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‘Ştiu eu pe cineva’. Self-organised mobility, labour intermediation and the two-fold exploitation of Romanian workers in the Austrian fresh food sector*

Abstract

The workings of Romanian migration networks across western Europe are well documented. Yet, transnational relations have rarely been examined outside of these networks, namely in their potential for value extraction in broader accumulation processes. This article looks at the self-organised mobility of Romanian workers in relation to exploitation in highly segmented labour markets, and substantiates the view that, in the Austrian fresh food sector, it is that self-organised mobility that has become exploitable by Austrian growers. The article shows how growers capitalise particularly on labour intermediation to maintain the resilience and profitability of local agricultural businesses in the Austrian agricultural market. The resulting workplace regime ensnares workers in a two-fold exploitability: not only is their labour power subject to labour extraction but so are their interpersonal relations. This analysis implies the need to move beyond commonplace vocabularies of ‘social capital’ to grasp the persistent exploitation of migrant workers and their reproductive capacities across segmented labour markets.

Keywords: informalised labour, mobility strategies, Romanian migration, agriculture, seasonal recruitment

The role of self-organised mobility among Romanian workers in the European context

The workings of expansive Romanian migration networks across western Europe are well-documented (Sandu et al. 2006; Anghel 2013). Therein, self-organisation stands out as a relevant modality of westward migration (Horváth and Anghel 2009). Personal relations between kith and kin form the main means through which employment opportunities across western European economies are mediated. From a migration network perspective, these transnational relations, generally understood as ‘social capital’, can be converted into increased economic resilience for Romanian households (Potot 2010; Ţerban and Voicu 2010). Yet, transnational relations have

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rarely been examined outside of migrant networks, namely in their potential source of value extraction in broader capitalist accumulation (Rubiolo 2018; Schmidt 2021).

Against this background, this article thus attempts to look at the self-organisation of mobility practices among Romanian workers in relation to what it potentially affords in terms of value extraction. Ethnographically, the article substantiates the view that, in the Austrian fresh food sector, it is precisely that self-organisation that has become exploitable by growers. Based on the findings from an ethnographic study within a greenhouse complex, the article shows how the growers capitalise particularly on the practice of labour intermediation to maintain the resilience and profitability of local agricultural businesses in the restructured Austrian fresh food sector. The resulting workplace regime ensnares workers in a two-fold exploitability: not only their labour power but also their relationships are subject to value extraction.

To this end, the article begins by reviewing how labour intermediation, as part of the Romanian migration phenomenon, is commonly understood in the literature. Therein, it notes the limits of framing transnational relations as social capital since this brackets out their subsequent valorisation within wider circuits of accumulation. To incorporate these, the article draws on the recent argument elaborated by Shah and Lerche to examine the socio-spatial separation of reproductive and productive spheres as crucial in understanding the dynamic exploitation of migrant labour (Shah and Lerche 2020). In two subsequent analytical sections, the article then offers a brief recount of the historical role of migrant labour and labour recruitment practices in the Austrian greenhouse complex in the course of European liberalisation before analysing the findings of a multi-site ethnography located between Austrian greenhouses and Romania.

A question of capital? Self-organised mobility, migration networks and the other side of the wage relation

The post-1990 scope of Romanian migration is exceptional: within only three decades, around 20% of the active Romanian labour force has become involved in temporary or durable migration patterns (Sandu 2006; World Bank 2018), with the numbers tending towards being underestimated due to the difficult-to-measure conditions in which labour mobility takes place (Rubiolo 2018). The migratory condition of contemporary Romania is enacted in highly diverse and complex ways: beside the formalised and privatised mobility arrangements (Horváth and Angel 2009; Voivozeanu 2019), studies frequently highlight the high degree of self-organisation as a characteristic of Romanian migration; that is, job placements being intermediated through direct relationships within vast and rapidly emerging networks across western European space (Hartman 2008; Potot 2010; Ţerban and Voicu 2010).

Hereby, the capacity of mobile workers to self-mediate employment opportunities in the European context is conceptually interesting in its own right. Labour intermediation is commonly discussed in migration studies along two lines of either commercial migration industries or horizontal migration networks (Jones & Shah 2020). Regarding the former, the characteristics of self-organisation as potentially involving each and every migrant in the practice of non-commercial intermediation

contrasts with the figure of the mediator, who usually appears in migration industry scholarship as the Simmelian *tertius gaudens*; that is, ‘the third who benefits’ (Bessy and Chauvin 2018). Often forming crucial nodes in migration industries (Gammeltoft et al. 2012), the literature documents a vast array of commercial intermediaries including ‘brokers’, ‘coyotes’, ‘smugglers’ and others performing complex roles in facilitating, commodifying and thereby profiting from human mobility (Jones & Sha 2020).

Yet, the type of labour intermediation in the Romanian context is seldom informed by a commercial purpose that would characterise such migration patterns as industries and some actors as *tertius gaudens* (Potot 2010). In the absence thereof, horizontal modalities of labour intermediation are commonly examined through the lens of a migration network. This extensive literature approaches migration by tracing the creation of migratory chains through the spread of interpersonal networks and their cumulative causation (Massey et al. 1998), in which the framing of interpersonal relations as ‘social capital’ features centrally as networks are seen as manifestations thereof (Sandu et al. 2006; Ţerban and Voicu 2010). While this perspective is reviewed elsewhere in more depth (Sha 2021), this chapter is particularly concerned with how it is applied to comprehend the dynamics of Romanian migration.

Here, studies have documented the high degrees of self-organisation of Romanian migration across European space (Horváth and Anghel 2009). Frequently, individual forerunners inhabit crucial roles in paving migration corridors which are then utilised by friends and relatives, rendering migration as a self-perpetuating and highly dynamic phenomenon (Şerban & Voicu 2010). In addition to the distinct functions of certain individuals in the course of emerging migration networks, it is observed that virtually every migrant fulfils a ‘sponsor function’ in the course of migration including, among other things, job distribution (Şerban & Voicu 2010: 117ff.). Similarly, in a study of the development of migratory chains in two localities in Romania, Potot highlights the highly networked nature of transnational job intermediation across distant relations through which, eventually, Romanian migrants ‘have played a role, without waiting for international agreements, in the construction of a large transnational space across Europe’ (Potot 2010). In this view, vast migration networks are ‘a social form that are adapted well to the globalization of the European economy’ (Potot 2010).

As this article goes on to show, this perspective provides only a partial understanding of the full implications of self-organised mobility in circuits of accumulation. When inserted into highly segmented western European economies that have become structurally dependent on migrant labour (Castles 1986), Potot’s conclusion can be analytically inverted: a globalising Europe was well adapted to make thorough usage of the rapidly expanding phenomenon of Romanian migration. Put differently, inasmuch as migrant networks are utilised to evade precarious working conditions, they also form channels into them. As evidenced by Judith Schmidt in the case of German agriculture, the trajectories of Romanian mobile workers – who move based on the mediation of employment opportunities on farms – cannot be separated from the ‘calculation patterns’ (*Kalkulationsmuster*) of German farm

owners, concerned with the supply of cheap labour in the competitive globalised European agricultural market (Schmidt 2020, 2021).

It is in this light that framing the value of transnational networks as ‘social capital’ pertaining exclusively to migrants (which is then convertible into economic resilience, for instance, by being able to mediate labour niches across Europe (Potot 2010: 4ff)) is problematic: the implication is that, analytically, it brackets out the manifold actors on the other side of the wage relation who might benefit from the self-organisation of migrants while not themselves being part of the network – for instance, companies and/or private employers. In doing so, this view renders ‘social capital’ as a form of value internal to migration networks (Portes 1998; Das 2004), rather than incorporated within broader capitalist valorisation processes (Rubiolo 2018).

In their recent publication, Shah and Lerche insist that a systemic understanding of the exploitation of migrant labour necessitates accounting for what they call ‘the invisible economies of care’; namely, the wide-spanning sets of close relations within and across the ‘spatiotemporally divided households that sustain workers’ in which ‘productive and reproductive activities are analytically and empirically intertwined’ (Shah and Lerche (2020: 721ff)). While their analytical interest is in the numerous gendered and generational forms of care work that constitute an ‘invisible economy because it is never considered in worker remuneration’ (Shah and Lerche 2020: 722), this perspective is also useful in reconsidering labour intermediation as a practice that sits between the spheres both of production and social reproduction: on the one hand, it functions as a transnational practice that sustains workers’ households over time and space. On the other, labour intermediation can become a modality of labour recruitment for employers, with potential economic benefits. This view addresses the relevance of migrant labour for both sides of the wage relation. Furthermore, it opens up ways of considering the underlying sets of interpersonal relations in which mobile workers are embedded – described here as the relationality of mobile workers (Millar 2018) – as a potential object of value extraction from which to trace the broader ‘machinations of capitalist growth’, in agriculture and beyond it (Shah and Lerche 2020).

By understanding, alongside Shah and Lerche, labour intermediation as a social re-/ productive practice that mobilises intimate and distant relations towards ensuring employment opportunities, the chapter asks how the self-organisation of mobility among mobile Romanian workers turns into a significant source of value extraction in segmented western European economies.

After describing the research design, this question is firmly rooted within the specificities of the field location, an Austrian greenhouse complex. In two analytical sections, the chapter first recounts the role of migrant labour in restructuring the Austrian fresh food sector, drawing on biographical interviews with growers and some statistical data. Given the limits of space, it only sketches some of the legal/economic aspects of Austrian EU accession. Then, it turns to examine the ethnographic material, acquired in Austrian greenhouses and Romanian communities.

Research design

In August 2021, the research stage began by the author following labour union activists on brochure distribution walks around the greenhouse complex before additionally approaching both Austrian growers and Romanian workers. Eventually, two growers agreed that I could participate in greenhouse work. This included activities ranging from sewing, crop and plant maintenance, pesticide spraying, the harvesting of mostly cucumbers, tomatoes and aubergines to the cleaning of greenhouses after crop production cycles. While the growers were informed that this employment was part of an ethnographic research project on agriculture, the research interest in the role of migrant labour therein was not fully disclosed. This decision was made due to the highly isolated and partly illicit labour practices that constitute the norm in the Austrian agricultural sector (Sezonieri 2017), a norm that was also encountered.

As a result, research participants have been anonymised and non-essential descriptions of workplaces and geographical locations have been altered.

In total, the author worked for six months on a twice a week basis in the greenhouse before moving full-time and living in a greenhouse dormitory from July to October and then December 2022. The usual workday comprised twelve hours a day for six days per week, sometimes including Sundays. This extensive presence allowed the building of proximate relations with workers. Besides sharing the workday in the greenhouse, many evenings were spent in various dormitories and in accompanying workers to appointments at banks or municipal offices as well as on private occasions such as weddings and birthdays. Additionally, one month of fieldwork was conducted in western Romania by following workers to their home communities during short vacations.

Emerging opportunities: migrant labour in the restructured Austrian fresh food sector

Historically, the greenhouse complex spanned over two thousand hectares in the eastern part of Austria. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, its fertile soils were cultivated by over three thousand peasant families, conducting mostly free-range horticulture. After the 1960s, the area was subject to agricultural restructuring processes in which the globalising vegetable market either pushed growers into business closure or led to the upscaling of production through economies of scale (for similar dynamics in Germany, see Schmidt 2021: 139ff). Former small-scale, multi-crop and free-range farming was gradually replaced by greenhouse-based single-crop intensification.

This was further accelerated by Austrian EU accession on 1 January 1995 and, within only a few decades, the landscape had become fully defined by plastic and glass greenhouses (Mejchar 2008). Crucially, greenhouse-based production increased the demand for cheap and flexible labour power, met through migrant labour: from the 1970s onwards, a variety of bilateral programmes between Austria and former Yugoslavia and a subsequent national labour market quota (*Kontingentregelung*) regulated local labour demand. From the 1990s, the share of workers from Romania grew to the point that they became the almost exclusive local workforce.

Nowadays, the greenhouse complex encompasses a hundred hectares and ninety businesses employ between two and thirty Romanian workers depending on the size of the business. The area serves as an agricultural powerhouse in the Austrian fresh food sector: yearly, two in every three Austrian cucumbers are produced in this place, followed by slightly fewer numbers for aubergines and tomatoes (LK Wien 2017). In sum, it accounts for around 40% of Austrian fruit vegetable production and the local cooperative stated a profit of nearly 100 million euros in 2020 (LGV 2020).

Conforming with insights from the literature on agricultural intensification, a central mechanism in the industrialisation of food production is the employment of a migrant workforce (Rogaly 2008; Zlolniski 2022). According to many retired farmers, the construction of the first greenhouses in the early 1970s accelerated the need for an extra-familial workforce. As one retired gardener remembered:

It happened kind of automatically. At first, we maintained the ethos of keeping the work in the family, especially my parents. But soon after building the first greenhouses, we realised that we needed additional hands in there. This is when we had to become actual employers (...) But the first labour migrants, if you will, were Sudetendeutsche. They resided in a nearby refugee camp and worked for a meal or one schilling at the time. These were really poor guys but, fortunately, the camps were abandoned soon. (...) Then, in the 1970s, this whole foreign worker [Fremdarbeiter] debate began. I remember that we [the local gardener cooperative] were always jealous of the Germans and their large Gastarbeiter schemes. Every year, we used to complain about our government: Look, again! The Germans got so many workers and we were only granted so few. But then, the labour contingents did increase sufficiently, mainly consisting of Yugoslavians.

This quote illustrates how increased labour demand in intensified production was first covered by domestic marginalised groups whose structural vulnerability rendered them exploitable for low wage, labour intensive employment. Afterward, bilateral recruitment schemes allowed for the large-scale employment of various non-domestic workforces consisting of Poles and groups from the countries of former Yugoslavia. Following the demise of the Ceaușescu regime, the mass exodus from Romania through westwards-oriented migration flows increased still further in the late 1990s (Sandu et al. 2006) to the point that, nowadays, Romanians are the fastest growing migrant population in Austria (Statista 2022). The exponential growth of Romanian workers in the greenhouse complex is vividly remembered by another grower:

Suddenly, they [Romanians] were everywhere. I mean, it was common that, from time to time, someone would knock at the door and ask for work. But in the late 1990s, it really exploded. Every hour, I had someone knocking at my door. 'Hast du Arbeit; hast du Arbeit' was the only German sentence they knew. And after you employ one, you can be sure that he brings his family, neighbours and what not. But they were solid workers, so I started employing them. Since then, we mainly have Romanians here. One of my long-term workers always invites me to his home in Romania. And, in return, I always joke: if I visit every village along the way where I know former workers, I will have to stop in every village in Romania.

The last sentence in particular illustrates the occurrence of a deep connectivity between Romanian households and Austrian greenhouses. As part of their westwards migration journeys, Romanian workers self-organised employment by literally knocking on the doors of the greenhouses of Austrian growers, with these initial encounters leading to the emergence and subsequent solidification of workplace relations between growers and workers. Crucially, the grower highlights how Romanian workers utilised these emergent workplace relations to intermediate work in the greenhouses with their kin and peers.

The increasing presence of Romanian workers in the 1990s not only marked a new period of labour recruitment in the greenhouse complex but was paralleled by significant transformations of agricultural production in the course of Austrian EU accession. In interviews, Austrian growers usually refer to the socioeconomic consequences of EU accession in highly critical ways: pre-1995, a system was in place that aligned harvest times with the regulation of border imports – local cooperatives were in close contact with government representatives who would inhibit the import of particular vegetables as soon as they would be available for harvesting in Austria. This remarkable level of institutionalised agrarian protection dissolved during EU accession. After a brief transitory period, Austrian greenhouse growers found themselves in the European single market and its relentless competition with greenhouse-producing companies from Spain or the Netherlands, resulting in drastic price drops for vegetables. In parallel, the once diversified Austrian fresh food market became dominated by powerful corporate actors up to the point that, nowadays, 83% of market share is distributed among three multinational companies, representing the highest market concentration in the European food sector (Jaklin 2013).

This restructuring of the Austrian fresh food sector manifested itself in a set of economic challenges for growers. This is symbolised in the altering of payment practices: pre-1995, the price of a cucumber was set in advance and payment would follow immediately; now it takes four to six weeks and the eventual price fluctuates based on the calculated offerings to the supplied retailer and negotiations with the agricultural cooperatives. This contributes to a high degree of perceived economic uncertainty among growers.

While the scalar reshuffling in the course of EU accession led to economic transformations in significant and often detrimental ways from the perspective of greenhouse growers, the new European modalities of mobility policy turned out to be quite advantageous. Whereas former labour recruitment proceeded through state-regulated guestworker programmes, Romanian workers were recruited in increasingly informalised ways until 2003, when visa restrictions were lifted and Romanians in the agricultural sector were granted work permits through the Saisonier-Regelung. Eventually, the Austrian labour market was fully opened to Romanians and Bulgarians on 1 January 2014.

Asked about the differences in recruitment patterns in the course of Austrian EU accession, one grower remembered:

With Romanians, it became way easier in terms of paperwork. But still, it would take weeks for the ministry to confirm that my worker was allowed to work. And the application

procedure was totally dumb (*deppert*): it required that he already resided in my business while applying for the job. Imagine, this worker is sleeping near the greenhouse and is desperate to start working because he needs the money. But our beloved government forbids it. And it's a greenhouse, so my cucumbers grow immensely fast and would rot if no-one picked them. You can imagine that we did not wait until the ministry confirmed it. After 2014, all of this became obsolete as the regulations were lifted. It is easier for everyone now. I don't have to mess with state officials and the workers are happy that they can bring the people they want.

This quote illustrates the withering of state involvement in parallel to the increase of informalised labour recruitment in the greenhouses as a suitable means of keeping production up. Confronted with a dense state bureaucracy, the growers began to prefer Romanian labour to previous forms of contracted migrant labour due to its local availability and convenience. It is seemingly paradoxical that Romanian workers already formed most of the local labour force even though visa restrictions were erased only as late as 2003. Yet, this can be explained by what is commonly observed in the literature as the early characteristics of self-organised migration within Romanian networks, including overstaying visa stays abroad, illegal border crossing and other practices (Horváth and Anghel 2009). As the first arriving, often illegalised workers began to intermediate employment opportunities in the greenhouse to friends and relatives, Romanian workers were soon covering most of the local labour demand, often with lower salaries than their eastern European counterparts. Thus, the eventual easing of visa restrictions in 2003 was only relevant in dislodging major obstacles of recruiting not only workers but also their acquaintances, both close and distant.

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent how growers could navigate the ambivalent effects of EU accession through utilising the expansive Romanian migration: forced to adapt to the new uncertainties caused by economic liberalisation, growers profited from the simultaneity of the large-scale self-organised mobility practices of Romanians and their firstly informal, and later formalised, legal usage, enshrined in the European principle of free movement.

In conclusion, this brief empirical recount of shifting recruitment practices in the greenhouse complex confirms widely evidenced insights about what is sometimes termed the 'Californisation of agriculture'; namely, the meeting of the challenges of retailer-driven agricultural intensification by employing a migrant workforce (Rogaly 2008; Złolnicki 2022). In Austria as elsewhere, the availability of fresh food is dependent on the labouring of others (Bolokan 2022).

A close reading of this process further reveals that, in Austrian greenhouses, not only did the Romanian workers themselves became indispensable for maintaining profitability, but also did their interpersonal relations. As the grower's remark that 'they bring their family, neighbours and what not' illustrates, self-organised mobility among Romanian workers became a self-perpetuating mechanism that met local labour demand in a flexible and reliable manner unmatched by pre-accession labour regimes. Since then, labour intermediation played an integral role for both groups along the wage relation: while it allowed Romanian households to sustain a living outside the drastic domestic liberalisation of the 1990s and 2000s (Stan and Erne 2014), it created recruitment channels for Austrian growers that made Romanian ru-

ral labour directly available. In this context, ‘Ştiu eu pe cineva’ (‘I know someone’) remains a common phrase among Romanian workers when bosses inquire how to fill up vacancies.

To substantiate this view further, the article now turns to an ethnographic examination of labour intermediation and its systemic role for greenhouse businesses in terms of flexibility and profitability.

‘Ştiu eu pe cineva’ – labour and intermediation in Austrian greenhouses

On a hot Sunday afternoon at the end of July, a procedure repeated itself which was observed many times during the fieldwork. I and several workers gathered in front of our dormitory, containing several containers next to the greenhouses. As we chat and recharge from the strains of the working week, I sit next to Aurel and his wife Silvia, both employed now for six years in this business and fourteen years in another business in the greenhouse complex. Next to them sit Silvia’s cousin, a nephew and two friends of the cousin. The two friends are a couple in their early 20s and arrived earlier this year through Silvia’s cousin. All six grew up in the same rural region in western Romania and form the core greenhouse personnel for this year. In addition to us, one worker is employed during the high season between May and September.

That afternoon, we were waiting for the new worker to arrive to substitute for Marius, a former worker who had arrived only two weeks previously through distant acquaintances of Aurel but who had abruptly quit three days ago. Before Marius left, he complained that ‘I work a lot and still I don’t make money. Look at us, we are sweating for nothing’ (*Uită-te la noi, transpirând aici pentru nimic*). Having asked why he does not claim more than his starting wage of 4.80 euros per hour, he waved aside and replied: ‘It’s not worth the effort of making trouble. I would rather move on’ and left for a friend in Belgium who had offered him a job at a construction site. The sudden departure of Marius left a susceptible gap in our greenhouse workforce as it occurred in the middle of high season. The daily cultivation of cucumbers over two hectares of greenhouses by seven workers demanded 66–76 hours of work per week. Having been approached by Harald, the greenhouse owner, for new workers, Aurel thought a bit and responded by saying: ‘ştiu eu pe cineva’. In the evening, he contacted acquaintances on the phone and a friend from Romania mentioned that his cousin Silviu was currently in Germany and looking for new employment.

That Sunday afternoon, Silviu arrived on a private enterprise microbus and was accompanied by three companions with whom he had worked in German agriculture during the weeks before and who were planning to depart further to Italy. As they stood in front of our dormitories, Aurel gave Silviu a brief introduction:

I say this to everyone new here: as you can see by yourself, the money isn’t much. But if you live and work properly, you can make money [se câş gă bani] as much as anywhere else. The only condition is that you cooperate and listen to me. I am not the boss here, Harald is. But I am here for a long time and know things [Ştiu lucrurile]. If this is all fine for you, we would be happy for you to stay. What do you say?

Silviu replied that he planned to stay, but he had some monetary issues since the first salary had not yet been paid. Aurel continued:

Well, that's no problem. Salary is paid every Friday in cash. Tomorrow after work, I can drive you to the supermarket and I can advance the money for the groceries until Friday. Then you return it and from then you can start living here on your own.

The following day, it turned out that not much introduction to the labour rhythms was needed – Silviu was already used to greenhouse-based work, having left when he was seventeen years old for greenhouses in Sicily with his father. The remaining few differences in work procedure were explained in detail by Aurel, taking his time with the new colleague while working. In the remaining three hours after work before we went to sleep, Aurel and I did the groceries in a nearby supermarket with Silviu.

After one week, however, Silviu left the greenhouse noting that he preferred to follow his companions to Italy. Soon after, another worker filled the gap who again arrived through Aurel's networks. Having left his container in a mess, Silvia and I cleaned the place before the new worker arrived.

This short ethnographic vignette is illustrative of the broader labour dynamics observable in Viennese greenhouses. The combination of laborious workdays and unfavourable working conditions results in a high degree of turnover among workers. Over time, this has created a dual pattern among the workforce. On the one hand, workers transition through the greenhouse complex as interim steps in their mobile labour trajectories, working in the greenhouse for several days up to one season. For the sake of illustration, the mentioned container was inhabited by five different people during the four months of my stay. I refer to these workers as more transient workers. On the other, they are accompanied by more long-time workers who are employed in the respective business on a more long-term basis. Employment duration within this second group ranges from three to even thirty years in single cases of workers who had arrived in the early 1990s. I refer to this group as established workers. Within the latter group, specific individual workers, mostly male and in their thirties to fifties, occupy a higher position in the work hierarchy by taking on more complex work duties such as assigning tasks, coordinating different work teams and monitoring orders. Effectively exercising the role of 'supervisor' in the industrialised production regime in the greenhouse, they are usually not financially disbursed as such – at 5.20 euros, Aurel received 40 cents more than his newly arrived counterpart Silviu, despite being in the company for six years longer.

By participating in the workday for four months, I came to recognise the relevance of established workers and the manifold forms of non-remunerated labour that they perform. These range from providing transient workers with basic necessities after their arrival, doing the groceries and organising appointments with official institutions, cleaning abandoned places after workers had left and carrying out the important induction of new workers to the daily labour tasks, as illustrated by the arrival of Silviu. These labours conducted by established workers are neither recognised nor recompensed by the growers, yet they are essential in meeting the daily demands of greenhouse work. This becomes most striking in the field of labour

recruitment. As Aurel’s brother-in-law told me once, while dropping by for dinner in our dormitory kitchen:

He [Aurel] did much here, I can tell. To all of his friends and relatives who were in need of money, he said: come to the greenhouse, come to the greenhouse [hai la sera, hai la sera]. He helped where he could; I also did the same in my firm. And with everyone who came, we showed them the work. How to wind the cucumbers around the ropes, how to care for the plants, how to select the ripe ones, everything. And I never wanted any extra money for it; for me, that would not be ok. I know things so I show them to new workers, that’s normal. But many people leave the greenhouse again, going to Germany, Spain, Italy or elsewhere because the work here is tough and the money is very low.

This latter point was energetically taken up by Aurel, sitting next to him:

You know, this is precisely the point. I get everyone a job here who needed one. Life abroad [viajă în străinătate] is not easy. I experienced it myself and I try my best to help. But Harald always complains that no-one I bring to the greenhouse is reliable because people always leave again. And I always reply that you must give these people more money. 4.80 euros, what is this? People are not dumb – they know what wages they can earn abroad. Thus, many leave again, it’s logical.

This conversation illustrates the central, yet difficult, position of established workers as greenhouse intermediaries. Aurel and his brother-in-law stressed the importance of ‘helping people out’, utilising their established position in Austrian greenhouses to intermediate opportunities to earn money for friends and relatives who were mostly either trying to compensate for insufficient wages in Romania or who were dissatisfied with previous employments in other western European countries. However, due to the low wages, many relatives and peers merely utilise this opportunity temporarily to find more preferable working conditions elsewhere. This creates the shifting nature of the group referred to as transient workers. Furthermore, labour intermediation is enacted as a gendered and generational practice as most established workers are older and male, while younger workers can recommend friends to them who then decide whom to suggest to the grower. Also, almost every worker I met had once brought her children to the greenhouse. During my research, I worked along with five teenagers who had just finished school in Romania and were earning money next to their parents for one season to finance their further education.

Taken together, job intermediation performs a complex function that is situated between both the spheres of ensuring the reproduction of workers’ households and of maintaining production in the greenhouse. Regarding reproduction for transient workers, it is a central mechanism to ensure continuing financial remittances back home by drawing on their extensive transnational relations to find ad hoc employment when necessary. The remarks of transient workers would often echo ‘I want to see how to make money there, too’ (Voivozeanu 2020), before moving on due to the adversity of the conditions of labour. Established workers facilitate movements by providing job opportunities to friends and relatives, as well as manifold forms of support in the course of their arrival. Rather than acting as commercial *tertius gaudens*, established workers form ‘internal’ nodes within the vast transnational migra-

tion networks that span the European economy and tie together Austrian greenhouses with Spanish farms, German construction sites and Italian caregiving sectors through the occupational mobility of transient workers. For both established and transient workers, earnings mostly aim to cover costs in the fields of house construction/renovation, elder care and children's education in Romania. Labour intermediation is thus central in ensuring the reproduction of workers and their domestic households and is embedded in the self-organisation of occupational mobility in the European economy.

In parallel, it performs an integral function for the other side of the wage relation, in this case Austrian growers. The wide-spanning sets of relations in which workers are embedded – constituting the relationality of workers – serves as a remarkable source of value extraction as it is precisely this relationality that growers tap into when they continuously approach established workers about potential new transient ones. By drawing on workers' self-organised mobility, growers can access an available and ad hoc workforce that, cynically speaking, matches well with the flexible demands and rhythms of greenhouse production (Schmidt 2021). Its systemic relevance cannot be underestimated because it functions as a profitable way of evading other costly forms of recruitment through labour agencies or other intermediaries.

The ambiguity of labour intermediation thus lies in its simultaneous valorisation as both a supportive practice that is enacted within close and distant interpersonal relations to cope with economic challenges in a transnationalised Europe (Rubilio 2018) and, thereby, its maintenance of a local, highly exploitative accumulation regime by ensuring the much-needed flow of cheapened migrant labour power to Austrian greenhouses (Rogaly 2021). In light of the former state-bureaucratic forms of recruitment, it becomes clear how intermediated labour recruitment is not only convenient but essential in extracting value, thereby increasing the economic resilience and profitability of greenhouse businesses. Emerging at the same time as the restructuring of the Austrian fresh food sector, intermediated labour recruitment became a central mechanism in coping with the short-term retailer-driven demands for cheap vegetables.

Thus, extracting value from workers' relations becomes a systemic feature of the current labour regime in Austrian greenhouses. Following this thought further, suggests that this constitutes workers in their 'two-fold exploitability': growers capitalise not only on the labour power but also on the relationality of Romanian workers in meeting economic pressures in liberalised European agricultural markets. This type of labour regime taps not only into the productive but the reproductive capacities of workers. Put differently, it is not only the capacity to work, but also the capacity 'să știi pe cineva', to know someone, that became a central aspect in the *Kalkulationsmuster* of Austrian growers (Schmidt 2021).

Finally, this argument is further deepened by considering the domestic context of Romanian workers. Accompanying Aurel and his family on a one-week visit home in western Romania, I asked his younger son (who had also worked in the greenhouse complex for four years) about his upbringing. While we drove through neighbouring villages, he recounted:

You know, the area here is rural and only a few people had a car. What we did was to check every weekend who would have a car available. Thus, I came to know everyone in the region from my generation.

I replied by asking: And when you are in need of work today, you basically ask these people from back then?

Yes sure, we are still very much connected. I mean, our whole region left abroad, but now we have Facebook groups. And anyway, we would meet at Christmas at home, and most of us try to come back more often as Germany and Austria are quite nearby. Look, you see the village we've just passed through? They all work in greenhouses near Nürnberg, Germany. Others are more widespread. I have my family now in Vienna but, theoretically, I could have a job elsewhere by tomorrow – Norway, Italy, France, Ireland, Germany, you name it. But I became used (m-am obișnuit) to Vienna.

As illustrated, interpersonal networks have grown out of the specificities of shared living in rural Romania, which forms the relational basis of the subsequent self-organisation of mobility. In the course of westwards migration, both close and more distant relations are mobilised to find employment abroad while maintaining social ties at home. Frequently, the ability to be engaged in simultaneous settings of domestic life and foreign labour mobility has ambiguous effects as it can outweigh the benefits of a higher wage. Having asked a befriended worker why he left a profitable job in a Dutch greenhouse, he replied:

You know, it is 2000km from the Netherlands to my village in Romania. During the year in the Dutch greenhouse, I didn't see my wife once because she works as a caregiver in Italy and it was not possible to schedule our home visits so that we could see each other. Now, I earn less than half the money than before; however, I could take a bus and arrive in my village in eight hours at any time.

As this statement further demonstrates, the ability of maintaining intimate relations over a distance plays a powerful role in accepting otherwise exploitative working conditions. These statements resonate with what was noted as a frequent practice among established workers: to leave for Romania at weekends in order to meet and cultivate the relational obligations in which they are involved – caring for elders; participating in weddings; doing house maintenance; engaging in communal traditional festivities; and taking care of administrative issues.

It is in this light that exploitation in Austrian greenhouses is further enabled by a certain unintended socio-spatial advantage: as it takes only half a day to reach most villages in western Romania, greenhouse employment affords the possibilities of meeting relational obligations in ways that are not possible in geographically more distant destinations, such as Spain or Italy. Somewhat cynically, this informs the reasoning of especially established workers to accept and get accustomed to otherwise adverse and exploitative working conditions. This adds a further strand to an examination of how value extraction is not limited to productive capacities but also encompasses the reproductive capacities of Romanian workers. Inasmuch as workers assign value to the possibility of meeting relational obligations over distance by being present in back-and-forth movements between Austrian greenhouses and

Romanian villages, they remain in greenhouse employment and thus provide solidity to the smooth continuation of the local labour regime.

Conclusion: the systemic role of migrant labour in segmented labour markets

This article incorporates the argument recently elaborated by Shah and Lerche (2020) that ‘invisible economies of care across the spatiotemporally divided households are shown to be crucial to migrant labour exploitation’ in which ‘the productive and reproductive activities are analytically and empirically intertwined’ (Shah and Lerche 2020: 721ff). It has attempted to specify locally and substantiate ethnographically this broader argument through an examination of the systemic role of self-organised Romanian labour mobility in the Austrian fresh food sector. By going beyond traditional distinctions that analyse labour intermediation either in terms of migration industries or migration networks, it looks at how labour intermediation is embedded in both spheres of reproduction and production, and is enacted along close and distant relational lines.

Thus, the relationality of workers has become valorised as a crucial economic resource, resulting in the maintenance of profitability and resilience for greenhouse businesses in the restructured Austrian agricultural market. Through the dual workforce pattern of established and transient workers, growers are able to tap into the relations that underlie labour intermediation among Romanian workers. The resulting labour regime constitutes Romanian workers in a two-fold exploitability: not only is their labour power subject to value extraction, but so also is their relationality. As such, it foregrounds the reliance of employers on migrant workers but, in addition, on their underlying, socio-spatially separated, interpersonal relations (Shah and Lerche 2020). Reiterating insights from this strand of the migration literature that examines the systemic role of migrant labour in capitalism, the explanatory value of the two-fold exploitability of workers in Austrian greenhouses goes beyond the view that Romanian labour is simply ‘cheaper’ – rather, networks currently form the most available and flexible source of labour power for capital in comparison to other ways of organising local production towards capital accumulation (Burawoy 1976; Shah and Lerche 2020).

Given that 40% of fresh vegetables in Austria are produced in the examined field location, this notion of two-fold exploitability thus denotes a central mechanism that ensures the availability of fresh and cheap vegetables to Austrian dinner tables. In addition to the well-documented workings of Mediterranean agriculture (Corrado et al. 2016; Scott and Rye 2018), this article lays bare a particular facet of the inequalities found in the northern European fresh food sector, which continues to rely ‘on extensive social vulnerability faced by hundreds of thousands of rural Romanians’ (Cosma et al. 2020).

To understand further the underlying regulatory frames that govern vulnerable workforces, recent studies usefully highlight the jurisdictional separation of mobility and social protection policy between national and European law as central aspects in the production of precarious work in Europe (Bogoeski and Costamagna 2022). While this article is limited in accounting for this aspect, it emphasises that further research is needed to examine the multiscalar constituency of agricultural labour

regimes and the legal and political entanglements that sustain precarious and wage-suppressed labour markets.

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