



The mobility of workers living at work in Europe

Journal:	<i>Current Sociology</i>
Manuscript ID	CS-18-0185.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	dormitories, labour, migrant workers, European labour market, workers mobility
Abstract:	<p>Scholars, mainly focusing on Asia, consistently describe the im/mobility of workers living at work as orchestrated from above. We bring to the forefront forms of workers' mobility that take place outside of the established and often policed tracks. Focusing on Europe, we show that the mobility of workers is the outcome of the interplay of both employers' strategies and workers' agency.</p> <p>Based on extensive fieldwork among migrant workers in Europe - Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry, and Eastern European migrant workers at the Foxconn electronics plants in the Czech Republic - our paper offers a new approach. Instead of focusing on the single workplace at a certain point in time, we adopt a perspective that considers the multiplicity of accommodations at work for workers across Europe along the time dimension.</p> <p>By extending the study of the dormitory regime to the European Union, we highlight the way the growing frequency of factories cum dormitories to a certain extent empowers the workers as their horizons extend to other sites within Europe and are not limited to a single firm.</p>

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

The mobility of workers living at work in Europe

ABSTRACT

Scholars, mainly focusing on Asia, consistently describe the im/mobility of workers living at work as orchestrated from above. We bring to the forefront forms of workers' mobility that take place outside of the established and often policed tracks. Focusing on Europe, we show that the mobility of workers is the outcome of the interplay of both employers' strategies and workers' agency.

Based on extensive fieldwork among migrant workers in Europe - Chinese migrants in the Italian fashion industry, and Eastern European migrant workers at the Foxconn electronics plants in the Czech Republic-, our paper offers a new approach. Instead of focusing on the single workplace at a certain point in time, we adopt a perspective that considers the multiplicity of accommodations at work for workers across Europe along the time dimension.

By extending the study of the dormitory regime to the European Union, we highlight the way the growing frequency of factories cum dormitories to a certain extent empowers the workers as their horizons extend to other sites within Europe and are not limited to a single firm.

KEYWORDS: dormitories, labor, migrant workers, European labor market, workers mobility

1. Introduction

Living in accommodation provided by employers has a long history worldwide. In the last twenty years, workers' accommodation at work has been mostly discussed for factories in

1
2
3 China and other Asian countries (Pun 2005; Azmeh 2014). The dormitory labor regime in China
4
5 has specific traits due to the huge dimensions of the plants, widespread availability of industrial
6
7 dormitories being available to all workers and industries to the point that it has been described as
8
9 ‘systemic’ (Pun and Smith, 2007).
10

11
12 With migrant labor increasing globally, the provision of different kinds of
13
14 accommodation for workers controlled by management and organized in a way that fits into the
15
16 organization of production is increasingly widespread, across productive sectors. Dormitories
17
18 can be found in the construction sector in Persian Gulf countries (Buckley, 2012); in agriculture
19
20 in the U.S. and Canada (Strauss and McGrath, 2017); and in the logistic sector among truck
21
22 drivers (Viscelli, 2016). They exist across Africa, especially in the mining industry, although the
23
24 traditional compound system has been in decline (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011).
25
26
27

28
29 In Europe, the spread of accommodation at work is slow, but growing, and it is affecting
30
31 different kinds of labor processes in different countries. Accommodation provided by the
32
33 employers is the norm among ‘dispatched workers’ (Caro et al., 2015), in slaughterhouses and
34
35 Amazon plants in Germany (Altreiter et al., 2015), electronics plants in Czech Republic (Author
36
37 2), Chinese-run manufacturing workshops in the Italian fashion industry (Author 1), and some
38
39 agricultural areas of Italy and Spain (Corrado et al., 2017). In order to account for this
40
41 phenomenon, Chris Smith (2003) introduced the concept of ‘dormitory labor regime’ as an
42
43 overall form of production that has political effects on the labor process and the political
44
45 apparatus of production. We share with this author concern for the political implications of
46
47 apparatuses of production that bind the workers to the workplace thus shaping the borders within
48
49 which workers’ mobility as agency can extend.
50
51
52

53
54 At the same time, we adopt a gaze different from most scholarship by questioning the
55
56 single workplace and dormitory as a site of study. Instead of focusing on the single workplace at
57
58 a certain point in time, we adopt as unit of analysis the multiplicity of accommodation at work
59
60 for workers across Europe and we analyze them in relation to each other along the time

1
2
3 dimension. A methodology that considers dormitory-based employment in relation to different
4
5 sites not only discloses a multi-sited dormitory landscape but also sheds light on the impact this
6
7 has on the workers and their subjective perceptions of it. By extending the study of the dormitory
8
9 regime to the European Union with its regimes of mobility (Schiller and Salazar, 2013) we
10
11 highlight how the growing presence of factories cum dormitories empowers the workers to a
12
13 certain extent as their horizons are not restricted to a single firm but extend to other sites within
14
15 Europe.
16
17

18
19 Free movement and mobility have been described as the most remarkable features of an
20
21 integrated Europe (Favell, 2008). While various policies have been put in place in order to restrict
22
23 the entry of migrants from outside Europe, and even though some researchers underline that there
24
25 is “too little mobility” in the EU (Zimmermann, 2016), a regulated freedom of movement for
26
27 European citizens has undoubtedly prevailed within Europe. The mobility of people within
28
29 Europe is far from matching that within the U.S. And yet, in 2016, about 36.7 million foreign
30
31 citizens lived in EU countries, and, of these, about 44%, or 16 million, were citizens of another
32
33 EU Member State (EU, 2017).
34
35

36
37 Acutely aware of the possibilities for mobility available, many workers perceive Europe
38
39 (or parts of it) as a chessboard across which to move in search of better opportunities. We discuss
40
41 this subject in relation to two specific case studies in Europe: Chinese migrants in the Italian
42
43 fashion industry, and Eastern European migrants working at the Foxconn plants in the Czech
44
45 Republic. Our analysis of the two cases relies on our primary, ethnographic data gained through
46
47 long-term fieldwork in both countries.
48
49

50
51 While most cases discussed in the literature, mainly focusing analytical attention on Asia,
52
53 conceptualize the mobility of workers living at work as only directed from above and often
54
55 policed by the state, the employers, and intermediaries (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Azmeh,
56
57 2014), our cases enable us to bring to the forefront forms of workers’ self-tailored mobility. We
58
59 argue that the patterns of worker im/mobility described in most literature, do not reflect actual
60

1
2
3 processes in Europe. By highlighting the interplay between employers' strategies and workers'
4 agency in Europe, we thus provide a more nuanced picture of living at work in Europe.
5
6

7
8 In section two we discuss the literature on the dormitory labor regime focusing on the
9 main concepts put forward in the last twenty years. After sketching the research methods in
10 section three, we present and analyze our case studies in section four. A concluding discussion
11 on the mobility of workers in Europe follows.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20

21 **2. Mobility and immobility of workers living at work**

22
23
24
25

26 The literature has dwelt on workers accommodation in dormitories organized by the
27 employers and the implications of this practice, showing that living at work can be crucial in
28 order to maintain, manage, and control a stationary – yet temporary- workforce (Smith, 2003;
29 Pun and Chan, 2013). Overall, the dormitory labor regime is analyzed for its political effects on
30 labor processes. While the different aspects that make up the dormitory regime are not easy to
31 disentangle as they are intrinsically connected, we single out three main points that are prominent
32 in the literature: 1) the rationale for firms and the involvement of states in making such choices;
33 2) the detrimental effects the dormitory regime has on workers and their bargaining power; 3)
34 the im/mobility of workers as orchestrated from above.
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46 First, the literature considers 'the concentrated nature of the spatiality of work and
47 residence integral to capital accumulation' (Pun and Chan, 2013, 179). Dormitories enable
48 employers to manage vast labor markets, thus expanding recruitment beyond the limits of the
49 local labor market. Secluding workers is analyzed as a powerful labor management tool that
50 enables the management to take advantage of the unrestricted availability of a migrant workforce
51 (Smith, 2003, 345), shelters employers from high labor turnover rates, and depresses wages
52 demands (Pun and Smith, 2007). Workers confined in dormitories are controlled more tightly
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 and often compelled to work overtime (Schling, 2014; Pun 2012). Spatial proximity in fact helps
4 meeting just-in-time production deadlines, as in the case of footwear and sportswear
5 subcontracting factories in China and Thailand discussed by Smyth et alii (2013, 395).
6
7
8

9
10 A second issue highlighted in the literature is the coercive nature of the dormitory labor
11 regime through which employers actively manoeuvre the forms of accommodation in ways that
12 weaken both social bonds and the bargaining power of the workers (Smyth et al., 2013, 401; Pun
13 and Smith, 2007). Isolation and the absence of social networks, it is argued, play a crucial role in
14 the control of workers. Employers' strategies rely on spatial tactics making difficult for unions
15 and civil society organizations to access the workplace and provide support to workers. For
16 example, in her study on migrant workers in Singapore, Yea (2017) shows that workers are
17 segregated to designated dormitory accommodation in remote areas where civil society
18 organizations cannot reach them. Dormitories are therefore discussed as 'the cornerstone of the
19 social control of workers in the workplace' (Azmeah, 2014) and often analyzed as total institutions
20 (Lucas et al., 2013).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34

35 Third, mobility and immobility of the workforce are often described as the outcome of
36 managerial choices (Caro et al., 2015), as the management may retain or move workers according
37 to production needs. Dormitories are analysed as part and parcel of a regimented order. Pun (2005)
38 shows that in much the same way as at the production site, control in the dormitories in China is
39 overt and often punishment-oriented. The regimental approach is evident in the spatiality of the
40 dormitories which are mostly described as fenced by walls, with entrance gates guarded around
41 the clock by security guards.
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 In short, scholars point out that workers are moved by others. Xiang and Lindquist (2014)
52 argue that, increasingly, the mobility of international migrant workers is orchestrated by states,
53 their agencies, and other actors on the basis of the employers' needs. 'Labor transplant' of
54 Chinese workers to Japan, South Korea and Singapore consists not only of just-in-time migration
55 controlled by states and agencies but also 'to the point allocation' from above of individual
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 migrants in order to satisfy the demands of a static capital (Xiang, 2012; see also Seo and Skelton,
4
5 2017).

6
7
8 Employer-driven workers' mobility on the basis of a gridlocked capital is a key element
9
10 also in the analysis of posted (or dispatched) workers in Europe that are employed in construction,
11
12 shipbuilding, and meat processing (De Wispelaere and Pacolet 2017), in jobs that can last from
13
14 a few months to several years (Wagner, 2015; Engbersen et al., 2013). Furthermore, scholars
15
16 point to the inability of workers to escape from the modes and the timing of the mobility into
17
18 which they are coerced. Practices of withholding passports and salary and threats to deport the
19
20 workers back home are also widely used to restrict the workers' mobility.
21
22

23
24 To be sure, some scholars point at forms of workers' mobility that the management is not
25
26 able to control. Dormitories produce conditions for the mobility of workers between different
27
28 plants and also in different countries. For instance, Azmeh (2014) underlines that some migrant
29
30 workers in Jordan escape from the clothing factories and look for employment in other sectors,
31
32 even when this entails leaving their passports with the firms. In the analysis of dormitories in
33
34 China, Pun and Smith (2007) stress that dormitories have a 'continued ubiquitous nature' in that
35
36 they not only reinforce management control but also nurture forms of resistance.
37
38

39
40 We take this line of research one step further by illustrating how the multiplicity of sites
41
42 in Europe not only testifies to management's growing recourse to temporarily stationary migrant
43
44 work but also significantly increases the ability of migrant workers to both access a wider labor
45
46 market and choose how to move across this vast chessboard. We shed light on the opportunities
47
48 now available for workers self-tailored forms of mobility across the increasingly rich landscape
49
50 of factories cum dormitories widespread across Europe or in single European countries.
51
52

53 54 55 **3. Research Methods**

56
57
58 We offer the cases of migrant workers living at work in the Italian fashion industry and
59
60 at the Foxconn plants in the Czech Republic. We are not interested in comparing the two cases,

1
2
3 as the differences between them are macroscopic in terms of industry, dimensions of the plants,
4 organization of production, workers' background, and types of accommodation for workers. Nor
5 do we intend to compare two national cases (for a critique of methodological nationalism see
6 Wimmer and Schiller, 2003; Amelina and Faist, 2012). The two cases are relevant because they
7 offer a somewhat similar pattern of workers' mobility which is different from the cases discussed
8 in the literature. In fact, in both cases, high numbers of workers regularly adopt exit strategies
9 that go beyond the employers' expectations. In turn, employers are forced to resort to ad hoc
10 measures to tame the hemorrhage of workers.
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20

21 Chinese migrants have made inroads into the Italian fashion industry since the late 1980s,
22 establishing small subcontracting businesses mainly in Italian industrial districts. Chinese
23 nationals holding a permit to stay numbered 334,000 in 2017. Entrepreneurship is widespread:
24 Chinese-run business total 50.737 units, one third of which are active in the industrial sector
25 (Ministero del lavoro, 2017). In Prato, around 4,000 Chinese firms are active in clothing and
26 textiles (Camera di commercio, 2017).
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34

35 The research in Italy is based on participant observation by providing services and
36 consultancy to immigrants at the Immigration Research and Services Center in Prato, Italy - the
37 hub of Chinese migration to Italy- for more than 10 years (1994-2007). We came into contact
38 with women and men, mainly in their twenties, and thirties, working as small entrepreneurs, and
39 as experienced and unexperienced workers. Given the length of time, the researcher happened to
40 meet the same person more than once and was thus able to follow their change of fortune. Further
41 fieldwork was conducted in the years 2012-2014 and 2017 which involved participating in a
42 series of public events and interviewing Chinese workers and employers in their forties and
43 fifties, children of Chinese employers, in their twenties, working in their parents' workshops, the
44 head of the local Union of industrialists and the representative for the garment industry, local
45 government officials, and the members of a cultural organization.
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Foxconn is a Taiwanese company with 1.3 million employees and a manufacturing centre
4
5 in China, where it employs around 1 million people (Pun et al. 2014). Over the last 15 years it
6
7 has also developed a territorial diversification strategy investing in various countries. In Europe
8
9 it has now plants in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. In the 1990s, the Czech Republic
10
11 was considered a migratory buffer zone between the West and the East (Wallace et al., 1996).
12
13 However, international migrant workers in the Czech Republic grew in the 2000s, reaching more
14
15 than 500,000 in 2017 and making up 10-11 percent of the workforce, working mainly in the
16
17 manufacturing sector.¹
18
19

20
21 In the Czech Republic research was conducted from 2012 to 2018, focusing on the
22
23 Foxconn factories of Pardubice and Kutna Hora. We carried out 70 interviews: 14 with key
24
25 informants (job centres, labor inspectorates, job agency managers, union officials and local NGO
26
27 members), and 56 with workers directly employed by Foxconn (23 with Czech, Mongolian,
28
29 Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Slovak workers) as well as migrant agency workers (33
30
31 with Romanian, Bulgarian, Slovak and Polish workers). Interviewees worked on the assembly
32
33 line, in quality testing, packaging and administration. Workers were predominantly male (37
34
35 against 19) with an average age of 38 years, with women younger than men; half of the
36
37 interviewees were married but only 40% of them had children.
38
39
40
41

42 Unless stated otherwise, all information is drawn from the authors' primary field research.
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 **4. Workers mobility in Europe**

50 51 52 **4.1. Mobility of Chinese workers in the Italian fashion industry**

53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

¹ Czech statistical office: https://www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci/1-ciz_pocet_cizincu [consulted 21 February 2019].

1
2
3 Since the mid-1980s, when China began reopening its frontiers to those who wanted to
4 emigrate, large numbers of Chinese migrants hailing from the southeastern coastal areas of
5 Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, and later also from northeastern provinces, have chosen Europe
6 as their destination. In Italy, Chinese migrants were able to enter *en masse* in the fashion industry
7 mainly becoming contracting entrepreneurs and workers employed by co-nationals.
8
9

10
11
12 Some thirty years later, the Chinese-run workshops active in the Italian fashion industry
13 are small productive units, ranging from the larger ones that employ some 30-40 workers, to the
14 majority of workshops that employ 5 to 15 workers. Both male and female workers are employed.
15
16 The workforce includes the so-called skilled workers (*chegong*), less skilled workers (*shougong*)
17 and odd jobs workers (*zagongs*) (see Author 1, 2017 on salary differentials for different working
18 positions).
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 In Chinese workshops workers live at work, a condition that we term the ‘sleeping
29 regime’ as workers are hosted in places much smaller than the larger dormitories described in
30 literature. In fact, workers mostly eat, sleep, and spend their idle time in the shop premises, or
31 else are housed in small numbers in apartments close to the workshop. Within the sleeping regime
32 workers often work at night as employers routinely accept orders in the evening that need to be
33 completed by the next morning. This organization of production entails the removal of the
34 worker’s personal life, as husband and wife may work in different workshops and, in principle,
35 workers’ children are not permitted to stay with their parents.
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

47 The role played by the sleeping regime is similar to other dormitory regimes in that these
48 arrangements help in meeting just-in-time production deadlines. However, by working and living
49 inside small workshops the workers experience forms of control that are different from those
50 often described in the literature. Paternalism is widespread in much the same way as in large
51 dormitories across the globe but relationships are informal and ‘family-like’ as, especially in the
52 past decades, employers tended to perceive themselves as ‘the mums and the dads’ of the
53 workers. In the cases in which bedrooms are inside the workshop premises and both workers and
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 employers live in the shop, control over the workers is unfettered and there is no privacy
4
5 whatsoever.
6

7
8 Scholars highlight the vulnerability of Chinese migrants and their total dependency upon
9
10 their employers (Wu and Sheehan, 2011). While we are aware that forms of extreme exploitation
11
12 of workers' vulnerability do exist, we link the sleeping regime to a more comprehensive
13
14 reconfiguration of the workplace that, to a certain extent, empowers the workers more than could
15
16 have been expected. Over time, in fact, a 'mobile regime' has prevailed in the networks of
17
18 Chinese contracting businesses according to which workers also experience short-term inter-
19
20 workshop mobility. Workers temporarily move to other Chinese workshops that urgently need
21
22 to complete orders, with the understanding that they will move back to their previous employer
23
24 as soon as they are needed there. This form of short-term mobility is the result of an informal
25
26 agreement between employers and employees.
27
28
29

30
31 I work in my parents' workshop; besides myself and my parents, four workers work in the
32
33 workshop. [...] The workers [...] live in an apartment that my parents have rented for them,
34
35 near the workshop. These workers have been working with us for three years. They left
36
37 when orders were fewer and there was not much work. That they moved elsewhere was
38
39 good for my parents because if there is little work and the workers stay with you, you still
40
41 have to feed and provide lodging to people who are idle, or only work a few hours a day.
42
43 One of the workers went to work in an ironing workshop, and came back later, when new
44
45 orders arrived. Another worked elsewhere for one and a half month, he too came back. I
46
47 do not remember how long the other two worked elsewhere, but I do know that this was
48
49 agreed upon with my parents. If there are not enough orders, to temporarily move to another
50
51 workshop is good also for the workers as they work on a piece-rate system (Male worker
52
53 son of the employers, 22 years old, July 2012).
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Together with the sleeping agreements, this form of workers' inter-workshop mobility is
4 structurally intrinsic to the organization of production. In fact, employers can count on workers'
5 unrestricted availability exactly because the workers live in the workshop premises or nearby; at
6 the same time they also count on workers short-term mobility in order to meet fluctuating orders
7 (Author 1). In the last decades, an informal nationwide network of Chinese contracting firms has
8 routinely resorted to occasional workers for completing urgent orders.
9

10
11
12 The workers' mobility takes place within a horizontal network of loosely connected
13 workshops and the single employer's authority over the workers is limited, especially in a
14 situation where the latter do not have a regular contract. Our findings show that control over the
15 workers' mobility has increasingly slipped out of the hands of the employers. Contrary to the
16 employers' initial expectations, the sustained short-term mobility from one workshop to another
17 has resulted in a nation-wide form of workers' networking whereby workers can compare the
18 conditions offered by different employers. Further, the mobile regime has nurtured workers'
19 relational bonds and facilitated the weaving of information exchanges and social networks by
20 exposing them to a kaleidoscope of information and opportunities.
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 As a result, another extreme form of workers' mobility has tended to prevail over short-
38 term mobility: workers increasingly tend to shape their self-tailored mobility by quitting their job
39 and hopping from one employer to another much more than employers would like them to do.
40
41
42
43

44 If I am not satisfied with the boss and they do not pay me as much as I want, I can leave.
45 It's simple. Finding another job is easy. Years ago, it was customary to give a week or so
46 of notice, but now everyone leaves overnight if they wish, they wait until they get paid and
47 then they leave. The workers I know do the same, they leave when they are not satisfied.
48 Or they ask for more money (Male worker, 34 years old, July 2012).
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57

58 Compared to the 1980s and 1990s, the mobility of workers has increased since the 2000s
59 because changed historical contingencies have opened up new spaces of agency. In the late 1990s
60

1
2
3 a new national law enabled Chinese workers to open their own small businesses. With many
4
5 more workshops needing labor, workers had more opportunities for choosing their Chinese
6
7 employers based on working hours, lodging and salary. The possibility of moving to new
8
9 employers was increased in the late 2000s by other structural changes. The previous constant
10
11 influx of migrant workers from China has almost come to a halt, as better opportunities could be
12
13 found in China. Further, Chinese migrants living in Italy increasingly look for less demanding
14
15 jobs outside manufacturing, choosing import, wholesaling, and retailing or opening coffee bars
16
17 and beauty salons. In a contest where, until recently, Chinese-run workshops tended to only
18
19 employ Chinese workers, the multiplicity of workshops run by co-nationals greatly increased the
20
21 opportunities for moving to employers who offered better conditions. Hence, today, the demands
22
23 of employers are not met by an available supply of Chinese labor. This imbalance is particularly
24
25 striking in relation to experienced workers, but it is evident also in relation to unexperienced
26
27 workers. Against such a background, employers complain that with the new situation they are
28
29 loosing the grip on their workers:
30
31
32
33

34
35 Everybody becomes a small entrepreneur, who wants to be a worker anymore? And [...]
36
37 the workers can make more demands: they want to eat well, sleep well (Owner of a garment
38
39 workshop, male, 45 years old, July 2012).
40
41
42
43

44
45 Nowadays, each potential employer, in competition with many others, tries to attract
46
47 experienced workers. During the peak months, many offer them a fixed monthly wage (*baoding*)
48
49 20 percent higher than the salary based on the average piece-rate in exchange for a guarantee that
50
51 the worker will not quit the job in the middle of the season. In their search for experienced
52
53 workers, employers offer conditions that were unthinkable only a few years ago such as daytime
54
55 only work and no rush to complete orders, sleeping quarters close to but physically separated
56
57 from the workplace, and Wi-Fi available for all workers. In recent years, some employers even
58
59 offered to experienced workers the possibility of bringing their children with them.
60

1
2
3 The threat to quit, thus, functions as a lever that workers use for imposing demands that
4 the management must accommodate, if only for the sake of retaining experienced workers and
5 in general an increasingly scarce workforce. Thus, to a certain extent, salaries and working and
6 living conditions are an open and contested process. All this change takes place in a context
7 where the line separating experienced workers and employers is a fine one. In fact, since the early
8 2010s the effects of the economic crisis have pushed many small subcontractors back into the
9 position of workers (Author 1).

10
11
12 All in all, the mobile regime emerging from this study is a reconfiguration of the space of
13 production - and workers' lives- that, like many other cases described in the literature, coerces
14 the workers into an unrestricted availability. And yet, the sleeping regime – in a context
15 characterized by the paucity of Chinese workers- facilitates the workers self-chosen mobility.

16
17
18 To sum up, the spatiality of work and residence in the network of fashion workshops
19 offers workers more strategies than their employers had in mind when they started promoting the
20 short-term inter-workshop mobility.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 **4.2. Migrant workers' mobility in the Czech Republic**

41
42
43
44 In the Czech Republic Foxconn owns plants in Pardubice (since 2000) and Kutna Hora
45 (since 2007) where it produces laptop and desktop computers, servers and printer cartridges for
46 brands like Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, and, until a few years ago, Apple. Moving to the Czech
47 Republic was a strategic choice as Foxconn was able to avoid the EU's high tariff barriers and
48 move closer to its customers' end markets in Western Europe (Evertiq, 2007).

49
50
51 Around 4,000-5,000 workers are employed in Pardubice and 1,500-2,000 in Kutna Hora.
52 Foxconn employs a multinational workforce made up of local and migrant workers from
53 Bulgaria, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Vietnam, and Ukraine. Czech and non-EU
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 workers are usually hired directly by Foxconn; alternatively, EU migrants, who make up 40-50
4
5 percent of the workforce, are predominantly employed by Temporary Work Agencies (TWAs)
6
7 (Bormann and Plank, 2010) and accommodated in dormitories outside the factories.
8
9

10 A large portion of the workers in the factories are men (60-65%), but the proportion of
11
12 women is higher on the assembly lines (migrants) and in the offices (Czechs). Until 2010,
13
14 Foxconn hired workers aged between 20 and 40, but the high labor turnover has pushed the
15
16 company to enlarge the labor market also employing workers over 40 years old. Core workers
17
18 have different shifts (8 hours for 2-3 shifts and 12 hours for 2 shifts), while agency workers are
19
20 employed only on 12-hour shifts, day and night (Author 2). Differences are also visible in wages:
21
22 Foxconn operators are paid around 4 euros per hour and earn 650-700 euros per month, but
23
24 agency workers are only paid when they work and have to make do with 3-3.5 euros per hour
25
26 and a monthly pay packet of 480-560 euros. Czech workers are mainly hired for better tasks in
27
28 terms of working conditions and wages, while migrants usually work on the assembly line and
29
30 in packing, where they are deployed according to their nationality.
31
32
33
34

35 TWAs recruit workers from their countries of origin, transport them to Pardubice and
36
37 Kutna Hora, and accommodate them in dormitories. Further, when production orders fall for
38
39 short periods, workers may wait for days or even a week in the dormitory without working and
40
41 without pay. Instead, when the waiting period is longer, agencies are likely to temporarily return
42
43 the migrants to their countries of origin. Workers will be called back as soon as the production
44
45 orders are up again.
46
47
48

49 Dormitories are not far away from the plants. They vary in size and can host from some
50
51 dozens to six hundred people sharing four bedded rooms and in some cases also a bathroom with
52
53 other male and female workers. As in Italy, usually no children are permitted but recently some
54
55 workers were able to take their children to live in the dormitory. Agencies rent out a fixed number
56
57 of rooms and pay the private owners of dormitories € 3.20-5.60 per day per worker depending
58
59 on the quality of the dormitory and its location.
60

1
2
3 TWAs' coordinators of production and accommodation manage both the daily work and
4
5 personal life of workers. In fact, they can enter the workers' rooms and pressure them to go to
6
7 work even when they are sleeping after a work-shift. Control of agency coordinators is not over
8
9 intrusive but it is continuous and aims to suppress behaviors that are considered dangerous (such
10
11 as smoking in the rooms) or that can decrease productivity (excessive drinking) or encourage
12
13 camaraderie (hosting friends). Thus, in many respects, the dormitories in the Czech Republic are
14
15 similar to those discussed in the literature (Pun and Smith, 2007) with the workers' mobility
16
17 organized from above in order to capture and manage workers. However, if the workers point of
18
19 view is taken into consideration, some critical facts emerge.
20
21
22

23
24 First, EU migrants at the Foxconn plants – in much the same way as those circulating
25
26 between Poland and the Netherlands described by Pijper (2009, 1083)- view TWAs as 'anchors'
27
28 as they enable them to find accommodation and start working and earning a salary immediately
29
30 upon arrival, and without bearing any direct costs for intermediary fees, transport, or
31
32 accommodation. To move through TWAs, therefore, is perceived more as a self-chosen strategy
33
34 than as a burden imposed by the management.
35
36

37
38 I worked in mines for 19 years and for 3 years as social worker in Bulgaria. In Bulgaria I
39
40 made bad money, 140 Euros per month... [I moved] in Plzeň [Czech Republic], where I
41
42 worked for Panasonic, through a contract with Danč agency, a really good agency. We had
43
44 a 6 month contract [...] I came here together with my husband, we learned about the job
45
46 from the internet. I will see how it works in the coming months and then maybe I will go
47
48 back to Bulgaria to find a better job, or maybe go to another agency. Maybe I will go to
49
50 another country (Bulgarian agency workers, female, 43 years old, September 2012).
51
52
53

54
55
56 Living at work is a practice that is gaining ground in Europe, although it has not (yet)
57
58 become a regular feature of the European manufacturing landscape and it does not have the
59
60 systemic characteristics of the dormitory labor regime in China.

1
2
3 I used to sleep in many dormitories. It's not good but I like to change. All the time I found
4 new people and something new. But it's true that the dormitories are noisy places. You
5 know, when you are four people in one room you have to take care also of the needs of
6 those that share the place with you (Slovakian agency worker, male, 50 years old,
7 Pardubice, September 2012).
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16

17 Second, most migrants, particularly the young ones, show little attachment to the firm
18 and leave often within a few months. Because of poor career prospects, repetitive jobs and low
19 wages, the yearly labor turnover of agency workers is 60-70 percent (Author 2). Labor turnover
20 needs to be considered in the context of the large EU labor market where European migrants
21 enjoy the right to freedom of movement.
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 I worked for six years in an Italian-owned garment factory at Ploiesti at the sewing
29 machine, eight hours, normal, no problems, [...] in Romania I was fine but I wanted
30 something more. In 2006 I moved to Spain where I had friends [...] In Madrid I worked as
31 a cleaner and in a bakery in Burgos. My partner worked in construction and then as an
32 assistant cook. With the crisis, we lost our jobs and we lived on the unemployment
33 allowance; when this was over, we came here. Some Romanian friends, who had been
34 living here in Pardubice, told us how things were, and we thought it was fine and we came
35 here [...]. I think people are moving because they have been out of work or because they
36 are unemployed or because they want to see another country [...] it's not a specific
37 country's fault, for example Spain or the Czech Republic. It's because of the global
38 economy, when we become unemployed here we go to Romania, we see what happens
39 there and if all goes well we can stay there or we move to another country that's open for
40 us to go, isn't it? (Romanian agency workers, female, 29 years old, September 2012).
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 While staying in the dormitories produces social-spatial segregation (Caro et al., 2015),
4
5 it also guarantees the workers a certain degree of sociability and exchange of information, as
6
7 migrants are often gathered on the basis of the country of origin. In fact, workers also make the
8
9 decision to stay in or quit a job assessing the different employment opportunities across Europe
10
11 while staying in the dormitories.
12
13

14 Third, migrant workers can move to private apartments, and a small number of them
15
16 actually do, in order to free themselves from the control and pressure in the dorms. Private houses
17
18 are rented directly by workers but TWAs may help in the search. Living in a rented apartment
19
20 offers the possibility of greater inclusion in local society, but entails additional costs, and a
21
22 minimum knowledge of the local institutions and Czech language. When workers move into flats,
23
24 agencies contribute approximately 115 euros for the rent and the workers have to pay the rest,
25
26 namely 150-250 additional euros. While this may be seen as an advantage, accommodation costs
27
28 are often perceived as a burden that increases the workers vulnerability. Large part of the agency
29
30 workers chooses not to rent a flat and prefer to stay in the dormitory (Author 2) as they consider
31
32 their job and their presence in the Czech Republic as temporary.
33
34
35
36

37 We talked [my partner and I] about renting a flat. But now, it's ok here in the dormitory.
38
39 To move to a flat we need someone to help us to find it, we need a little bit of money. We
40
41 know few words of Czech. The agency can give us some money if we rent a flat, 3000
42
43 crowns [€115] per person. If you don't work at least 150 hours a month you have to pay the
44
45 full rent but they usually call you at work to make sure we work at least 150 hours
46
47
48
49 (Romanian agency worker, 27 years old, female, September 2012).
50
51
52
53

54 What is worth emphasizing here is that workers' mobility is facilitated by the growing
55
56 number of factories in Europe that accommodate workers in dormitories. Counting on their
57
58 previous work experiences, and driven by the goal of looking for ever better opportunities for
59
60 themselves and their families, temporary workers at the Foxconn Czech plants devise their own

1
2
3 mobility strategies based on their knowledge of the labor markets and working conditions in
4
5 different workplaces, comparing wages, hourly standards and production quotas. They are thus
6
7 able to jump from one job to another in search of better conditions. Further, the high labor
8
9 turnover is reinforced by the workers' widespread perception that union are 'useless' as unionists
10
11 mainly promote better working and living conditions for local workers (Author 2).
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 **5. Concluding remarks**

20
21
22
23
24 Evidence from our fieldwork suggests that the mobility of workers living at work in
25
26 Europe is the result of the interplay of employers' strategies and workers' self-tailored mobility.
27
28 In fact, as much as capital considers the workforce living at work as temporary, migrant workers
29
30 themselves hold a temporary perspective of the workplace that facilitates their exit strategies in
31
32 search of less exploitative conditions. If looked at from the single workplace perspective, at a
33
34 certain point in time, dormitories do fulfil the role attributed to them by the employers of
35
36 capturing the workforce and ensuring that it meets the needs of production in an unrestricted
37
38 way. However, if the multiplicity of accommodation at work increasingly widespread in the EU
39
40 – in a context of a regulated freedom of mobility - is considered, a growing potential emerges for
41
42 workers mobility in terms of exit strategies.
43
44
45

46
47 This process is better grasped when the workers' subjectivity is taken into account against
48
49 the background of changing structural labor conditions in Europe. Counting on a host of
50
51 conditions and actors, including TWAs, social networks, their own previous international
52
53 working experiences and the growing interests of employers in Europe in having workers living
54
55 at work, the migrant workers discussed in this paper increasingly look at the experience of living
56
57 at work from a different perspective: they see employers less as gatekeepers and more as
58
59 providing the opportunity to get a foothold in the labor market, access higher wages and/or better
60

1
2
3 living conditions. In sum, workers consider the multiplicity of accommodation at work,
4 increasingly widespread across Europe, as a chessboard where they can jump from one square to
5 another in search of better conditions. This kind of mobility, in turn, shows that the dormitory
6 regime in Europe in itself opens up unexpected spaces of self-tailored mobility that researchers
7 tend to neglect.
8
9
10
11
12
13

14 The time dimension is of paramount importance for gaining insights into this
15 phenomenon. Our study takes into account the experience gained by workers over time and the
16 role it plays in increasing or reducing workers' confidence that a better job can be found in the
17 growing number of live-in firms. We suggest that the mobility of workers between different
18 workplaces should be considered a specific ability that workers acquire over time and use to their
19 advantage. As shown, Chinese workers in Italy moving from one workshop to another learn
20 either from co-workers or by direct experience that other employers offer more comfortable
21 living arrangements, better food and/or wages or that in other workshops night work is not the
22 rule. Similarly, EU workers living at work in the Czech Republic are able to gather information
23 on different opportunities in Europe and move quickly from one workplace to another.
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 The subjective reasons that drive migrant workers to accept long and sporadic working
38 hours, and at times substandard accommodation, are repeatedly overlooked in most literature that
39 tends to label migrant workers only as victims (for a critique see Rogaly 2009). However, without
40 including the workers' subjectivity, the analysis remains incomplete and is unable to identify the
41 multiplicity of drivers that explain the workers' mobility. While we are aware that workers in
42 dormitories live in hyper-precarious conditions (Lewis et al., 2015), our findings suggest that the
43 workplace itself contributes to creating the conditions for some form of workers' transnational
44 mobility power (Smith, 2006; Alberti, 2014; Author 2). We thus agree with the body of literature
45 that considers labour's free mobility as a form of power and highlights the role played by migrant
46 workers in the regulation of labour markets (Lusis and Bauder, 2010).
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Our findings show that not only young, single workers, but also older male and female
4 workers are mobile. In particular, the workforce in the Chinese-run workshops is made up of
5 workers are mobile. In particular, the workforce in the Chinese-run workshops is made up of
6 both female and male workers of ages ranging from around twenty to fifty. In the Czech Republic,
7 dormitories host both EU women and men of any age although the majority of workers are men.
8 We argue that this social composition of the workforce is made possible by the combination of
9 two crucial elements: the provision of dormitories for the workers together with a systematic
10 outsourcing of social reproduction. Production and reproduction are closely connected and co-
11 constituted. In both research cases, the daily reproduction of workers is strictly connected and
12 subordinated to production needs, as workers' are subjected to the capital productive cycle
13 (Schling 2014), while social reproduction in terms of care for family members is externalized,
14 either to the country of origin or to other workers. A mainly intra-ethnic organization of
15 reproductive work prevails among the Chinese migrants in Italy whereby Chinese migrant
16 women take care of other Chinese migrants' children day and night in their own homes (Author
17 1). This practice is paralleled by the long-standing practice of sending babies back to their
18 grandparents in China. In the case of the workers at Foxconn, social reproduction is shouldered
19 by family members – especially women, including grandmothers- in the countries of origin, as
20 having children in dormitories is usually forbidden.

21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42 The combination of dormitories and the outsourcing of the social reproduction, thus,
43 contributes to shape the social composition of migrant workers and facilitates a self-tailored
44 mobility from one factory cum dormitory to another. The virtual exclusion of social reproduction
45 is both a form of dispossession imposed by the dormitory labor regime on the workers and a
46 condition workers increasingly take advantage of as it increases their potential for mobility in
47 and out of different labor markets in Europe. Moreover, dorms – and also TWAs in the case of
48 the Foxconn workers - are subjectively perceived by the workers as making their transnational
49 lives easier. Our interviewees repeatedly stated that living in a dormitory at the workplace, or in
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

a flat provided by the employer, favors their (transnational) mobility plans as they do not need to spend energy and money in searching for a place to live or taking care of everyday chores.

The different organization of production and tasks for workers in the two research sites impacts on the horizons workers develop vis-à-vis the job market: being required to perform simple tasks that rarely provide valuable skills, migrant workers in the Czech Republic can potentially look for a job across different industries throughout Europe. Experienced Chinese workers in the Italian fashion industry, on the other hand, count on skills that are highly in demand and easily marketable, and therefore - unless the opportunity arises in jobs that are perceived as less demanding such as those in the service industry - do not actively look for a job in other industries. Skills in this case tend to favor an intra-industry mobility of workers. Furthermore, agency workers at Foxconn tend to perceive themselves as precarious and replaceable (Schling 2014); Chinese workers, on the other hand, are increasingly aware of their bargaining power.

To sum up, different elements point to situations in the European Union which are quite different from those often portrayed in the literature. We contend that dormitories cannot be viewed only as structures to coerce workers into forms of mobility devised and implemented from above: the multiplicity of sites needs to be considered because this spatiality helps the workers to expand their horizons and their perception of the opportunities available. While this tends to empower the workers, their mobility power can be unstable.

References

- Alberti G (2014) Mobility strategies, 'mobility differentials' and 'transnational exit': the experiences of precarious migrants in London's hospitality jobs'. *Work Employment and Society* 28(6): 865-881.
- Altreiter C, Fibich T, and Flecker J (2014) Capital and labour on the move: the dynamics of double transnational mobility. In Drahekoupil J (ed.) *The outsourcing challenge. Organizing workers across fragmented production networks*. Brussels: Etui, pp. 67-87.
- Amelina A and Faist T (2012) De-naturalizing the national in research methodologies: Key concepts of transnational studies in migration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35(10): 1707–1724.
- Azmeh S (2014) Labour in global production networks: workers in the qualifying industrial zones of Egypt and Jordan. *Global Networks* 12(2):495-513.
- Bezuidenhout A and Buhlungu S (2011) From compounded to fragmented labour: mineworkers and the demise of compounds in South Africa. *Antipode* 43:237–263.
- Bormann S and Plank L (2010) *Working Conditions and Economic Development in ICT production in Central and Eastern Europe*, Berlin: Weed.
- Buckley M (2012) Locating Neoliberalism in Dubai: Migrant Workers and Class Struggle in the Autocratic City. *Antipode* 45(2):256–274.
- Camera di Commercio Prato (2017) *L'imprenditoria straniera in provincia di Prato 2015/2016*. available at: www.po.camcom.it (retrieved June 12, 2018).
- Caro E, Berntsen L, Lillie N and Wagner I (2015) Posted migration and segregation in the European construction sector. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(10):1600-1620.
- Corrado A, De Castro C and Perrotta D (2017) Cheap Food, Cheap Labour, High Profits: Agriculture and Mobility in the Mediterranean: introduction. In Corrado A, De Castro C and Perrotta D (eds.) *Migration and agriculture. Mobility and change in the Mediterranean area*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-25.

- 1
2
3 De Wispelaere F and Pacolet J (2017), *Posting of workers Report on AI Portable Documents*
4 *issued in 2016*, Bruxelles: European Commission.
5
6
7 Engbersen G, Leekers A, Grabowska-Lusinska I, Snel E and Burgers J (2013) On the differential
8 attachments of migrants from central and eastern Europe: A Typology of Labour Migration.
9
10 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39(6):959-981.
11
12
13 European Union (2017) *Key figures on Europe 2017*. Bruxelles: EU.
14
15
16 Evertiq (2007) *Asian EMS-firms Discover Eastern Europe*. Available
17 at:<http://evertiq.com/news/6299> (retrieved June 12, 2018).
18
19
20
21 Favell A (2008) The new face of east-west migration in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration*
22 *Studies* 34(5):701-716.
23
24
25
26 Lewis H, Dwyer P, Hodkinson S and Waite L (2015) Hyper-precarious lives: migrants, work and
27 forced labour in the global North. *Progress in Human Geography* 39(5):580–600.
28
29
30 Lucas K, Kang D and Li Z (2013) Workplace dignity in a total institution: examining the
31 experiences of Foxconn’s migrant workforce. *Journal of Business Ethics* 114: 91–106.
32
33
34
35 Lusia T and Bauder H (2010) Immigrants in the labour market: transnationalism and
36 segmentation. *Geography Compass* 4(1):28-44.
37
38
39
40 Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali (2016) *La comunità cinese in Italia*. Available at:
41 www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it (retrieved June 12, 2018).
42
43
44
45 Pijpers R (2010) International employment agencies and migrant flexiwork in an enlarged
46 European Union. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36(7): 1079-1097.
47
48
49 Pun N (2005) *Made in China: women factory workers in a global workplace*. Durham and
50 London: Duke University Press.
51
52
53
54 Pun N and Chan J (2013) The spatial politics of labour in China. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*
55 112(1):179-190.
56
57
58
59 Pun N and Smith C (2007) Putting transnational labour process in its place: the dormitory labour
60 regime in post-socialist China. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(1): 27–45.

- 1
2
3 Pun N (2012) Gender and Class: Women's Working Lives in a Dormitory Labor Regime in China.
4
5 *International Labor and Working-Class History* 81: 178-181.
6
7
8 Pun N, Yuan S, Yuhua G, Huilin L, Chan J and Selden M (2014) Worker-intellectual unity:
9
10 Trans-border sociological intervention in Foxconn. *Current Sociology* 62(2):209-222.
11
12 Rogaly B (2009) Spaces of work and everyday life: labour geographies and the agency of
13
14 unorganized temporary migrant workers. *Geography Compass* 3(6):1975-1987.
15
16
17 Schiller N, and Salazar N (2013) Regimes of mobility across the globe. *Journal of Ethnic and*
18
19 *Migration Studies*, 39(2):183-200.
20
21
22 Schling H (2014) Gender, temporality, and the reproduction of labour power. Women migrant
23
24 workers in South China. *Sozial.Geschichte online* 14: 42-61.
25
26
27 Seo S and Skelton T (2017) Regulatory migration regimes and the production of space: the case
28
29 of Nepalese workers in South Korea. *Geoforum* 78:159-168.
30
31
32 Smith C (2003) Living at work: management control and the dormitory labour system in China.
33
34 *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 20:333-358.
35
36
37 Smith C (2006) The double indeterminacy of labour power: labour effort and labour mobility.
38
39 *Work Employment and Society* 20(2):389-402.
40
41
42 Smyth R, Qian X, Nielsen I and Kaempfer I (2013) Working hours in supply chain Chinese and
43
44 Thai factories: evidence from the Fair Labor Association's 'Soccer Project'. *British Journal of*
45
46 *Industrial Relations* 51(2):382-408.
47
48
49 Strauss K and McGrath S (2017) Temporary migration, precarious employment and unfree
50
51 labour relations: exploring the 'continuum of exploitation' in Canada's temporary foreign worker
52
53 program. *Geoforum* 78: 199-208.
54
55
56 Viscelli S (2016) *The big rig: trucking and the decline of the American dream*. Berkeley:
57
58 University of California Press.
59
60
61 Wagner I (2015) EU posted work and transnational action in the German meat industry. *Transfer*
62
63 21(2): 201-213.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Wallace C, Chmouliar O and Sidorenko E (1996) The Eastern frontier of Western Europe: mobility in the buffer zone. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 22(2): 259-286.

Wimmer A and Schiller NG (2002) Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks* 2(4): 301–334.

Wu B and Sheehan J (2011) Globalization and vulnerability of Chinese migrant workers in Italy: empirical evidence on working conditions and their consequences. *Journal of Contemporary China* 68(20): 135-152.

Xiang B (2012) Labor transplant: “point to point” transnational labor migration in East Asia.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(4):721-739.

Xiang B and Lindquist J (2014) Migration infrastructure. *International Migration Review* 48(1): 122–148.

Yea S (2017) The Art of not being caught: temporal strategies for disciplining unfree labour in Singapore’s contract migration. *Geoforum* 78:179–188.

Zimmermann KF (2016) *Refugee and Migrant Labor Market Integration: Europe in Need of a New Policy Agenda*, presented at the EUI Conference on the Integration of Migrants and Refugees, 29-30 September.