵ Taking another example of the conference *Outsourcing Destination: Bulgaria*, the explanation for the preference for students and recent graduates with no work experience was that they were easy to train to the requirements of the company and did not “carry the burden” of previous training in practices conflicting with the ones imposed by the employer.

²⁶ Huws, U. (2013) Working Online, Living Offline: Labour in the Internet Age. In: *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, Vol. 7, No 1, Summer 2013, pp. 1-11.

²⁷ www.investor.bg/imenata-na-biznesa/263/a/k-marsenak-universitetite-ne-poznavat-outsorsing-industrijata-167357/. Accessed December 19, 2014.

Teachers, in particular, have to manage their demanding job with a monthly salary of less than 300 Euro and in an increasingly critical public environment that puts the blame for the faults in the education system on them and their lack of motivation.²⁸ Such employees often have to readjust to the requirements of corporate work at a later age.

Another group of employees is the return migrants and students who have benefited from the EU exchange programmes to spend a few months abroad. Programmes like Erasmus Mundus allow students to spend time at foreign universities and, thus, among other things, improve their foreign language skills. The programme is motivated by the desire to promote intercultural understanding and provide students with the opportunity to experience their EU citizenship through education. However, the exchange programmes are only a part of EU-facilitated forms of mobility, which allow people to turn their migration experience into linguistic skills and cultural competences that make them suitable for a call-centre job. The growing number of Bulgarian students pursuing degrees abroad and the growing youth unemployment rate in the EU mean a growing number of well-educated Bulgarians who speak foreign languages at a near native level and are looking for a job at home. The Association of the Private Universities in Bulgaria estimated in 2011 that about 80 000 Bulgarian students get higher education in other countries²⁹. Taken together with the number of return migrants, which is increasing due, in part, to the economic crisis in Europe, the pool of employees at Bulgarian call centres is characterized largely by the mobility of its labour force. These employees, having spent time abroad, possess the most central skills required for the work, the so called "cultural competences" that in countries like India are otherwise being taught to employees at special training sessions.³⁰

²⁸ See Ivancheva, M. (2014) *How a Bulgarian Teacher Made the News... for all the Wrong Reasons*. www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/bulgarian-teacher-made-news-for-wrong-reasons/. Accessed December 19, 2014.

²⁹ www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/80-hil.-bylgarski-studenti-v-chuzhbina-3801971. Accessed December 19, 2014. The official statistics show a much lower number of 27 895, which is due to the fact that not all universities collect data about the nationality of their students.

³⁰ See Nadeem (Ibid.) among others.

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Call centre work is indeed one of the employment options for return migrants and is actively advertised as such. A recent article in the *Independent* about outsourcing in Bulgaria quotes what is labelled as a “typical worker in Bulgaria’s call centres,” a young female who has graduated in Political Science in Austria and returned to work back home: *“My first intention was to stay and work in Austria,” she said. “But I knew outsourcing was growing in Bulgaria and the profile employers are looking for is young people like me with language skills. It was natural for me to look for a job here.”*³¹

The words of the young woman should certainly be taken with a pinch of salt bearing in mind the overall promotional tone of the article. The attractiveness of a call centre career for a graduate in Political Science over other work options is probably slightly overstated. The main stimulus for taking up call centre jobs is usually financial. One of the older employees, 45-50 years old man, who has worked at an international institution as translator, shared that he opted for working at a call centre because the living standard secured through the job was closer to the one he had abroad. Thus, initially he did not consider going back to his teaching position from before, because he could not imagine lowering his living standards. While some of the return migrants employees admit they have better employment options in Bulgaria, few consider the call centre a career choice that follows logically from their education.

Nevertheless, despite the overt statement of call-centre companies that higher education is not required for the job, most employees have at least undergraduate degrees. Since working knowledge of English is a must, regardless of the language to be used on the job, the majority of Bulgarian workers speak at least two foreign languages. This makes it virtually impossible for Bulgarian employees to find a call-centre job without at least a Bachelor degree. On the contrary, foreigners are often with only high-school or college degrees. In the words of a HR at one of the call-centres, the foreigners who come to work at the company would be considered low-skilled labour back home. As she explained, there is certain hesitancy as to whether call-centre employment could be considered high-skilled labour or low-skilled labour in Bulgaria. There is ambiguity about call-centre employ-

³¹ www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/forget-india-call-centres-are-moving-to-bulgaria-8939055.html. Accessed December 19, 2014.

ment in Bulgaria – while most workers are overqualified in terms of education, they are taking up the role of low-skilled native labour force in the country of the customer.

New migration routes driven by outsourcing

In the Middle Ages, feudalism in Western Europe and the inheritance system, which postulated that everything goes to the first-born son, led to a multitude of impoverished aristocrats, artisans, and peasants, who fed into the Crusades chasing the dream of the wealth of the Orient. Today, the restructuring of the economy and the state that leaves a growing number of people in the developed world jobless and increasingly considered unworthy of state support makes them turn an eye to the lands where jobs have migrated.

I am coming back to Sofia from Belgrade after attending the No Border meeting there in 2013. I am travelling by train on my own and I happen to sit in a compartment with two foreigners on their way to Bulgaria – a young 20 something male Brit and an older man, probably in his late 30s from Switzerland. The Swiss guy is visiting a friend whom he's met online and is very nervous about setting his foot on Bulgarian soil, he keeps asking about crime, prices, customs, and culture. The British guy takes over the role of an expert on the country and willingly shares his impressions and tactics for getting along in the Balkan state. He had been living in Bulgaria for about three years, working for an online betting company that had outsourced its business here and had a Bulgarian girlfriend. He is very happy with his life and job and shares he would never be able to have this standard of living in the UK. He was recruited directly from the UK, where he was currently unemployed, and flown to Sofia for an interview before he signed his contract for work in an online betting call centre. His tactics for surviving as an expat lied in basically avoiding contact with anything local.³² He described his daily routine, going to work from his new apartment building to the new business building where his office was, taking the subway and not the bus because the subway

³² This self-imposed insulation from the locality of their new home seems to be a commonplace for expats, judging from Fechter's study: Fechter, M. (2007) Living in a Bubble: Expatriates' Transnational Spaces. In: *Going First Class? New Approaches to Privileged Travel and Movement*. Berghahn Books, pp. 33-52.

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was quite new and felt more Western. He says if one manages to avoid the old buses and shabby streets and quarters, one can almost feel like “in the West”. He is praising the rise of call centres and outsourcing in Bulgaria and says they offer great opportunities to young Bulgarians.

The young Brit is one of the rising number of labour migrants in Bulgaria attracted by the booming outsourcing industry. As the essence of service offshoring is to provide services abroad, it relies heavily on linguistic competences. The hunger for employees speaking foreign languages makes companies turn their eyes on foreign labour. In recent years, outsourcing companies, foreign and Bulgarian alike, have started recruiting workers from abroad, through international recruitment agencies, operating around the world. During her speech at the conference *Outsourcing destination: Bulgaria*, the head of the HR department of Telus International Europe presented the recruitment of foreigners as one of the strategies for upgrading the human capital of the company. As she explained, the recruitment of foreigners also served as a disciplining measure towards Bulgarian workers, who realized that there was serious competition for their workplaces and thus became more motivated and diligent in their work. The disciplining effect of foreign workers is, of course, not the only reason for hiring foreign force.

Native speakers are especially valued in call centres, where language and cultural competences are the main qualifications needed for the job. Yet, they usually cost more to the company – the difference between the salaries of a foreign and a Bulgarian call-centre worker can be twice or more. The policy of paying foreigners more is a well-kept secret in the companies, most of which impose rules of non disclosure on their workers, meaning that they are not allowed to share information about their remuneration with co-workers.³³ Such rules can also be inscribed in their work contracts.

The exact number of foreigners recruited is unknown, but is on the rise. After Bulgaria’s accession to the EU, the restrictions about the number of foreign workers (who should not be more than 10%) were partially lifted as EU workers are considered native ones. Native speakers are hunted down by recruitment agencies operat-

³³ This tendency is also mentioned by Mircheva and Kirov (Ibid.), who write about the difference in remuneration that is usually denied or simply kept secret by employers.

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ing in Bulgaria and abroad with considerable zeal. The recruitment process can be rather aggressive and can include stealing employees from one company for another. This labour force, which would otherwise not qualify as particularly high-skilled, is so sought after that it is comparable to the new masters of the corporate universe – IT specialists and developers. I will only give one example: a couple of years ago, one of the big international companies was faced with the prospect of losing a considerable part of its German speaking employees at one of its projects to another company, when an HR agency started aggressively recruiting them by offering bigger salaries. Faced with the prospect of losing experienced employees and planting the seed of discontent among their co-workers – since German language was not the best paid in the company, the management took decisive measures and offered pay rise to all the members of the German team. The unusual decision, having in mind the general disposability of call-centre workers and the considerable flow of personnel, had to be, in turn, justified and explained to the rest of the employees. Appealing to some sort of solidarity and loyalty to the company, threatened by ill-intending external forces, could not, however, yield empathy in the generally cynical and disillusioned employees. After the meeting, people were muttering that they hoped for some other company to offer them a bigger salary and that they would accept it immediately.

The reasons to take up a call-centre job in Bulgaria are mainly financial, though some people are intrigued by the lesser-known destination. One of the new foreign employees, a Dutch man in his 50s, has been researching call centre employment options across Europe and argued that according to his careful calculations a call-centre job in Germany would pay the equivalent of 1400 lv (700 Euro), which would offer a comfortable living standard in Bulgaria. Most foreigners, however, receive roughly twice bigger salary, which is 8-9 times the minimal wage. The Dutch man had previously been working in another call centre in the Netherlands, but as others from his compatriots share, employment has been more and more difficult to land on back home, since call-centre jobs are becoming less available and the requirements for qualification more difficult to fulfil.

The foreigners directly recruited from Western Europe constitute only one share of the foreign workforce at the call centres – there are hires from other parts of the world and quite often

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people find themselves in Bulgaria for various reasons before taking up a call-centre job – study, love or plans for business investment in the country that failed. However, what is interesting is the way this type of migration is framed. The difference in the conditions of employment favours workers from the West, who might receive accommodation waivers partly covering their rent. But what is truly remarkable is the consistency, with which the image of the foreign Western migrant is constructed along the lines of adventurism and leisure migration. “They are mostly single, young, and without any commitments back home,” explained the HR of an outsourcing company, “they like to travel and it is harder to make them stay after the first year than to recruit them.” The recruitment strategy of the HR agencies follows the same patterns, attracting the new hires with promises of never-ending partying and a high-end lifestyle dining out every day – the symbolism of this promise evoking the image of expatriates in colonial settings, enjoying luxury compatible neither with their life back home nor with their new surroundings.

The figure of the expatriate is linked to the idea of lifestyle migration³⁴ – people pursuing a different lifestyle in exotic destinations, which implies a sense of freedom in choosing the destination and the conditions for resettlement. As many of the Westerners choosing to live in the East are representatives of diplomatic missions or corporate elites, their movement has fed into the notion of nomadic and exterritorial elites.³⁵ Their mobility and resettlement are analysed in stark contrast to the movement from East-South to North-West, which is framed in predominantly negative discourses of poverty migration and welfare abuse.

The recruitment agencies aided by employees bringing in friends or simply searching for people fitting the profile that is currently wanted in the company are actively importing labour migrants in Bulgaria from the West. The recruitment strategies of these agencies mirror the strategies of agencies offering work for Bulgarians in more affluent countries. Ads for construction workers, domestic workers, nurses, and caretakers can be seen along-

³⁴ Benson, M. and O'Reilly K. (2009) Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration. In: *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), pp. 608-625.

³⁵ Bauman, Ibid.

side ones for medical professionals, au-pairs, and work-and-travel programmes. Labour migration has come to define one of the major survival strategies of Bulgarians throughout the post-1989 years and Bulgarians are still labelled as job-stealing immigrants in the West. This tendency is not only new but also telling for the restructuring of migration flows within the EU. While there have been foreigners living and working in Bulgaria, their number has so far been limited (in 2012 the number of long-term immigrants in the country is estimated to 14 103 (EUROSTAT), which is about 0.6% of the population). This excludes EU citizens, who do not have the status of foreigners or immigrants since Bulgaria became part of the Union in 2007. The number, however, includes not only economically active labour force, but also retired migrants, people who are running their own businesses, and unemployed. The Brits buying real-estate and settling in Bulgaria for their retirement have traditionally been thought of as leisure migrants, attracted by the climate and the quiet life. In the perspective of newer migrants, however, it becomes more and more clear that such migration flows are the attempt of people to counteract the global redistribution of jobs and the deterioration of the welfare state across Europe. The picture eerily resembles the stratification that Saskia Sassen describes in her study on global cities – the financial centres of the global North increasingly getting rid of the middle strata of (middle-class) workers and instead creating a dualistic model of highly-paid professionals and low-paid service force, caring for them in laundry shops, restaurants, hotels, etc.³⁶ These developments come to defy the narrative of a restructured economy justifying outsourcing, claiming manual and low-skilled jobs will be offshored to less developed countries, while the Western worker will enjoy the benefit of better occupations, working the jobs of the future – service and high-skilled jobs. The feeling of superiority induced by such narratives has remained since, but in reality the economy has been developing far from the prospects outlined in such stories of solace.

While migration from the Global North to the South-East is the result from the loss of jobs due to outsourcing and migration, it defies traditional categories in migration studies on multiple levels.

³⁶ Sassen, S. (1991) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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It differs from what is traditionally recognised as labour mobility – i.e. a South-East to North-West migration from the poorer and less developed countries to the bosoms of capitalist prosperity. Migrants from the core EU countries are analysed in the optimistic overtones of cosmopolitanism and new cultural citizenship.³⁷

The movement from South-East to the West does indeed represent the major bulk of human traffic (taken in the very broadest sense of the word without any to the violent and involuntary trafficking of human bodies). In the field of migration studies that clearly draws a boundary between so called political, economic, and leisure migration, human flows are not only strictly defined in terms of their motivation, but also through their geographical positioning and orientation. Labour migration feeding into capitalist development has flowed from rural to urban areas and from developing to developed countries.³⁸

Conclusion

In the world of digital labour we can less and less fit either labour or migration within traditional categories and expect them to follow old patterns. Call-centre jobs are an example of this change. The ambivalence of this kind of work – low-skilled in Western Europe and high-skilled in the Global South and East, creates the opportunity for a different framing of this employment in accordance with the geographical positioning of the company. It is creating middle ground employment zones of sorts that are geographically determined. This not only means that call centres in Asia are the new cradles of an emerging digital middle class, while the ones in Eastern Europe are exploiting the processes of de-classing of cognitive workers, but also that they are the last

³⁷ See Favell, A. (2008) *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free Movement and Mobility in an Integrating Europe*. Blackwell Publishing.

³⁸ For a general discussion of different academic approaches to migration, see Torpey, J. (2000) *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Massey, D., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, J. E. Taylor (1993) Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal. In: *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 431-466.

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resort of a shrinking pink-collar labour force in the North-West that follows in the footsteps of fleeing capital. Reinforcing racial divides and nurturing old categories of migration, call-centre outsourcing masks the systemic restructuring of the relation between labour and capital, which renders them both mobile and changes dramatically the face of employment on a global scale.

The precarity of employment is also ambiguous as it is as much imposed as desired by employees who see flexibility and the frequent change of jobs as a way of escaping the harrowing dullness of repetitive tasks. This (in)voluntary precarious employment on the move means that the choice to change jobs or countries is more frequent and made easier than the choice and possibility for developing an occupational identity and self-organization to contest working conditions and social policies. Mobility becomes a defining property of employment, through migration, ICT transferred work, and the instability of precarious work. In this context, call centres provide middle ground employment zones that are defined through the new kind of outsourced work but also geographically. This kind of new middle class work is made possible through outsourcing and, specifically, at the ends of the outsourcing chains in the top outsourcing destinations of developing and poor countries that allow companies to pay lower wages but also allow employees to sustain an agreeable living standard with their remuneration.

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