Christian Sperneac-Wolfer, Andrei Botorog and Ferdinand Sutterlüty

‘Slaves’ without coercion? Work-related classification patterns among Romanian migrant workers*

Abstract

Tens of thousands of Romanian migrants work in the German construction sector. Their work is often characterised by unpaid wages, long working days and the withholding of sick or holiday pay. The risky and exploitative nature of the conditions under which they work is reflected in their negative evaluation of their engagements as ‘slave labour’. Starting from such a clearly negative evaluation, this article asks how such workers classify their work and what role such classifications have within the context of labour exploitation. Based on qualitative interviews with and participant observation among Romanian construction site workers in Germany and in Romania, the article reconstructs four work classifications, each of which offers a different reason to make hard work plausible in the eyes of workers, while employers actively turn such interpretations into a mechanism of vulnerability. Without direct physical coercion, these ideas motivate workers to take on work that they themselves criticise as ‘slave labour’. The paper concludes by arguing that the recognition of such classifications and their social effects are crucial for an understanding of labour exploitation.

Keywords: *classifications, construction industry, sociology of work, migrant workers, exploitation, multi-sited ethnography*

Introduction

For many Romanian migrant workers employed in the German construction sector, work is characterised by unpaid wages, withheld sickness or holiday payments and by working on unsecured sites (Birner and Dietl 2021; Europäischer Verein für Wanderarbeiterfragen e.V. 2022).

One of those workers is Ionel,[1] who worked on a construction site in Echsberg until a concrete slab fell on his head in 2021. His employer reacted by forcing him to change out of his work clothes into his everyday ones and by pressuring

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1 To protect the participants, all names and details that might lead to the identification of places, companies or persons have been changed.

him to confirm to the doctor that it was a household incident. Only then did the employer drive the injured Ionel to a hospital 50 kilometres away, where it turned out that his injuries were so severe that he would be unable to work for several months. Subsequently, his employer sent a backdated dismissal, deregistered Ionel from health insurance and, as he was also his landlord, terminated Ionel's lease at the end of the three-month period. The employer's actions left Ionel in a precarious state without sickness benefits, no health insurance and at the risk of becoming homeless after three months. As Ionel started to look for help, a union activist was willing to support him. Finally, after a lawsuit was filed, his employer renewed Ionel's health insurance. Ionel is now living on sickness pay of around 700 euros per month.

Reports from *Faire Mobilität*[2] and others show that Ionel's is not an isolated case and that cover-ups in cases of work accidents, backdated dismissals and wage theft are an integral part of the everyday lives of Romanian workers in Germany (Voivozeanu 2019; Faire Mobilität 2022). The risky and exploitative nature of the conditions under which Romanian migrants work on German construction sites is reflected in their negative evaluation of their engagements as 'slave labour'. In view of such a clearly negative evaluation, questions immediately arise – how do Romanian construction workers in Germany classify their work and what roles do such classifications have within the context of labour exploitation?

Framed by social classification theory, we reconstruct four classification patterns that Romanian migrants use for their work, according to which the negative evaluation of their own work nevertheless appears to be acceptable. Based on a multi-sited transnational ethnography amongst Romanian workers, and semi-structured interviews with their families and friends, this article reconstructs four work classifications and their motivational effects. In the first classification pattern, work appears as a binding agreement while in the second, it is interpreted as a source of income. According to the third pattern, workers may regard their work as a source of identity and, in the last, work is classified as part of normalcy. Each classification interprets work in a different light and hence offers a distinct rationale for working under conditions that receive a negative evaluation. In the German context, the social effect of these classifications is that they make working on construction sites plausible and, at the same time, increase workers' potential vulnerability.

In demonstrating how migrant workers classify their work abroad, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on migrant labour (Birke 2022; Ciobanu 2013; Sandu 2005; Voivozeanu 2019), with its originality located in its highlighting of classifications and their effects which, so far, has been a particularly overlooked dimension.

After a brief overview of the situation of Romanian workers in Germany, the article turns to the classifications within their theoretical context. Subsequently, the article presents the qualitative methods used to collect the data. Afterwards the four classification patterns are presented, each in a single sub-section. The article

2 Faire Mobilität, the EMWU or Arbeit und Leben offer free consultation for workers mainly from eastern EU countries.

concludes with a discussion of classifications at work and their social effects under exploitative working conditions.

Romanian migrant workers on German construction sites

Romanian workers in Germany have the same rights in the workplace as their German colleagues. One of the sources of their labour rights is Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), guaranteeing freedom of movement and work for all citizens of the European Union. The article further explicitly specifies that:

> Such freedom of movement shall entail the abolition of any discrimination based on nationality between workers of the Member States as regards employment, remuneration and other conditions of work and employment. (Article 45(2), TFEU).

This legal requirement is shaped by the normative idea of an EU-wide concept of equal treatment. Researchers, in turn, can use this law as a benchmark against which to assess whether this standard of equity is met.

On paper, these workers have the right to the same pay as their German colleagues. In addition, large areas of the construction sector in Germany are highly regulated through general labour rights and a far-reaching collective agreement. Negotiations on a minimum wage for the construction sector failed in 2022, however, and, since that October, the statutory minimum wage has applied, which has been 12 euros/hour (gross). Workers can expect higher payment in companies that abide by the collective bargaining agreement (Bosch and Hüttenhof 2022). General labour rights include 30 days of paid annual leave or the payment of leave allowances, continued wage payment in cases of illness and health and pensions insurance.

Despite the far-ranging rights of EU working migrants, existing reports already paint a bleak picture of conditions in the industry. Reports list cross-sectoral forms of exploitation (Daelken 2012; Loschert et al. 2023) before and after the introduction of freedom of movement rights (Jobelius 2015) and speak of wage theft, lack of health insurance, poor housing conditions and cases of forced labour. With regard to the construction industry in particular, studies and reports highlight labour exploitation, unpaid work, unpaid overtime, informal work or cases of the theft of the annual leave entitlement and a lack of occupational safety (Voivozeanu 2019; Lackus and Schell 2020; Birner and Dietl 2021; Lübbe 2022; Sperneac-Wolfer 2022). No definite numbers exist as to how many Romanians are affected by labour exploitation; one expert from a counselling centre for migrant workers put the number of victims in the thousands or more.

With three to five million citizens abroad (Dospinescu and Russo 2018), migration is a significant factor in Romanian society and the motives and backgrounds of Romanian migrants are well researched. Economic reasons are a powerful motive to seek work abroad (Sandu 2005), as are local migration cultures (Horvath 2008) and transnational networks (Ciobanu 2013) through which workers find job opportunities abroad or assist each other. In the area of posted work, findings indicate that 'low-level wages and precarious working conditions in Romania' (Voivozeanu 2019) play

a decisive role in workers choosing to keep working abroad, whereas in Germany the language barrier excludes them from vast areas of the labour market. Recent studies point towards a 'multiple precarity' that working migrants face in the German meat and construction sectors (Birke 2022; Sperneac-Wolfer 2023; Voivozeanu 2019).

However, little is known about how Romanian workers interpret and evaluate their work in Germany and how their classification patterns affect their work. Studies on blue collar workers show the relevance of positive work interpretations for the self-perception of workers and their willingness to work under harsh conditions (Lamont 2000). Nevertheless, since negative classifications such as 'slave labour' are widespread, especially in the field of construction work, while employers are known as 'robbers' and 'thieves' (Sperneac-Wolfer 2022), questions regarding the classifications and their effects arise again.

Social classifications

Through social classifications, actors interpret and evaluate their environment (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989; Sutterlüty and Neckel 2006; Sutterlüty 2010) and thus also their work. Such classifications operate by assigning a social object to a larger class of objects that share certain characteristics and valuation attributes associated with them. 'Slave labour' is precisely thus an evaluative interpretation of a physically demanding task, and it interprets work in terms different from its classification as 'drudgery' or 'hard slog'. Each such categorisation has a context-specific semantic content that is reflected in its use by those uttering it, and thus its reconstruction enables access to their interpretations. For instance, it is of interest what Romanian workers mean by categorising what they are doing as 'slave labour'.

Social classification systems have the status of collectively shared categorisations that are deeply woven into cultural contexts (Lévi-Strauss 1962) and biographies of individuals (Willis 1978). Likewise, different and competing classification systems may be present in any given context, resulting in classification struggles over legitimate evaluations.

To individuals, or actors, social classifications both function as an instrument of perception and influence their perception in equal measure. In everyday life, actors rely on certain sets of social classifications that enable them to evaluate and interpret themselves and their environment. These also orient the behaviours, tactics and strategies of actors (Sutterlüty and Neckel 2006; Swidler 1986). This is why different social classifications lead to different social effects. It is not without consequences for work interactions with management if supervisors are classified as exploiters who do not want to do any real work or if they appear as colleagues who happen to have greater responsibilities. Each of these varying interpretations result in a different social impact, in this case in different feelings towards the supervisor.

The power of social classification is well studied for many areas (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Sutterlüty 2010). In the context of work, studies have demonstrated that blue collar workers classify the shop floor as a field of recognition through good work performance (Burawoy 1979) and they have shown how education forms patterns of classifying work (Willis 1978). Furthermore, scholars have pointed to work as a source from which workers derive their sense of personal responsibility, their ethos

and thus ultimately their morality (Lamont 2000). Work itself is not only an object of classifications but has a far ranging symbolic-cultural dimension in societies (Hann 2000; Gudeman and Hann 2015) that includes multiple cultural meanings and work-related moral economies. Classifications are also necessary for the performance of work, since workers constantly need to interpret their tasks and their own positions to coordinate how they go about their work (Burawoy 1979; Dunkel and Weihrich 2018).

Though much is known regarding the conceptual role classifications have for work, little is known about how and through what classifications EU migrants in the construction sector perceive their work. The following section briefly explains the methods used to obtain the data.

Data, field access and analysis

To learn how Romanian workers classify their work in Germany, the project team[3] conducted a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) and semi-structured interviews within the methodological framework of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

A multi-sited transnational ethnography follows workers to the 'backstages' (Scott 1985) of the workplace, namely a large dormitory complex housing several hundred construction workers from Romania. Participant observation was also carried out in workers' negotiations with their employers, during consultations with doctors or in bars and restaurants in Germany as well as in the workers' villages in Romania. Fieldwork started in June 2021 and is still ongoing. After a period of ten months of fieldwork in Germany, participant observation was carried out in the workers' places of origin, while additional data was collected during twelve more months of participant observation in Germany and in Romania during summer 2023. The result is a total of 50 interviews (26 with workers, 12 with individuals gathered from their separate social contexts and a further 12 with relevant experts).

Access was gained through shadowing a union organiser who regularly visited the dormitories and assisted workers in social and labour conflicts. Researchers volunteered to act as translators during medical consultations and meetings with local authorities, and also assisted workers in handling their conflicts by writing letters on their behalf or by collecting evidence. Problem solving quickly turned to be an important part of the fieldwork. At all times, we introduced ourselves as researchers to the workers. Quickly, our mobile phone numbers were distributed in the field and workers called us, team members being perceived as 'people who can help' and were known as academics 'writing a book on the experiences of Romanian workers'. In some cases, workers encouraged team members to document their situation because 'the world needs to know how we are treated here'. Problem solving was helpful

3 The team consists of the three authors of this article. The research project 'Romanian Migrant Workers in the German Construction Industry: A Study Based on Social Classifications Theory' is located at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main and is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). We thank the anonymous reviewers of *Sociologie Românească* and the editorial team of SEER for their helpful remarks and comments.

in establishing trust and it also made team members familiar with the hurdles that workers face. The Romanian family background of some of the team members proved to be helpful in the field and researchers were perceived to be 'one of us' in terms of origin. At the same time, workers and union activists repeatedly emphasised the advantages yielded by team members during consultations with doctors and institutions because they were able to surmount the language barrier in speaking German without an accent. Following the initial phase, team members regularly spent time with the workers after work and received invitations to feasts, celebrations and to barbecues, which one worker characterised as 'so you have made family here, that's good'. At this point, a distant observer position had been transformed into active participation, which enabled us to observe how workers evaluate their tough work.

After ten months of field work in 'Echsberg', one researcher followed a worker's invitation to travel to Romania for four months. There, participant observation was carried out in a village in Suceava county, which we have anonymised as 'Setul-Mic', for a month and a half. Shorter research stays were also carried out in villages in the counties of Iaşi, Brăila, Constanţa, Satu Mare and in Hunedoara, in the Jiu Valley. Sampling followed the invitations received from workers or their families. Additional conversations occurred on trips through the country via microbuses and trains.

At all sites, observations were documented in field notes on smartphones or notebooks and later developed into full field protocols (Emerson et al. 1995). This transnational qualitative research design not only targets the experiences of Romanian construction site workers in Germany but also includes work classifications made in their Romanian contexts. The long research duration and the number of research trips allows for the testing of hypotheses, while the breadth of the database compiled allows for good comparisons to be made.

Interview participants were recruited from this field and, up to this point, 26 semi-structured interviews have been conducted in Romanian with workers and 12 more with friends and families in the home villages, with recordings lasting between 30 minutes and five hours. Workers were all male, with the youngest in their late twenties and the oldest in their late fifties, while the average was in the range of 40 to 50. In the villages, five interviewees were women and seven were men. Interviews were transcribed for analysis. In order to gather background information regarding the social and legal situations of workers, 12 additional expert interviews with lawyers, activists and union representatives in Germany and Romania were carried out. Additional data was gathered in work-related online platform groups as well as through corresponding hashtags on social media.

Analysis was done according to Grounded Theory and particular attention was given to the specifics of interview and observational data (Corbin and Strauss 2015). One of the advantages of this analytical approach is its capability to include different forms of data which has allowed us to cross-fade workers' interview responses, their everyday conversations and ideas of work present in Romanian villages and online groups. In particular, the open and inductive approach of Grounded Theory has enabled us to reconstruct classifications present in this data as well as to trace

their effects within the labour process in the German construction industry. As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2015), analysis started with open coding and, through constant comparison, codes were developed into categories. Fieldwork was conducted in parallel to analysis until analytic categories were saturated, like the four classification patterns of work presented in the empirical section of this article.

For reasons of clarity and conciseness, this article focuses primarily on work-related classifications and their impact on workers.

Classifications of work

Romanian construction workers are constantly engaged in practices of classifying their work. Four classifications emerge as a collectively shared pattern and are repeatedly brought up in similar ways by several workers across varying situations.

Work as a binding obligation

Work is classified in the field as an agreement between worker and employer. Once made, the negotiated agreement, or tacit understanding, between worker and employer acquires a binding character that turns out at least for those subject to it to be stronger than legal regulations. Workers refer to such agreements as *o înţelegere* – an understanding, a deal or an agreement. Such agreements establish a relationship between worker and employer in which workers are highly sympathetic towards their employer in response to demands for more work. With such relationships come perceived expectations that can be either fulfilled or disappointed. On the side of the workers, such relations are part of a binding obligation and are characterised by their far-reaching willingness to meet expectations, even if this means additional work that exceeds the scope of the original agreement.

Ionel, the worker from the Introduction, attributes his acceptance of 12 hours per day causally to this relationship and the understanding it entails. He explains:

> I wanted it to be a friendship thing between me and the employer … Yes? I mean I wanted to understand him, too. If he says we have to finish, yes. I kept quiet, I didn't say anything, because look, it's five o'clock and we have to finish, to go home. No, let's stay and finish. That's it, it's urgent, we're finishing. But he took advantage. He saw that I didn't say anything the first day, I didn't say anything the second day, I didn't. He took advantage.

Ionel intended to have a friendly relationship with his employer, one in which he would show understanding if the latter was in need of overtime to finish a contract. He fulfilled his perceived obligations over a long period of time and stayed quiet, even though his work was so stressful that he could not even take a breather without his boss showing up and spurring him on, as he explained later in the interview. Still, he emphasises the 'professional' nature of the relationship, which he defines as 'having respect for the work I do as well as having respect from him as an employer'. It is only now, after his employer broke the agreement through the cover-up of the workplace accident, thereby showing his lack of respect, that Ionel analyses this as an abuse of his own good faith and a breach of trust.

Ionel and his employer had *o înţelegere*, whereby one agreed to work and the other to pay for it. Some such agreements are tacit and workers know an employer's conditions, for instance if there is annual leave or the continued payment of wages in case of illness, but also the amount of the hourly wage. In other cases, both parties negotiate within a very limited scope, for instance over one euro more or less per hour and seal their understanding with a handshake.

To understand the nature of such an *înţelegere*, it is instructive to look first at an east Romanian village, the home of several migrant workers. In such villages, as several interview partners tell us, work is sometimes based on negotiated agreement between client and worker, an *înţelegere*. This happens in construction as well as in agriculture. Such agreements have a binding character because word is given and, as a representative of the village explained, whoever breaks his word is poorly regarded and news will spread fast that this employer does not pay. Once a job in Germany is classified as *o înţelegere*, workers interpret their agreement as equally binding as it would be in the Romanian context and feel obliged to follow it, as a discussion amongst workers regarding vacation money demonstrates.

Employers are legally obliged to pay 14.25 per cent of the gross wage as vacation pay to SOKA-BAU, the construction sector welfare fund. If workers take their vacation, employers report it to SOKA-BAU and receive the corresponding money. In return, the worker receives the money after a certain period if s/he does not go on leave. This system is designed to ensure that construction workers who change employers do not lose their vacation entitlement (Bosch and Hüttenhoff 2022). With 30 days of paid leave and a small number of weekly work hours, vacation money for one year can exceed 2500 euros.

Employers actively exploit this system. During a field visit to one dormitory, a union activist was explaining to a group of eight workers that their employers had falsely filed for vacation money from their accounts by claiming they had gone on vacation, even though they had worked throughout the time in question. They were paid with what was supposed to be their vacation money. The money, the union activist explained, could be refunded if enough workers testified that no-one was on vacation at the time. The following scene is an excerpt from a field protocol documenting what happened right after some of the workers, like Fabiu, had already gone to work for another employer:

> The union activist explains to Fabiu that his boss stole 2000 euros from him by pointing to the pay slip. Fabiu reacts by saying: 'This is not my money; we did not agree on paid vacation.' 'But this is your legal right, this is your money,' answers the union activist. Fabiu replies: 'We did not agree on paid vacation. This is not my money, so whatever my employer does with this money is his business. I stick to our agreement.' The other workers around him accept his explanation.

This short scene demonstrates the binding power such informal agreements can have if workers classify work as a field of agreements. Although Fabiu would be able to recover a month's wages, he declines to do so because paid vacation was never part of their understanding. This reaction is particularly striking, since Fabiu now works for another employer and could take action against his previous employer

without fear of dismissal. The group's reaction is also striking: though some agree to fight for their money, Fabiu's response is acknowledged and not criticised.

In contrast to a Romanian village with its high level of social control, employers can often break an agreement, for instance by not paying wages, with impunity. If workers then react and try to recover their money, some employers react according to this work classification. For instance, Gheorghe received the following message when he, seriously ill, demanded his wages and vacation pay through the union: 'How dare you? We helped you, we gave you work and everything, and now you go against us?' For the employer, the legal demand is bold but illegitimate, and the discussion is immediately taken to the level of personal relationship via the response as to how much the worker owed, reminding of Gheorghe's moral debt. The employer reacted as if the worker had broken the common agreement.

Workers who see their work as embedded in a binding agreement usually act accordingly, even if this results in disadvantages to them. This interpretation is very present in the field, and employers know this and act accordingly. In the next pattern, however, this loyalty is completely absent.

Work as a source of income

Romanian migrant workers in Germany can also be found classifying work as a source of income. It is because of the expected revenue that workers are ready to work under conditions that they themselves consider tough. In this pattern, conflicts are centred around financial issues and employers take measures to counter income-oriented mobility.

In the previously discussed conflict over vacation money, some workers did not demand the vacation money since it had not been agreed upon. Others, who treated work primarily as a source of income, were seriously motivated to obtain the money from their ex-employer when they learned about the fraud. Suddenly confronted with an unexpected opportunity to recoup some of their vacation money – with sums ranging from 800 to 2500 euros – a crowd gathered quickly and prepared their statements. While talking, one shouted out 'Now we'll show them!' and others were thrilled at the prospect of large payouts. In this situation, a group of workers constituted itself around the shared view of work as a source of income, of which they had been defrauded.

It was the prospect of a higher salary than in Romania that brought many workers to Germany, including to Echsberg, in the first place. In this city, the standard hourly wage is 10 to 15 euros after tax, a higher rate than in other German cities where wages may be as low as 9 or even 8 euros. With a monthly salary of 2000 euros and more for a work week of 50 to 60 hours, the income is also significantly higher than the minimum monthly gross salary of 3000 lei in the Romanian construction sector (around 610 Euros; EFBWW 2022) and many workers' families in Romania depend on the German income. Monthly remittances ranging from 750 to 1500 euros support the lives of relatives in Romania, the education of their children or the construction of new houses. However, taking into account the widespread wage fraud, many workers earn much less than expected and look for better-paid employment.

This classification of work entails a high degree of mobility, and relationships with employers are not as important as in the first type. Some workers following this interpretation may switch to another employer within Echsberg for better pay, others will have moved to Echsberg from other cities and stay there for the same reason.

There is a theory in the field about why the wages are higher in Echsberg. Sorin, some other workers and a team member visited another dormitory three hours' drive away, in an isolated district somewhere on the outskirts of a town lacking public transportation. Sorin, a well-connected and talkative worker who is in his thirties, explains:

> The isolation makes the workers more dependent on their employers. It's different in our place. Because we are not so isolated, we can easily go to the highest paying employer, and this is why we raised the prices during the last years from then 9 euros per hour to a minimum of 12 euros now. If someone in Echsberg were to offer 10 euro or so today, people would immediately leave.

This mobility is apparent in the case of Fabiu, who left his former employer for a wage higher by 1.50 euros and came back when he was offered a euro more. In Sorin's view, the salary in Echsberg is higher because the transport infrastructure makes it relatively easy for workers to move to better-paid employment.

Ultimately, on a transnational scale, workers come to Echsberg for the prospect of higher incomes, even though working conditions in other countries like Spain, France or Italy might have been easier. Cosmin, a worker in his late forties, left a much more relaxed job in the Italian construction sector for a higher hourly wage in Echsberg. He accepted the hard work because he urgently needed money to pay for his daughter's university education. Involuntary time off work is accordingly a problem. When Cosmin had to stay at home for weeks due to an illness and was receiving only around 1000 euros per month in sick pay, he complained to one of the researchers:

> I did not come to Germany for nothing or for holidays, but to make money.

His answer expresses the importance of income for him, and it testifies to his goal of using his time in such a way as to maximise his financial gain.

Such an interpretation of work in particular entails a willingness to work more hours and to work harder, as Sorin's example shows. He also left the Italian construction industry years ago for German construction sites. Until a herniated disc caused by extensive work forced him to take time off, he was ready to work overtime and under tough conditions to earn more money. He explains how someone can make an income in Germany: 'If you want more money, you have to pull harder.' Central in this answer is the idea of performance-based wages which increase with the severity of the work. In Echsberg, there are multiple possibilities to 'pull harder', from going without leave to informal work on Sundays.

To collect their vacation money and earn extra income, some workers do not take their Christmas holidays. For a similar reason, some workers look for extra work on

Sundays. In both cases, the prospect of more income serves as a rationale for extra work. However, more widespread is the acceptance of paid overtime.

This interpretation also refers to the work itself. 'To make money' is often heard in response to the question of why someone chooses to work on construction sites in Germany rather than in agriculture or other areas. Here, hard work is associated with a higher income while physically less demanding work entails a lower income. As a result of his herniated disc, Sorin has been thinking about finding a job as a driver. He explains:

> You know, bit by bit, the little raindrops accumulate and I can have a decent life with less money.

This statement shows the association of work with income – and of hard work with more income – as well as the reverse. In such an interpretation, hard work seems a plausible option to those looking to maximise their earnings.

By promising a high income but paying it only in part or not at all, employers exploit this interpretation of work and turn it into a mechanism that leaves workers vulnerable. Employers sometimes do not pay the full wage for several months but promise a worker that it will be paid on the consensual termination of the contract. Wage fraud or the withholding of the wage is so common that the term 'good employer' refers simply to an employer who regularly and fully pays the agreed wages. Conversely, one meaning of the term 'slave labour' is unpaid work. 'We are slaves because they do not pay us', a worker comments who was not paid at all for two months. If a conflict over wages arises, and if there is evidence such as testimonies from colleagues or pictures from the construction site, workers can hope for an informal understanding or a settlement in court – usually, however, resulting in a much smaller sum than expected.

Employers have also developed strategies to counter income-oriented mobility. In Echsberg, as in other towns, an informal compensation system has been established whereby a pay rise of 0.40 to 1.00 euro per hour is promised to workers after six months or one year. Employers also raise the cost of changing workplaces by, for example, providing housing to workers who therefore face immediate homelessness if they leave their employer.

The classification of work as income puts the focus on the expected wage and goes hand-in-hand with the assumption that the harder the work, the greater the revenue. One of the social effects of this classification is that it makes hard work acceptable and plausible for workers. Another effect is the high degree of income-oriented mobility with consequences in Echsberg and on a larger scale. Employers take measures to counter the high mobility of workers by raising wages through time or by raising the price of a new job. However, work is not only the field of relationships and income but also a source of identity, as the next subsection shows.

Work as identity

Where workers classify their work as a source of identity, the tough nature of work in the German construction sector is in itself a reason why workers are willing

to take it on. The symbolic gains from hard manual labour are of central importance. Such an understanding of work is accompanied by a specific set of conflicts: workers who classify their work as a source of pride rarely complain about the wage as long as it is in keeping with the local average. However, they do often complain about poor treatment, not least in the form of inappropriate housing.

In working societies, work is an essential part of identities. As Michèle Lamont (2000) demonstrates, blue collar workers find in their labour a source of identity, pride and morality, despite the low wages in comparison with white collar workers. However, not much attention has been given to the symbolic gains that migrant workers in particular may derive from their work abroad. This section demonstrates that, if work is a source of identity, then a change towards physically less stressful work – whether in another industry or elsewhere in the construction sector – might threaten an identity built on enduring hard work day in and day out.

A good example of this classification is Cătălin, who was interviewed before and after his retirement at the age of 56. Around a year before his retirement, he tells us bluntly:

> I am not afraid of work. I worked for years in the mines of the Jiu Valley in Romania. Every time I went into the mountain, I was ready to fight the mountain. The same here, in construction.

He does not complain about hard work, neither in construction nor in the mines, but confronts it with physical readiness and pleasure. More importantly, he sees his work as a continuation of his time as a miner, and formerly as one of the 'socialist heroes' (Kideckel 2004): mythical figures who were, until the collapse of socialism in Romania, rewarded not only with good pay but also with respect and pride for their highly dangerous occupation. German construction sites offer a comparably risky environment and, like the mines, are sites of male sociability with a high sense of camaraderie. Against this background, when Cătălin speaks of 'slave labour', he is mainly critical of poor housing conditions:

> We live in a jungle, like slaves we live here. Did you see the toilets and the kitchens? That's how we are treated here!

With two showers and three toilets for 30 people, such housing conditions must appear as a grievous contrast to symbolic status gained through work.

After being dismissed from a construction job at the age of 56, Cătălin decided to return to his small Moldavian village not far from the Ukrainian border, where a member of the team visited him. On a tour through the region, he presents, in a melancholic tone but with great pride, the rusty remains of a steel mill as a monument to Romanian workers who, he says, had been betrayed by politicians since the 1990s. Although retired, he continues to work. On his property, he explains:

> I feel good. Now I can build this house here for my family. My kids pay for it and I am building it. My next-door neighbour is also building himself a new house, so we can build them together.

Furthermore, after his retirement, the hard, but collective work continues, albeit under much better conditions – including respect from his family and better housing conditions.

Like Cătălin, other workers also find identity in their work in Germany. Cornel is one of them; he worked on construction sites all over Europe where he mostly laid rebar, one of the harshest tasks.[4] Thick calluses cover the hands of this worker, who is in his forties. Asked what good work means to him, he replies:

> Since I was a child, I have only known hard work, I have never experienced good work.

Yet during the interview he also criticises the use of rebar mats in Germany, where they are used as part of a rationalised workflow. Instead, he favours a hands-on approach to laying rebar of the kind he experienced in Greece, which he claims results in a higher quality of work as well as developing the worker's skills. Here, the self-image of a skilled worker goes hand-in-hand with a focus on the quality of work.

The connection between a worker's identity and work quality can also be observed in Mircea, a member of a larger crane operator network who also is in his late forties. When our conversation turned to wages and housing, he answers:

> I've seen it all, the well-paid jobs as well as the badly-paid jobs. I've slept in places like here, with three or more to a room and cockroaches in the kitchen, as well as in four-star hotels.

However, other factors matter at work:

> Good training of crane operators, respect and recognition for the hard work in the crane. And finally, a passion, because without passion you cannot do this job.

The standard by which he evaluates work is neither housing nor payment; instead, his focus is on the training and therefore on the quality of work. In this view, a worker's identity is derived from an inward connection with work alongside a passion for it.[5]

This interpretation is observable in their dormitories, where some workers evaluate each other according to their perceptions of identity. There is a small kiosk near the compound, to which many men head directly after their shift to enjoy a beer and a cigarette with their colleagues. With shirts white from concrete dust and hands calloused from laying rebar, they tell each other about their daily output. Habitual drinkers are met with disdain, as are the younger, less experienced workers of whom it is rumoured: 'They're only here to make a quick buck. They spend all day looking at their smartphones instead of working.' Other, less physically demanding

4 Editor's Note: high tensile steel rods used to strengthen and reinforce concrete slabs and structures.

5 Since this work comes with long periods of absence from families, a passion for work can contradict other passions in the life of workers, resulting in conflicts. Some workers decide to return to their families, mourning that they had to leave one of their passions behind.

occupations are held in similar contempt. Once two Romanian cleaners came for a visit and, when they were saying goodbye with the words 'We have to be in work tomorrow at 8:00 a.m.' a worker replies: 'That's a sham, that's not real work. At 8:00, I've already been working for two hours.'

In this culturally embedded classification of work, hard work is evaluated as part of one's own identity as a skilful, strong, diligent and steady worker who is passionate about the job. Occasionally, the hard worker is portrayed with attributes of bravado. This results in the valuing of hard manual labour over supposedly easier ways of earning money, as well as in the evaluation of workers according to this image. Older workers in particular connect this picture with an idealised image of Romania's communist period.

Work as normalcy

In the final pattern, work is classified by workers as part of their normalcy. In this interpretation of work, what is central is not a relationship, income or identity, but rather the idea of work as an integral and indispensable part of life. While work is seen as a source of health, anyone who could work but does not is held in low regard by society. In this interpretation of work, it seems more plausible for workers to find a new position after being dismissed instead of drawing sickness or unemployment benefits.

This pattern is observable when workers lose their job, as often happens in Echsberg, where it has been known for workers to be unlawfully dismissed by phone. When a member of his team helped Cosmin, who had broken his foot, to fill out a sickness benefits calculation form, his employer called. He told the worker that he need not bother turning up for work again. When the call ended, Cosmin unsuccessfully tried to reach a colleague who was also a well-known intermediary. When no-one answered, he asked the team member what he should do, because he had to find new work. Despite his broken foot and although sickness benefits can be paid for up to 78 weeks – a fact of which Cosmin, who had had many accidents, was aware – his first reaction was to search for a new job.

The same classification can be observed some weeks later, when Cosmin had been hospitalised because of complications. When he discussed the idea of leaving to spend Christmas with his family, who he hadn't seen for around 10 months, a team member translated for him the doctor's question 'What is your plan after Christmas?', receiving the answer:

> If I get better, I'll come back to Germany for work, isn't that normal?'

The answer underlines the importance of work in his life as part of everyday normalcy. The first part of the response stresses that, as soon as he is healthy again, he will return to the work environment that caused his injury; in the second, his answer shows that the question itself does not make much sense to him, because it is 'normal' to go to work whenever you are able to. What is striking is also what is not explicitly mentioned here: neither does he say he wants to enjoy more time with his family when he has recovered, nor does he cite reasons like income or identity

for wanting to go back to work, since work itself is the reason why someone should work.

The interpretation of work as an unquestioned element of everyday normalcy echoes in the justification workers give when asked why they have signed a contract with a specific company known for exploitation: 'What should I do? You have to work.' This pattern can also be found among those who cannot work due to illness.

After years of heavy work, Dumitru suffers from extreme back pain due to multiple herniated discs and currently receives sickness benefits. In his interview, the fifty year old worker explains that, when he worked, he was not in need of a gym or sports, because what he did all day was exercise enough. He thus stresses the health effects of work as well as implying that, if someone works, no further recreational activity is necessary to stay healthy. By the same token, if regular sport is necessary for a healthy life, then work is viewed as an acceptable substitute. The essential importance work has for him emerges once again at the end of the interview, when he regrets, with tears in his eyes, his inability to work. His only wish is to work again one day, no matter what the salary is or his position on the construction site.

Like Dumitru, Lucian, a worker in his forties, wants to work again one day. He invests a considerable part of his welfare payments in consulting doctors, hoping that one of them will be able to treat his condition. He is upset that workers make fun of him by saying he is on holiday in Germany, angrily responding:

> This is my work now; my work is to find a treatment so that I can work again.

His main goal is to restore his health so that he can work again, and to be healthy is associated with the ability to work.

However, this idea of work relates to an idea of a working society. Another worker, Adrian, currently off sick, describes what would happen if the police encountered him on the street on weekdays: 'Papers for inspection! How are you supporting yourself?' and, if the worker cannot produce sufficient documents, the police officers are doubly suspicious: 'So you are stealing, huh?' Being without a job raises suspicions of deviance and makes it seem legitimate that police should check on passers-by for no apparent reason. This is only understandable against the backdrop of an imagined society in which work is the norm; in which it is equated with normalcy. For this worker, such a society was once a given:

> Even the blind worked under Ceausescu. They had work, now they don't even have a pension.

In rural Romania, where many of the workers migrating to Germany come from, work is also considered an essential part of normalcy. The small village of Setul-Mic is home to three workers currently working in Echsberg. The village has a rich history of work. Several industrial sites guaranteed work for all inhabitants until many were made redundant after the revolution, causing many to seek work abroad.

Remus, a local villager in his forties who never went abroad, talks about his 16-hour workdays and highlights that:

> If you do not work, your mind goes up to the mountain and you go crazy.

Like in Echsberg, long working days are not considered cause for complaint, but rather seen as necessary for good mental health. A typical workday of Dana, a worker's wife of 49 years, also lasts for 16 hours, including eight hours in a small store after which she assists in wedding venues and gardens. She clearly distinguishes between work as normalcy and work for other reasons, as field notes on a conversation reveal:

> Me: 'I saw at City Hall that, if someone gets welfare, their names are public.'
> She: 'Yes, there are two or three here who get it. But actually, everybody works here. And after work, then it depends on what you want. I have a colleague at work, after work she puts her feet up and drinks. She doesn't want to work, but she doesn't get anything then either.'

For Dana, there are three classes of people. First there are those who are without work and receive social security benefits, with their names published as if they were deviants. Second, there is her colleague who works regular hours in the shop but relaxes afterwards. And third, there are people like her who work extra hours above the norm to earn additional income.

In this pattern, work is classified as normalcy, as an indispensable part of everyday life, while being without work is seen as unhealthy or as deviant. This interpretation of work comes with social effects. In the German context, it results in workers looking for a new job immediately after being fired, regardless of whether they are sick or entitled to unemployment benefits. Since the priority is to have work instead of a well-paid or prestigious position, this heightens the acceptance of poorly paid and poorly regarded positions amongst those that are accessible to Romanian workers. In the context of a Romanian village, however, findings indicate a negative attitude towards non-working people. Thus, simply to have a job, even if it is 'slave labour' in Germany, guarantees a better position within the local community than that held by those who do not work and are at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Conclusion

This article reconstructed four work classifications among Romanian construction workers in Germany. Each classification offers a different rationale for hard work under tough conditions: drudgery may be interpreted as the fulfilment of duties within an agreed relationship or as necessary for economic revenue; hard work itself can be a symbolic contribution to one's own sense of identity or it can have the meaning of being part of everyday normalcy. Those categorisations are embodied as well as embedded in the everyday lives of workers – not only in the German context with its dormitories but also within the Romanian context and its history of labour: thus they are part of a symbolic net reaching from Romanian villages to German construction sites.

As these examples have demonstrated, the relationship between the elements of this network is sometimes conflictual: in one case, workers who derived their identity from their work made fun of others whom they accused of only wanting to make money. On the other hand, the worker's wife respects those who work more to earn more and she is dismissive of her co-worker who works only normal hours. It follows that, while the classifications each have their clear, unique position in the network, the ways in which they relate to other classifications demonstrate that they are part of the field and exist in the actors' cultural repertoire. The classifications unfold their power as workers interpret their work through them, resulting in field-specific social effects.

The creation of plausibility and thereby of vulnerability are the two intertwined social effects of these classifications that contribute to the ongoing labour exploitation of Romanian construction workers in Germany. As demonstrated, each of the deeply embedded work classifications offers a different reason to make hard work plausible in the eyes of the workers. Without direct physical coercion, these ideas motivate workers to take on work that they themselves criticise as 'slave labour'. At the same time, employers actively exploit workers' interpretations, leaving them vulnerable. For instance, an employer reminding workers of their moral indebtedness is trying to turn a work classification which acknowledges personal relationships into a mechanism of vulnerability.

This is not to argue that the exploitation of migrant workers is based solely on their classifications or that they have themselves to blame for them. On the contrary, it is of utmost importance to analyse actors like subcontractors and general contractors, local authorities and the German state, as well as structures such as labour and welfare laws, to get a clear picture of modern labour exploitation. What this article is arguing is that, in the specific context of these workers, social classifications of work play a crucial role; their social effects, among others, consisting in rendering them vulnerable. Without the recognition of such classifications and their social effects, our understanding of labour exploitation remains incomplete, failing to account for the workers' own interpretation.

Multiple work classifications are present in the field and the actors themselves refer to them. Some elements of the workers' interpretations reach back to rural Romania and to Romanian labour history. This indicates that workers do not, as it were, travel alone, but carry their social classifications with them.

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