Mobility strategies, ‘mobility differentials’ and ‘transnational exit’: the experiences of precarious migrants in London’s hospitality jobs

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Abstract
This article explores the patterns of occupational and geographical mobility of migrant hospitality workers, drawing on participatory research in London. It focuses on the ways in which migrants strategize around temporary employment and move across different jobs and locations trying to improve their precarious lives. Combining labour process theory and the perspective of the autonomy of migration the author reviews the concept of ‘mobility power’ as a form of resistance to degrading work. The findings illustrate that, while certain categories of migrants remain trapped in temporary employment, others manage to move on occupationally, develop aspects of their lives beyond work and engage in new migration. The main argument is that, in contrast to mainstream accounts of migrants’ labour market incorporation, migrant temp workers use their transnational exit power to quit bad jobs and defy employers’ assumptions about their availability to work under poor conditions.

Keywords
autonomy, hospitality, labour process theory, London, migrants, mobility differentials, mobility power, precarious employment, transnationality

Introduction
Much of the literature on migrant workers tends to draw an unproblematic association between temporary/flexible employment and labour migration. In sectors where migrant
workers are concentrated this literature emphasizes the mutual interest in temporary employment on the part of employers, who need to match fluctuations in demand, and migrants, who choose jobs that suit their short-term plans (Janta et al., 2011; People1st, 2009). At the opposite end of the spectrum critical scholarship illustrates how migrants’ ‘preference’ for temporary employment is underpinned by their uncertain migratory and financial status (Anderson, 2010; McDowell et al., 2008; McKay, 2009b). For example, McDowell et al. (2008: 754), in a study of hospitality jobs in London, found a particular correlation between new migration patterns and temporary agency work, arguing that ‘the increases in the supply of transnational migrant workers, prepared to work under less favourable conditions than local workers, have been facilitated by and have increased agency work.’

This article questions the view that there is a simple match between temporary employment and migrant labour in sectors like hospitality (Janta et al., 2011), or that migrants are a straightforward means of labour market flexibilization (Ruhs, 2006), passive victims of employers’ abuse (TUC, 2008), or complicit with a regime of precarious work and low pay. Rather it builds on the literature that highlights workers’ tendency to leave insecure jobs due to low investment in them (Elger and Smith, 1998; Smith, 2006) and on research that calls into question employers’ assumptions about migrants’ willingness to work under poor terms and conditions (Forde and MacKenzie, 2009; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009).

While these debates have focused on the challenges that migrant labour represents for management, here the author takes the perspective of migrants, exploring the ways in which they act upon their precarious conditions and strategize around their mobility and ‘temporariness’ to escape degrading jobs. The theoretical contribution lies in revisiting the concept of ‘labour mobility power’ within the labour process debate around quitting (Smith, 2006, 2010) and drawing on the insights of the ‘autonomy of migration’ perspective (Mezzadra, 2004; Moulier Boutang, 1998; Papadopoulos et al., 2008) to disclose mobility as a possible terrain of resistance for low-income migrants.

The empirical material draws on participant observation in London’s hospitality industry and temporary agencies. The main empirical contribution is that while the mobility of migrants was differently constrained by their employment and migration status, some workers managed to make a strategic use of temp jobs in order to gain new skills, enrich their social lives and reproduce their mobility occupationallly and transnationally. Migrant temp workers in the hospitality industry showed a weak attachment to work and, through their mobility strategies, defied employers’ expectations about their availability to engage in long and unpredictable hours for low pay. In contrast to mainstream accounts of migrants’ labour market incorporation and moving beyond a focus on economic mobility (Hagan et al., 2011), the analysis highlights the unpredictable and independent drivers of migrants’ movement, pointing to the effects of ‘mobility power’ beyond the workplace.

The first part of the article discusses research on migrant workers in the UK and provides the regulatory context underlying their employment in the hospitality sector. The second section develops the theoretical framework, reviewing debates on quitting and mobility power in Labour Process Theory (LPT) and the insights of critical migration studies. An overview of the research methods is followed by an ethnographic account of
the mobility pathways of migrant hospitality workers and by an analysis of the ‘mobility power differentials’ shaping their opportunities for occupational and transnational mobility. Finally, the implications of renewing LPT and industrial relations approaches to migrant labour are considered.

Migrant workers in the UK hospitality sector

Jobs in hospitality, both in the UK and internationally, are characterized by poor working conditions, insecure contractual arrangements, long, anti-social working hours, very low wages and hard human resource management (Dutton et al., 2008; Lucas and Mansfield, 2010; TUC, 2007, 2008; Vanselow et al., 2009). Harassment and bullying, unpaid overtime and wage withdrawals are experienced in particular by migrant workers who comprise a significant section of the sector’s workforce, especially in London, where they are often employed on casual contracts or by temporary agencies (Evans et al., 2007; Lai et al., 2008; McDowell et al., 2007; McKay, 2009a, 2009b; Wills et al., 2009; Wright and Pollert, 2006).

According to the industry-specific literature migrants are meant to provide ‘a constant turnover of unskilled employees’ (Janta et al., 2011: 1007) matching the need of employers to respond to rapid fluctuations in demand (Lai et al., 2008; People 1st, 2009). Scholars have highlighted the function of migrant labour as ‘greasing the wheels’ of the UK labour market (Ruhs, 2006). Similarly, surveys of UK employers emphasized that the high levels of commitment, availability and flexibility of migrants are among the reasons why employers prefer them to indigenous workers (CIPD, 2005, 2013). Others have argued that employers assume that migrants work harder because they are focused on maximizing income, learning English, or sending remittances back home (Dench et al., 2006).

In the hotel and restaurant industry in London the ‘influx’ of ‘new migrants’ from the EU accession countries, preferred to other racialized minorities for their stronger ‘work ethic’, is meant to have further exacerbated employment features in the sector given their supposed availability to accept lower wages and conditions (Dutton et al., 2008; McDowell et al., 2008; McKay, 2009a). Critical migration scholarship has shown how low skilled migrants, with fewer financial resources and uncertain legal status, have limited access to secure and long-term employment and risk remaining ‘trapped’ in temporary and casual work (Anderson, 2010; Vosko, 2010). Under the points-based system for immigration (PBS) (Home Affairs Committee, 2009) non-EU migrants in the UK categorized as ‘economic migrants’ can be considered effectively temporary as their right to stay is dependent on a work permit sponsored by a particular employer (Anderson, 2010: 309). Despite their mobility not being regulated under the PBS, ‘accession migrants’ have suffered forms of discrimination and insecure and poorly paid employment as well as limited welfare rights (Anderson et al., 2006; Ciupijus, 2011).

Other scholars have called into question the common view of migrants as endlessly available to work under poor terms and conditions. Research has emphasized the contradictions underpinning employers’ view of migrants as homogeneous, disposable and interchangeable while simultaneously expecting long term commitment (Forde and MacKenzie, 2009: 441). In a study on employers’ use of migrant labour Forde and MacKenzie showed how migrant workers were often willing to move to alternative jobs
for relatively small improvements. Similarly McKay (2009a: 39), researching migrant labour in the construction and hotel sector, warned against assumptions about migrants being ‘more ready and willing to work’; employers were also aware of disadvantages such as ‘language and uncertainty over the likely length of their stay’. Research has illustrated how ‘new migrants’ have a range of motivations to embark on temporary, poorly paid work (Cook et al., 2011). This is a strategy to gain language skills before moving to better jobs, or as a ‘stepping stone’ to support themselves while training for a specific occupation (Wright and Pollert, 2006).

Overall, far from suggesting a ‘natural match’ between employers’ needs and migrant workers’ preference for temporary work, the employment of migrants emerges as an open-ended and contradictory social process. Beside tensions and uncertainties in the use of migrant labour for employers, only limited research exists on the subjective reasons that lead these workers to take on precarious jobs in relation to their migratory paths. This article looks at the ways in which low paid migrants might use their mobility and temporary status strategically to escape harsh conditions and move to better jobs and locations. Bringing into dialogue the often separated fields of labour and migration studies, the following explores the theoretical debate on workers’ quitting potential within LPT and that on migrants’ everyday strategies of mobility within migration research. The aim is to understand mobility as a possible terrain of resistance for those considered the most vulnerable to exploitation and insecurity.

**Mobility as a terrain of struggle**

**The point of view of the labour process**

Scholars within LPT have provided some useful insights into the factors underpinning workers’ mobility choices and their effects on managerial control in the workplace (Knights and Willmott, 1990; Thompson, 1989; Thompson and Smith, 2010). Drawing on the Marxian notion of labour power, LPT emphasizes the constant need for capital to obtain consent from workers because of the unspecified magnitude of work effort (Edwards, 1979; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Thompson, 1989). Within this tradition Edwards and Scullion (1982) were the first to argue that turnover and ‘quitting’ could legitimately be considered expressions of a conflict between capital and labour over the ‘frontier of control’. In relation to temporary agency work research has shown how a ‘duality of control’ between the labour process and the site of contractual employment makes workers’ loyalty and self-discipline more difficult to achieve, further exacerbating ‘the indeterminacy of labour potential’ (Gottfried, 1992: 447).

More recently Smith (2006, 2010) reconsidered the potential for conflict implicit within workers’ quitting strategies. Rehabilitating an overlooked dimension of labour power, Smith (2006: 391) defines ‘mobility power’ as the ‘internal expression of high labour turnover’, urging researchers to consider its destabilizing impact on the labour process. This author has also emphasized that labour mobility should be understood in direct connection with the effects of ‘policing borders and the differentiation of labour power into legal and illegal categories with differing implications for labour market access, the segmentation of employment and weakening of unionizing potential’ (Smith,
Indeed, scholars have considered how the regime of migration controls in the UK, by establishing different entry categories for migrants, produces their ‘temporariness’ and precarious working conditions (Anderson, 2010).

While labour scholars have started to acknowledge the impact of migration regulation on migrants’ position in the labour market, the debate within labour process studies has remained focused on the impact of mobility power on work effort and in the workplace, overlooking the motivations of workers entering and leaving temporary jobs from the point of view of their migration trajectories. In this regard critical migration research offers an alternative understanding of the indeterminacy of labour and of the ‘struggles of mobility’ waged by migrant workers, bringing into the picture the range of social, economic and subjective processes that shape people’s patterns of mobility and fixity.

**The point of view of migration**

Migration research has highlighted how working migrants draw on their transnational networks to migrate and develop economic activities to sustain their immigration (Hagan et al., 2011; Harney, 2007; Riccio, 2001; Vertovec, 2004). Hagan et al. (2011) studied low-income Latino migrants in the construction sector in North Carolina and how they accumulate work experiences and informal learning in their countries of origin and arrival to advance their occupational career and ‘escape bad jobs’ (Hagan et al., 2011: 151). They argue that migrants apply occupational mobility strategies including on-the-job reskilling, ‘job-jumping’ and ‘hopping’, challenging common views that mechanically associate low levels of education and poor language skills with ‘blocked mobility’ (Chiswick and Miller, 1995).

While de-constructing rigid categories of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ migrant workers, Hagan et al.’s (2011) critique maintains a focus on migrants’ economic mobility and their strategies in relation to the labour market. Rather differently, other researchers have emphasized how migrants’ trajectories are increasingly socially diverse, temporary and embedded in friendship networks. Terms such as ‘middling transnationals’ (Conradson and Latham, 2005) or ‘working tourists’ (Uriely, 2001) highlight how fairly well educated migrants often migrate for non-economic motives, develop a ‘transnational lifestyle’ and do unskilled work for instrumental reasons. The limitation of this section of migration research is that it reproduces a relatively de-politicized and individualized view of migrants’ position in the economy and society of arrival, against the false image of a de-regulated and permissive labour market (Conradson and Latham, 2005: 300; see also Vertovec, 2004). In contrast, the ‘autonomy of migration’ perspective, drawing from autonomous Marxist readings of capital-labour relations, allows for an understanding of migrants’ mobility that considers both the everyday practices of migrants and the tensions that they generate as migrant labour.

The ‘autonomy of migration’ is grounded on the assumption that capital maintains a specific, if changing, interest in controlling the speed and pace of workers’ mobility across national borders (Mezzadra, 2004; Moulier Boutang, 1998; Papadopoulos et al., 2008). Migration is understood as an act of rebellion in itself vis-a-vis the political measures that are designed to control the movement of labour (Moulier Boutang, 1998). The autonomy of migration emphasizes how migrants through their ordinary mobility
practices constitute alternative forms of existence and modes of life that evade and defy existing labour controls and the exclusionary mechanisms of citizenship (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013: 191).

It becomes apparent that mobility constitutes a crucial terrain of agency and resistance for migrant workers in precarious employment precisely because of the existing obstacles to transnational and occupational mobility. How do migrants strategize around their mobility and temporariness to escape exploitative conditions despite the current regime of migration and labour control at the bottom end of the service economy?

Research methods

This article draws on a participatory study on migrant employment conducted by the author in London. In particular the data was produced through two phases of participant observation, confronting participants in their ‘corporeal reality’ (Burawoy, 1991: 291) to explore the everyday lives and responses of migrants working in the hospitality industry and the nuances of the social stratification of migration in this relatively informal sector. Semi-structured and informal interviews were conducted with 50 migrant workers employed under a variety of contracts (part-time, agency, fixed-term or casual contracts) and 10 practitioners involved in the sector. All observations and conversations across the two phases were recorded through ‘full field-notes’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

Initial access was obtained by the researcher through registration with two temporary agencies and subsequently carrying out assignments in large restaurants and catering establishments. This phase of participant observation lasted four months (January-April 2008). Covert research was chosen at this stage to avoid the ‘reactivity’ of the participants impacting significantly on the results of the research (Bryman, 2004), e.g. managers attempting to hide or reduce the worst aspects of the job since they knew they were being observed. The identity of the researcher and the aims of the study were disclosed to 10 of the migrants met through the agencies, with whom further semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The rest of the informal interviews in the agencies (30) were conducted covertly. The responses from all the informants and the identities of the agencies and workplaces visited have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

With regard to the organizations researched, the agency ‘International Talent’ was one of the leading providers in London allocating migrants to catering and housekeeping jobs. The second, the ‘East End Agency’, was smaller in scale and dispatched only catering workers. The workplaces visited were hotels and restaurants belonging to large international chains with high target markets, or hospitals and conference centres where migrants were employed to provide full-service catering. The researcher experienced the pattern of shift working typical of migrants in the hospitality sector, where working hours are irregularly distributed throughout the week according to the fluctuating demand from the hotels and restaurants. This period of covert observation ended because of exhaustion resulting from the intensity of work and the difficulty of coping with shift working. Further semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 individuals among union and community organizers and 10 hospitality workers in the context of the second phase of the research. This phase involved 18 months of overt participant observation in a union campaign in the local hotel industry (from October 2007 to April 2009).
The workers interviewed were all migrants coming from either EU or non-EU countries, more specifically from Nigeria, Ghana, Eritrea, Italy, Portugal, Angola, Poland, Lithuania or Brazil. Their ages varied significantly, ranging from workers in their 20s (the majority in the case of recently arrived migrants), to middle-aged women and men who often belonged to established migrant communities. While the qualitative sample was also mixed in terms of gender, the majority of migrants interviewed were female (35). Many of the agency workers had very little or no experience in the sector and were often overqualified. Some had uncertain migration status (undocumented, over-stayers or with a visa about to expire), but their proportion in the sample will remain unspecified to protect their vulnerable position.

The interviews lasted between one and two hours and investigated migrants’ practices of resistance, their perception of temporary work, their migration and employment status and their plans regarding occupational and geographical mobility. When possible the researcher conducted a second or third interview with the same individual to map possible changes in the life trajectories of these workers, following other examples of longitudinal research on migrant labour (Krings et al., 2011). The interviews and fieldnotes were analysed applying ‘content analysis’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) according to the key focus on migrants’ occupational and geographical mobility. The wider analytical approach followed feminist theories of ‘intersectionality’ (McDowell, 2008b; Nash, 2008) to explore how differentiated migrants try to circumvent the multiple and interlocking constraints on their mobility, escape bad jobs and improve their precarious lives.

Precarious migrants’ use of mobility within and beyond the labour market

Acquiring skills through occupational and transnational mobility

For some, the choice of temporary or part-time employment in the catering sector was supported by a clear plan of occupational mobility, for instance in order to acquire the language skills needed for a specific career or ‘re-invest’ their work experience somewhere else:

Diana shows a relatively instrumental approach towards temping in the catering sector, considering it only an ‘initial step’ in her migratory plan. Holding a degree in philosophy, her aim, besides learning English, is to find secretarial work in the near future (her ‘real job’ back in Lithuania) that would better match her occupational aspirations. (Fieldnotes, interview with Diana, Lithuania, 29, agency worker, one year in London, catering shift at the River Hospital, emphasis added)

After a few months, Diana decided to ‘quit the agency’ where she faced ‘disrespect’. She expressed relief that she no longer had to ‘deal with those horrible people’ who put pressure on her and made it impossible for her to sustain a multiple-jobs schedule. However, with no need for a work permit as an ‘A8 migrant’, Diana could remain out of employment for a certain period and wanted to profit from her stay in London to improve her English.
A different experience was recounted by Cynthia, an Eritrean woman with Italian citizenship who was employed on a part-time basis in a hotel restaurant. Cynthia favoured flexible employment because of her family commitments, but also as part of a longer-term plan including both skills development and onward migration. Her dream was to establish a business in Jamaica, her husband’s country of origin. She expressed a mix of disinvestment and pride in her current occupation, with a view to moving away from the UK:

Why should I care about this company? I do now the very minimum required since things are going so badly... they don’t give me much money but they haven’t got a clue what I am learning from them, for what I want to do for my future! For me, customers are customers; it is the essence of this work .... (Cynthia, Eritrea, 36, eight years in London, part-time employee, Food & Beverage, Zanda Hotel, emphasis added)

Although her position was not financially rewarding, Cynthia was confident about the possibility of re-investing the skills developed through her current job into a new project, which involved moving forward both in occupational and spatial terms. Cynthia’s exit strategy appeared crucially supported by her transnational ties spread across Europe, Africa and the Caribbean which facilitated her sense of detachment from the firm. At the same time her decision to quit was reinforced by the persisting difficulties of ‘integration’ in London: ‘Life in London is hard, it’s too heavy and grey.’

While in the cases above we can see a relatively strong relationship between transnational mobility and labour market trajectories, many of the temporary migrants interviewed appeared disinterested in advancing their position occupationally. The decision to work temporarily in the hospitality sector appeared to be functional, to sustain a migratory plan, which was in turn the result of a mix of desires for a variety of educational, experiential and cultural gains.

Experiencing the world, reproducing mobility

The testimony of Agnieszka, a woman from Poland with past experience in catering jobs, is in contrast with the stereotypical image of the ‘hard working’ A8, available to work under exploitative conditions on the basis of strict saving plans:

I worked in the catering over two years because I was a student, only because I was a student! I came to improve my English, travelling, to get an experience, meeting people ... to explore. I never thought about saving money. It is really difficult to save ... unless you completely renounce having a social life, but then you can’t take advantages of all the things going on in London! If you have the plan, something more than earning money, you can work in catering, but meanwhile taking some courses, improve yourself. (Agnieszka, Poland, 30, nine years in London, former bar worker, community organizer for the hotel sector, emphasis added)

Also among the non-EU citizens there was evidence of the possibility of using temping in the sector strategically. A male migrant from Brazil with a European passport and multiple language skills, after only a few months in casual employment as a ‘room steward’ in a luxury hotel, quit to take on a job as a driver for a wine company.
Far from representing career advancement, the new opportunity to work as a driver allowed Corrado to quit a poorly paid job, while freeing up time for him to play the bass, his ‘real passion’, and look for a band to join in London. (Fieldnotes, interview with Corrado, Brazil, 35, one year in the UK, casual, former room steward, Hybris Hotel).

The new job was more rewarding financially, while still giving him freedom to arrange working hours and the extra opportunity to ‘travel all around exploring the capital’. In a second interview Corrado disclosed his intention to make a further move and become self-employed. Thanks to his contacts in Brazil, he was planning to set up a ‘transnational trade in garments’, ‘something small for the moment’, but which could provide an alternative income.

A highly instrumental and careless attitude to hospitality work was expressed by another worker from Brazil during a shift in the restaurant of a luxury hotel:

Felix started the shift at the restaurant at 6pm. Even when the maître shouted at him and humiliated him because of his poor English, Felix seemed to remain indifferent. The ironic winks he exchanged with his Brazilian mates helped him to get through the shift and cope with management’s harassment. He told me that he did not care much about being treated badly as he didn’t care about the job. Felix worked in different places and with different agencies; he planned to stay only for a short time in London with the aim of learning English: shift work fitted perfectly with his daily schedule. This was not his ‘real job’ after all. He used to be a graphic designer in his country. He left his job to learn languages, to see Europe, to travel – he said he felt young and free. There is no privacy when you are sharing a room, but, for Felix, this was only for a short time. I could see a certain degree of self-control in him, in the way he ‘managed’ his temporariness. (Fieldnotes, interview with Felix, Brazil, 26, six months in the UK, agency worker, catering, The Lush Café, emphasis added).

This young migrant’s capacity to juggle shift-work, to live with precarity and find new routes away from exploitative employment, clearly depended on other factors. These included: his family and class background; the possibility of re-entering employment in his home country; access to financial support; and strong transnational friendship networks (Fieldnotes, informal interview with Felix, the Brazilian party in Kilburn). Although Felix was unable to find work as a graphic designer, a few months later he managed to quit temping in London and move to Paris, where he found a better job and improved his overall quality of life.

Getting stuck

Certainly, there was no guarantee of finding another job, accessing another recruitment agency or moving to a different country for all the migrants in the study.

A middle-aged woman from Brazil, working as a maid in the same hotel as Corrado, found it particularly difficult to improve her situation. In the first interview Cecilia expressed a mix of motives for her immigration to the UK with plans to move on to southern Europe:

I think I will change job after vacation, I am thinking to do something like ‘housekeeper-nanny’, it is convenient and I can work with families in residence. So it is good for improving
my English and it is a quieter job … Anyway, it will be something for a short time, I am thinking about moving to Spain. My interest is to stay in Europe, also for cultural reasons, in order to have a good time, a better life … here there is a cultural richness that you cannot find anywhere else. (Cecilia, Brazil, 47, casual, nine months in the UK, chambermaid, Hybris Hotel, emphasis added)

After six months, when the researcher met Cecilia for a second interview, it was clear that her plan to improve her English skills did not succeed and that housekeeping was still the only option for her. Eventually Cecilia ‘got stuck’ in the same hotel for much longer than expected and could not fulfil her plan to upgrade to her dream job or move to Spain.

A similar story of immobility in casual employment emerged in the case of a Polish woman employed in a luxury hotel as a cleaner. She worked 12 hours a day, five or six times a week. She said:

I have to do it, because we really have a lot of work. I needed money for my flat in Poland, to save money. (Neva, Poland, 50, casual, five years in the UK, chambermaid, Jupiter Hotel)

Neva sometimes had to do 12 days in a row and was still casual after three years in the same hotel. She was not offered a proper contract. She thought, ‘This is the way’ (Fieldnotes, interview with Neva). Despite enjoying legal status, Neva lacked access to the social and financial support needed to move to a new job and preferred not to lose the relative security provided by her current employment. Similarly the migrant woman from Lithuania, Diana, despite enjoying the ‘privilege of mobility’ in the UK labour market, could not realize her desired occupational move solely on the basis of her legal status. Diana lamented that UK employers tended to ignore her experience in administrative work and during the last interview she appeared caught between the fear of unemployment and that of ‘becoming a temp forever’.

Struggles of mobility and ‘mobility power differentials’ in the hospitality sector

Overall the relative success in turning down ‘bad jobs’ and moving away differed according to workers’ migratory and employment status, their age, ‘race’, gender, educational background and the possibility of relying on local and transnational support networks. Some of the migrant workers managed to make a positive and strategic use of their mobility and temporariness. Their strategies appeared variously intertwined with their occupational trajectories or, beyond labour market motives, with their intention to develop themselves or simply ‘renew’ their transnational mobility. In this process they developed a sense of instrumentality and detachment towards hospitality work on the basis of their labour market strategies and wider migration plans. However, as shown by the stories of those who remained ‘stuck’ in poorly paid, hard and precarious jobs, temporariness and flexibility did not assume a positive meaning for all the migrants in the study.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a systematic evaluation of the multiple axes of differentiation that impact on migrants’ capacity to make a strategic use of their
mobility across temporary and insecure jobs. Gender and generational differences, for instance, have clearly impacted on the impediments to mobility of the women migrants described above (see also Erel, 2009; McDowell, 2008b). The analysis below considers the intersection between the migratory and employment status of these workers, as discussed in the literature (Anderson, 2010; Vosko, 2010), to identify the relative increase or decrease of ‘mobility power’ and the factors that explain migrants’ ‘mobility differentials’.

Despite the fact that agency employment is considered among the most precarious contractual types, these workers being at higher risk of dismissal, lacking workplace and social protections (McKay, 2009a; TUC, 2007), some of the agency migrants in the study did manage to make a strategic use of their temporary status, for instance by quitting their job when it became unbearable or no longer useful to sustain their life or occupational projects (e.g. in the testimonies of Felix and Diana). This appeared possible due to their relatively low attachment to a particular employer or occupational sector, which confirms the fragile nature of ‘dual control’ and the higher labour indeterminacy of indirect employment (Gottfried, 1992; Smith, 2006). The intermediated nature of their employment relationship meant that migrant agency workers were more prepared to leave their insecure job and dis-identify with it. Diana decided to ‘quit the agency’ that did not allow her to sustain her multiple shifts across London, putting into question employers’ assumptions about migrants’ availability to work for long and variable hours (see also Forde and MacKenzie, 2009).

Their migratory status particularly influenced the mobility power of migrants and their capacity to strategize around flexible and temp work. Being EU or non-EU crucially shaped the possibility for these workers to make unconstrained plans of trajectories in and out of the hospitality industry. They had the option of remaining or returning to their country of origin, as well as the possibility to remain unemployed for some time to dedicate themselves to other activities. The cases of Diana and Neva are examples of the interplay of migratory and employment status and of the relative difference that holding EU citizenship makes for these workers. Despite her ‘privilege’ of being white, being relatively educated and enjoying freedom of movement, Diana felt trapped in temporary employment, and continued to experience labour market discrimination in the UK and skills degradation similarly to other East European migrants (Ciupijus, 2011; McDowell, 2008a). Yet, in contrast to her colleagues from outside the EU, she had the opportunity to stay in the country without a work permit to cultivate her language skills and future occupational mobility.

Migrants were not simply focused on labour market ‘upward’ mobility. In the case of Corrado his ‘jump’ was into a totally different sector and did not follow a ‘linear’ occupational advancement or re-skilling strategy (cf. Hagan et al., 2011). Rather his move was aimed explicitly at escaping the harsh and degrading conditions of his hotel job as a ‘backyard boy’. While research in hospitality has associated the maximum degree of agency with cases where migrants have a clear plan of progression or training for a specific occupation (Wright and Pollert, 2006), the mobility strategies of migrants in this study seemed to be guided by wider perspectives about non-economic gains (e.g. Corrado’s passion for music; Felix and Cecilia’s interest in the cultural experience of living in Europe; Cynthia’s preference for life in Jamaica).
Migrants returning to their home countries or ‘transferring their skills to third countries’ might be considered the ultimate form of ‘job-jumping’ and ‘occupational career’ (Hagan et al., 2011: 171). In the case of Cynthia her choice to move away was also a consequence of a sense of ‘failed’ integration in the company where she worked and in the city at large. The perception of possibility for new migration was elicited by her transnational ties as part of a family network spread across continents. Compared to British workers who may also use their international skills to migrate and set up their business overseas, the peculiar aspect of Cynthia’s ‘transnational exit’ lay exactly in her reliance on transnational connections to overcome the marginalization and occupational immobility experienced as a non-citizen and part-time worker.

While Cynthia’s mobility was still facilitated by her Italian passport, some of the highly transient migrants from outside the EU were also able to seize the opportunity of temporary work and challenged management expectations through their transnational ‘mobility power’. As MacKenzie and Forde’s study demonstrated (2009: 156), employers’ assumptions about migrant workers’ availability to work unpredictable and long hours were called into question by migrants’ rising aspirations as they became more ‘embedded in the local community and labour market’. They were meant to ‘move up the ladder’ according to their degree of integration and acquisition of ‘country-specific skills’ such as education and language. Rather differently, the precarious Brazilians in this study managed to jump from one job to the other or otherwise improved their condition despite lacking fluent English, attachment to the local community or a particular occupation. They resisted precarious working conditions through their mobility within the labour market and transnationally.

In this sense, while the migration-related interests such as income maximization and learning English might be perceived by employers as guarantees of migrants’ high commitment to work on flexible patterns (Dench et al., 2006), here the same motives represented a challenge rather than an insurance to employers’ assumptions. In other words, while the migrant profile of the workforce and the regulation of labour mobility exacerbate high turnover in the sector, this article suggests that management and workers’ strategies in hospitality are not merely mirroring each other (cf. Janta et al., 2011; People1st, 2009). Workers’ own strategies and gains are much more differentiated and unpredictable than that. In turn, the combination of migration and employment status produces a higher or lower mobility power for migrants depending on other complex intersections of gender, age, class and ‘race’, and differently influences migrants’ access to social resources, including their capacity to move (see also Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

Most strikingly, not only workers who were entitled to freedom of movement but in some cases even non-EU agency migrant workers with uncertain migration status and limited entitlement to work appeared able to ‘jump’ from one job to the other. Despite not enjoying the benefits of EU citizenship and living in the UK on a temporary student visa, Felix’s relatively easier access to social and economic resources allowed him to find jobs through different agencies. The multiple drivers and trajectories of young transnationals clearly transcend the logic of the migrant as *homo economicus*. Yet Felix’s mobility patterns also differed from an individualized occupational advancement (Hagan et al., 2011) and his complex experience of precarity was not reducible to that of ‘middling transnationals’ focused on developing a ‘transnational lifestyle’ (Conradson and Latham, 2005;
Uriely, 2001). Although coming from a middle-class background, as a low-income migrant he struggled with the precarity of work and life in London. Yet, drawing on his friendship networks, Felix managed to circumvent the constraints of his migratory and employment status by moving to a different country.

Indeed it was in the variety of migrant workers’ drives and mobility gains across the labour market and broader migration strategies that the stories presented disclosed a different understanding of ‘mobility power’. While the current regime of migration controls can be understood as a way of channelling highly mobile workers into insecure and temporary jobs (Anderson, 2010; Mezzadra, 2004), migrants in this study, drawing on their circuits of trans-local connections, appeared to find effective ways to overcome these constraints and improve their harsh working lives through their occupational and geographical mobility.

Conclusions

This article aimed to deconstruct the common view of migrant workers as mere victims of precarious employment or otherwise complicit with employers’ strategies of flexibility and low pay in sectors where they are in demand. Drawing from participatory research at the bottom end of the hospitality industry in London, it showed how migrants exercised their mobility and used their temporariness strategically in order to exit difficult situations, gain time, re-invest their skills or simply renew their capacity to be mobile.

In comparison with reviews of LPT that emphasize ‘mobility power’ as a source of worker resistance in the workplace (Smith, 2006, 2010), this study disclosed how migrants use their quitting potential for reasons that often exceed a mere economic rationale and are independent from their identity as workers. Consideration of the irreducible, multiple and subjective factors driving migration into (and out of) these low-paid jobs suggests the need to re-interpret the concept of ‘mobility power’ from the point of view of these workers’ transnational mobility practices. Beyond the impact of mobility on ‘effort power’ (Edwards and Scullion, 1982; Smith, 2006) migrants’ mobility struggles become significant in social domains that exceed the workplace, including family, friendships, local and transnational communities. The specificity of the ‘transnational mobility power’ of migrants as compared to that of UK citizens lies precisely in migrants’ exclusion from citizenship and from ‘standard’ employment (with the attached rights and protections) and constitutes what renders mobility an important terrain of resistance and emancipation for migrants.

To be sure, migrant temp workers are largely instrumental and often dis-identify with the job they do, which weakens their potential to engage with unions and traditional forms of worker representation. However, the study shows that they are not merely subjugated to the regime of temporary and precarious work, nor are they a simple tool of labour market flexibilization. The different occupational and geographical trajectories of trans-migrants are not reducible to neoclassical economic readings of migration. On the contrary migrants’ mobility appears to exceed linear labour market or ‘civic integration’ pathways and not to be easily captured by traditional forms of loyalty and attachment to the firm.
While the strategic use of mobility, flexibility and temporary work appears highly differentiated along racial, gender, class and juridical lines, it does not merely reflect individual economic mobility (cf. Hagan et al., 2011) but appears crucially supported by the presence of collective resources and networks across migrant communities, both local and transnational. As a consequence, the timing and nature of migrants’ occupational and spatial mobility emerge as fundamentally unpredictable, questioning common assumptions about the ‘disposability’ and ‘availability’ of migrant labour at the origin of high turnover in the sector (cf. Janta et al., 2011; McDowell et al., 2008; Wright and Pollert, 2006).

Going beyond a view of migrant workers as the ultimate form of vulnerable labour may also encourage trade unions and community practitioners to take contingent and precarious work seriously and re-think current forms of collective organization to respond to the increasing precarization and ‘transnationalization’ of labour. This involves questioning the deep-seated assumption among trade unions that workers’ ‘propensity to resist’ stems necessarily from a strong occupational identity and continuity of employment, which are becoming distant realities for both migrant and non-migrant workers. On the contrary, migrants’ mobility and temporariness appear to constitute a double terrain of control and resistance against the precarious conditions of life and work.

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References


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