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Categorization and differentiation as ‘useful others’: An intersectional perspective on the European labor market

Abstract: This article examines the ways in which social class, gender, age, and origin interact in European labor markets, with a focus on young mobile individuals (YMI) and their role in maintaining social stability. The study employs qualitative research methods and an intersectional perspective, to examine both the structural categorizations and segregations of these individuals, as well as their representation. The findings elucidate the dual construction of YMI as both culturally foreign and economically valuable, and how social discourses and institutional practices position and evaluate them within capitalist structures. The article underscores the necessity for comprehensive policy and institutional reforms to advance equity in education, labor markets, and social benefits. Furthermore, it recommends that broader comparative and quantitative research be conducted to more closely examine the intersectional challenges and to evaluate the impact of specific policies in this context in a more systematic manner.

Keywords: EU Labor Markets; Neoliberal Capitalism; Migration Policies; Skills shortage; Intersectionality; Precarious Working Conditions; Heteropatriarchal-Colonial Structures

Melanie Fleisch and Lukas Kerschbaumer, Kategorisierung und Differenzierung als „nützliche Andere“: Eine intersektionale Perspektive auf den europäischen Arbeitsmarkt

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht die Art und Weise, wie soziale Klasse, Geschlecht, Alter und Herkunft auf den europäischen Arbeitsmärkten interagieren, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf jungen mobilen Individuen (YMI) und ihrer Rolle bei der Aufrechterhaltung der sozialen Stabilität liegt. Die Studie wendet qualitative Forschungsmethoden und eine intersektionale Perspektive an, um sowohl die strukturellen Kategorisierungen und Segregationen dieser Personen als auch ihre Repräsentation zu untersuchen. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen die doppelte Konstruktion von YMI als sowohl kulturell fremd als auch wirtschaftlich wertvoll, und wie gesellschaftliche Diskurse und institutionelle Praktiken sie innerhalb kapitalistischer Strukturen positionieren und bewerten. Der Artikel unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit umfassender politischer und institutioneller Reformen, um die Chancengleichheit in den Bereichen Bildung, Arbeitsmarkt und Sozialleistungen zu verbessern. Darüber hinaus wird empfohlen, eine breitere vergleichende und quantitative Forschung durchzuführen, um die intersektionalen Herausforderungen genauer zu untersuchen und die Auswirkungen spezifischer politischer Maßnahmen in diesem Kontext systematischer zu bewerten.

Schlüsselwörter: EU-Arbeitsmärkte; Neoliberaler Kapitalismus; Migrationspolitiken; Fachkräftemangel; Intersektionalität; Prekäre Arbeitsverhältnisse; Heteropatriarchal-koloniale Strukturen

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Introduction

“We called for labor and human beings came.” (Max Frisch, 1965)

The European Council’s strategies, including the Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 and Europe 2030, are designed to enhance the competitiveness of the EU and stimulate economic growth, employment, social inclusion and poverty reduction (see European Parliament, 2000; European Commission, 2021, 2011). These strategies place particular emphasis on facilitating rapid integration into the labor market, enhancing individual employability, mobilizing young, qualified workers and liberalizing the internal market (see Klatzer and Schlager, 2012; Treaty on European Union, 1992; Van Berkel et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned initiatives, cross-border mobility within the European Union remains relatively constrained. However, migration plays a significant role in sectors such as healthcare and food production (see Eurostat, 2020; Paul, 2020; Liversage, 2023). The long-term viability of care systems, which are facing challenges due to demographic shifts, is contingent upon the contributions of migrant workers. These workers play a significant role in supporting economic growth and social advancement within the European Union (cf. Fenwick, 2019; Hussein, 2022).

The social consequences for young mobile individuals (YMI) are frequently disregarded. These workers tend to face inferior working conditions, job insecurity and diminished pension benefits relative to native workers (cf. Bridgen et al., 2022; Heindlmaier and Kobler, 2022; Höhne et al., 2014; Paul, 2020;). Migration is a crucial means of addressing the dearth of labor and skilled labor in the EU, as well as of achieving the objectives set forth in the Europe 2020 and 2030 strategies (see Council of the European Union, 2024; Peichl et al., 2022).

At the same time, migration remains a contentious topic. Right-wing extremist tendencies that dehumanize migrants and reject cultural diversity are becoming increasingly prevalent in the discourse (see Decker, 2016; Wodak, 2021). Welfare chauvinism, which demands social benefits only for native citizens, represents a central element

of these discourses (see Decker, 2016). Migrants are frequently depicted as danger to public health and safety, which serves to reinforce xenophobic attitudes (cf. Léonard and Kaunert, 2020; Kessler and Janiszewski, 2023). These narratives promote economic exploitation and precarization by individualizing social inequalities (cf. Kollender and Kourabas, 2020; Lehner, 2019).

EU Labor Migration and the Construction of the “Useful Other”

The acceptance of YMI in Europe is contingent upon their economic utility. While they are welcomed as workers, they are simultaneously exposed to racist discourses and anti-immigrant rhetoric that fosters rejection and discrimination at various levels of society (see Kourabas, 2021). This construction of the “useful other” can be traced back historically to the naturalization of nations and state orders, which provides a legitimizing foundation for hierarchical orders of humanity. Nation-states categorize people according to race, gender, sexuality and religion, and these differentiations are legitimized through processes of naturalization (see Bischof, 2013; Mantz, 2019).

Although YMI in Europe receive support under integration policies, they also face high expectations, reflecting a dual strategy of promoting individual initiative while often receiving inadequate support. The historical guest worker model exemplifies this ambivalence, as migrants were valued for their economic contributions but expected to return home after a set period. This “ambivalent simultaneity” (Kourabas, 2021: 15) demonstrates the persistent and intricate intertwining of integration and exclusion in contemporary political and social discourses (see Kollender and Kourabas, 2020).

The contemporary right-wing discourse has given new life to the concept of the “useful other”, which originated in the guest worker model. This discourse demands that migrants return to their countries of origin after completing their work (see Schiretz, 2023). This perspective exploits the labor of foreign nationals while simultaneously devaluing them in racially discriminatory ways and underscoring their own nationalistic identities (cf. Ha, 2018). At the European level, YMI are differentiated according to the country of origin. There are disparate rights afforded to EU citizens and those from the European Economic Area in comparison to non-EU citizens. From a social and cultural perspective, foreigners are frequently perceived as a potential threat to the perceived homogeneity of a given society and are often marginalized (see Ha, 2018; Steuten, 2019).

In a capitalist-neoliberal society, the concept of the “binary construction of the other” (Jain, 2018: 266) becomes more complex. Those entering the system do so within a hierarchical structure that is driven by colonial and heteropatriarchal logics, which exploit differences as economic resources (cf. Grosfoguel, 2011; Mantz, 2019). As cultural differences gain significance in the modern economy, new distinctions are continually created to sustain capitalism’s economic foundation (see Mantz, 2019 after Lash & Urry 1996).

As Jain (2018) posits, the construction of the “useful other” serves as a political mechanism for differentiation and exploitation in neoliberal societies. In this frame-

work, the distinction between “bad others” and “good us” becomes less significant, with factors such as origin, gender, class, and age regulating and differentiating YMI. Labor migration policies exploit these categories to regulate the distribution of workers. Those with high-level skills face fewer obstacles to obtaining work permits, whereas those with low-level skills face more significant barriers. The gendered division of labor is often shaped by gender roles, with YMI occupying demanding or low-wage jobs. Furthermore, age and origin criteria impact job allocation through the implementation of specific programs and quotas (cf. Bartig, 2022; Degele and Winker, 2008; Jain, 2018; Rinne et al., 2011).

Hierarchical classifications perpetuate national and global inequalities by naturalizing supposedly inherent characteristics (see Castro Varela, 2007; Mantz, 2019; Recci, 2014). In the context of the global market, differences are frequently regarded as beneficial for a flexible and cost-effective workforce (see Grosfoguel, 2011; Ha, 2018; Jain, 2018). Nevertheless, the socio-cultural and political participation of these communities may be constrained if they are perceived as incompatible (cf. Steuten, 2019). The construction of groups as “others” is contingent upon processes of differentiation and the prevailing power of interpretation, which are shaped by global power relations (cf. Erel, 2018; Castro Varela, 2007; Ha 2018; Jain, 2018; Mantz, 2019).

This paper examines the categorization and segregation of YMI as ‘useful others’ in the European labor market. The objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of labor migration in an aging society. To this end, the analysis will take into account both structural and symbolic factors at the macro and meso levels. The study considers the intersections of various social categories, including gender, origin, age, and class, within the context of a neoliberal capitalist society. The research is concerned with the obstacles encountered by YMI in accessing the labor market. These include regulations pertaining to residence, work permits, social benefits, the recognition of qualifications and age restrictions. Moreover, the study investigates the availability of employment opportunities, with a particular focus on reproductive work such as care work. The primary focus of the analysis is on the Austrian labor market at the meso level, with Germany, Switzerland, and Poland serving as comparison countries at the macro level.

Hierarchical Differentiation in the Labor Market: Neoliberal Capitalist, Colonial, and Heteropatriarchal Influences

In the context of the global labor market and European migration policy, nationality, citizenship and residence status are pivotal elements in the governance of labor migration and the concomitant rights and obligations (cf. Jain, 2018). The variability of these regulations within the EU has a significant impact on access to the labor market, working conditions and social integration for EU citizens, third-country nationals, persons with subsidiary protection, refugees and asylum seekers (cf. Mantz, 2019; Soiland, 2008).

The neoliberal capitalist model, which has been the dominant economic and social paradigm since the 1970s, has a profound impact on the economic and social order of the EU. The neoliberal approach to economic policy places emphasis on the role of free markets, privatization, and deregulation as means of reducing state intervention in order to promote competition and efficiency. This form of capitalism is closely associated with historical imperial and colonial legacies (see Mantz, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In the context of labor market policies, this colonial logic is exemplified by a nuanced form of expansion that exploits labor from lower-income regions without the necessity of direct territorial control or physical occupation outside of Europe (see Ha, 2018).

Furthermore, the global dissemination of neoliberal capitalism is accompanied by heteropatriarchal logics, which manifest themselves in precarious working conditions and a decline in social services within the European Union. In particular, the demand for mobile and low-cost workers is increasing in the care sector, where predominantly female migrants provide essential services (see Erel, 2018; Castro Varela, 2007; Gündüz 2013). This phenomenon, which Yeates (2011) refers to as the “transnationalization of care”, is further reinforced by demographic shifts and the integration of privileged women into the labor market. Both productive and reproductive labor are inextricably linked to colonial-national and heteropatriarchal logics and a neoliberal order (cf. Bischof, 2013; Ha, 2018; Mantz, 2021).

The text elucidates the manner in which inequalities are shaped by patriarchal traditions, colonial-national structures, and neoliberal economic forms. It underscores the significance of grasping the mechanisms of hierarchization and the production and reproduction of Western capitalist societies through the lenses of class, gender, age, and origin (cf. Soiland, 2008). The concept of intersectionality is employed to elucidate the intricate intertwining of segregation and organizational mechanisms, particularly in the context of YMI. This group encompasses migrants from the European Union and third countries, in addition to asylum seekers, refugees, and individuals who have been displaced. Due to their age and mobility, YMI occupy a distinctive position in an aging society, frequently being subjected to categorization as either “useful” or “useless” others.

In their 2008 article, Degele and Winker posit that intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines the intricate interconnections between social categories, which operate within social and institutional structures (macro and meso levels), identity formation processes (micro level), and cultural symbols (representational level). They argue that this framework is particularly useful for understanding how social inequalities are reinforced. The authors underscore the pivotal role of age as a social category in neoliberal societies, emphasizing its impact on the valuation of labor and access to resources.

Methodological approach

The analytical model for examining the “useful other” in the EU is based on the multi-level analysis framework developed by Degele and Winker (2008). This model considers the impact of categories at the micro level, the logic of capitalist accumulation at the macro level, and ideological justifications at the representational level. The primary focus is on the macro and meso levels, which are employed for the purpose of analyzing the mechanisms of segregation within the European labor market. This analysis encompasses an examination of access to employment, reproductive labor, employment opportunities, and disparities in wages and social security. At the symbolic level, the ideologies that justify social inequalities are subjected to close rigorous scrutiny.

In the initial research phase, a comprehensive analysis of legal texts, government documents, statistical reports, international documents and academic studies from Austria, Germany, Poland and Switzerland was conducted at the macro level from 2010 to 2022. The research encompassed an array of legal and socio-economic domains, including immigration and labor laws, visa and residence regulations, integration strategies, and demographic and labor market data. The countries were selected for analysis in order to consider both the established migration and integration policies of the D-A-CH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) and Poland’s perspective as a “new immigration country”.

A combination of qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015) and sociological discourse analysis in alignment with Keller (2007) was employed to document the structural and symbolic dimensions of the construction of “useful others”. The qualitative content analysis concentrated on the relations between class, gender, origin and age relations and examined documents on topics such as “integration”, “usefulness”, “rights and duties”, “educational opportunities”, “access to the labor market” and “social security”. Systematic coding was employed to identify discrepancies and patterns in the labor market access conditions and the rights and obligations of disparate groups.

The application of sociological discourse analysis facilitated an investigation into the ways in which individuals are symbolically categorised as ‘useful others’ at the macro, meso, and micro levels. This entailed an examination of the role of specific discourses in the (re)production and legitimization of social hierarchies. The analysis concentrated on the portrayal of genders, age groups, ethnic groups, and social classes, as well as discourses on migration as either a threat or an economic resource.

In the second phase of the study, the meso-level was examined in order to gain detailed insights into the institutional dimensions of labor migration in Austria. Eighteen expert interviews were conducted in the regions of Tyrol, Vienna, Lower Austria, and Burgenland. The interviewees were representatives of organizations in the fields of economics, integration, labor markets, social services, and education, including chambers of commerce, integration funds, and advisory services. Austria was selected as a representative case study within the European Union for a number of reasons,

including its central geographical location, significant economic and political influence, historical experience of migration, and institutional structures that are comparable to those of other member states, such as Germany. This focus enabled the targeted management of data and a comprehensive analysis of the expert statements.

A qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2015) was employed to examine the structural dimensions of labor migration. A coding system based on Degele and Winker (2008) was utilized to encode the interviews, thereby capturing reflections of social class, gender, ethnicity, and age in institutional regulations. The analysis concentrated on the following area: access requirements and recognition of qualifications (class), gender-specific regulations in the care sector (gender), residency rights and integration measures (origin), and regulations for young and older (age) individuals. A discourse analysis (Keller, 2007) was conducted to examine the symbolic dimension, investigating the discursive representations and legitimizations of social classes, genders, ethnic groups, and age groups in institutional regulations.

The objective of the analysis is to demonstrate how individuals are constituted as “useful others” within the economic and social context of neoliberal capitalism. This is achieved by examining the operation of power relations, including those relating to class, gender, ethnicity, and age, at both the structural and symbolic levels. The analysis also considers the ways in which these distinctions serve to legitimize and maintain economic and social inequalities.

Examining the Construction of the “Useful Other”: Macro- and Meso-Level Insights

The following section presents an analysis of the macro and meso levels for each category. At the macro level, the conditions in Austria, Germany, Poland, and Switzerland are examined in order to gain an understanding of the general contexts and regulations related to the construction of the “useful other”. The meso level is dedicated to a detailed examination of Austria, with the objective of gaining insights into the institutional and symbolic dimensions of labor migration and its regulation.

Gender

The social, cultural, and structural factors that shape gender relations are numerous and complex. In a neoliberal, capitalist societal framework that is permeated by colonial and heteropatriarchal logics, female YMI experience specific forms of discrimination and disadvantage. In the European Union, women from non-EU countries, in particular, play a pivotal role in addressing the mounting demand for care services, largely due to the aging population. The increasing demand for care workers is inextricably linked to migration policies and the transformation of gender roles. In numerous European countries, particular regulations and challenges pertain to migrant women in the care sector.

In Germany, the Care Strengthening Act of 2023 has facilitated the integration of academic studies and vocational training in nursing, as well as the immigration of

nursing professionals. However, stringent standards and language proficiency requirements still pose significant barriers for many migrant women (see Sell, 2019). In Austria, the Nursing Reform 2022–2024 has revised the assessment of foreign nursing qualifications to enable a comprehensive evaluation of qualifications and experience. This reform allows trained nursing assistants to work under supervision, facilitating a quicker entry into the profession (see Federal Ministry for Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection, 2024). In Switzerland, the aging population, coupled with racism and discrimination against migrant healthcare professionals, presents additional challenges (see Merçay et al., 2021; Zünd, 2023). A significant portion of home care is provided by female family members, raising issues regarding the recognition and compensation of their work, particularly in relation to pension entitlements (see Fluder et al., 2016). Similarly, in Poland, as in other countries, the care of elderly and dependent individuals is primarily provided by family members. However, this tradition is being challenged by the increasing mobility of families. The mobility of younger generations may reduce the availability of familial support (cf. Sowa-Kofta et al., 2021).

These measures and regulations in different countries demonstrate the intertwined nature of migration and gender policies and the structural and symbolic barriers that female YMI, particularly in the care sector, must overcome.

Meso-level

In Austria, the male breadwinner model is the prevailing social structure, with men occupying the primary role as earners and women assuming a supportive position. This traditional gender order, which is supported by patriarchal norms, views women’s employment as a secondary priority. This perspective has a detrimental impact on women’s professional prospects, particularly those who are subjected to additional racial prejudice. Discourses that portray women as the natural caregivers for children and households serve to reinforce these patriarchal structures. The assumption that women should assume these roles is frequently justified on the grounds of biology and naturalism, thereby further restricting their professional participation.

“Women have the household, children, and education. They have several topics that automatically connect. (...) But with men and women, it becomes difficult.” (EXPERT 15)¹

A significant structural impediment to women’s professional advancement is the dearth of accessible childcare facilities. In a heteropatriarchal society, women are typically tasked with the responsibility of childcare, which subsequently diminishes their economic independence and career prospects. This disadvantage is further compounded by societal norms that tend to position women in the role of primary caregivers. In a neoliberal framework, the responsibility is shifted from the collective to the individual, with the state failing to provide collective solutions.

1 Representative of a Refugee Support Organization for Women.

“There are far too few full-day childcare facilities. Women often come to us for advice too late to even arrange childcare. (...) It’s women, mothers, who have to take care, and it makes it more difficult to engage with women.” (EXPERT 10)²

The emphasis on workplace flexibility to reconcile work and family life serves to reinforce traditional gender roles by framing part-time work as a women’s issue and maintaining men as the primary earners.

“It is socially accepted to work part-time if I have dependent relatives or need childcare. But if I now want to work only 32 hours because of my dog (...), that is seen as provocation.” (EXPERT 02)³

The structure and culture of work are significantly influenced by heteropatriarchal, colonial, and neoliberal ideologies. The prevailing patriarchal norms situate women primarily within the maternal and caregiving roles, frequently confining them to part-time positions within the labor market. This effectively limits their professional recognition and career advancement opportunities. Furthermore, colonial logics serve to exacerbate this discrimination by amplifying differences in origin and social class. Consequently, women from lower social strata are more frequently compelled to take on part-time or precarious jobs that accommodate familial obligations. In neoliberal capitalism, part-time work is accepted only when it serves the purpose of profit maximization, particularly in fulfilling family caregiving responsibilities. Other reasons, such as individual interests or professional development, are viewed as less legitimate.

The objective of women’s empowerment programs is to facilitate greater access to the labor market and social inclusion. However, these initiatives often perpetuate deeply entrenched hetero-patriarchal and colonial structures that create additional hurdles for women from specific countries of origin. These programs are frequently situated within a neoliberal context that prioritizes individual adaptation and personal responsibility over the promotion of structural and collective change.

“Women from Afghanistan have a very low level of education (...) women from Syria, Iran and Iraq have very good qualifications. (...) In Afghanistan, you can see that the oppression of women is progressing. (...) They are so insecure and so shy, so dependent and so un-independent.” (EXPERT 07)⁴

“It’s a gender issue that women find it easier to accept help than men. (...) women are often single parents, (..) do not receive child support payments and do not sue for them because it is too tedious (...). At the same time, however, they can no longer work because they have childcare responsibilities.” (EXPERT 05)⁵

The fact that women seek counseling reflects both their precarious situation and the discursive construction of migrant women as needy, which fails to acknowledge their

2 Team Leader at an Employment and Integration Services Organization.

3 Coordinator of a Mentoring Program within an Economic Interest Group.

4 Representative of a Regional Social Services Organization.

5 Managing Director of a Social Innovation and Integration Company.

abilities and potential. A significant number of the initiatives implemented have been demonstrated to be ineffective and transient, which has the effect of undermining the long-term support of the women in question. YMI faces significant challenges in the labor market due to structural discrimination and racial prejudice. The neoliberal capitalist system frequently forces women into low-paid, insecure employment, particularly in the health and care sector, where gendered divisions of labor are reinforced by stereotypical and paternalistic attitudes. The reduction in funding for women’s empowerment programs in recent years (see Bonavida, 2023; Glösel, 2018; Vienna.at, 2023) illustrates the precarious nature of support within patriarchal structures and demonstrates that the advancement of women is often overlooked in times of uncertainty.

Age

The age structure of the European labor market is becoming increasingly defined by the role of YMI. In a neoliberal capitalist society, the value of YMI is increasingly recognized as a means of addressing demographic shifts and skill shortages. This re-evaluation demonstrates the intimate connection between age structures, social integration, and economic optimization concerns.

The German government’s “Chancenkarte” initiative is designed to attract qualified workers, with a particular emphasis on younger mobile individuals, who are accorded higher scores in the selection process (see German Bundestag, 2023). In Austria, the Red-White-Red Card has also contributed to the preference for YMI. The card permits qualified workers from third countries to work and reside in Austria. In order to enhance economic productivity, younger applicants receive a higher number of points in the points system (see Migration.gv.at).

In Poland and Switzerland, foreign workers are not evaluated according to a points system. However, other examples from these countries illustrate how age ratios intersect with gender and class relations.

As previously stated, in Poland, the care of older relatives is typically the responsibility of female family members. However, the mobility of the younger generation is challenging this tradition. The departure of young family members often results in a dearth of care workers for older relatives, thereby exacerbating the burden on remaining family members and the need for formal care workers (cf. Sowa-Kofta et al., 2021). The aging migrant population in Switzerland presents a number of specific challenges, including those related to access to healthcare and the potential for discrimination. As the population continues to age, there is an increasing demand on the healthcare system and social support structures, which are ill-equipped to meet this challenge. Concurrently, initiatives are being implemented with the objective of reducing the reliance on foreign labor from younger, mobile individuals (cf. Schilliger and Schilling, 2017; Zünd, 2023).

These measures and regulations demonstrate the interconnection between migration and age-related issues, as well as the structural barriers that both younger and older

mobile individuals must surmount. It is noteworthy that age constitutes a specific form of discrimination within the framework of EU law. In accordance with Article 6(1) of the Employment Equality Directive, Member States may justify age discrimination if it is objectively and reasonably justified by legitimate national objectives. Age-related distinctions may be pursued for social and economic goals, such as considering experience or financial stability (see Benecke, 2010; O'Connide, 2005). In neoliberal discourse, age is primarily characterized by aspects such as youth, fitness, and health. This leads to an individualized responsibility for health and performance, which in turn influences access to the labor market and social status (cf. Degele and Sobiech, 2008; Degele and Winker, 2008).

Meso-level

Both older and younger mobile individuals encounter distinctive challenges in the labor market. Older workers frequently encounter difficulties in identifying positions that align with their extensive experience. Conversely, younger individuals, particularly those under the age of 25, often face challenges in accessing sufficient guidance and support. Access to education and the labor market represents a significant challenge for this age group. Notwithstanding the existence of programs such as youth coaching, a dearth of sustained assistance persists following the transition into the workforce.

“Youth coaching is excellent, but as soon as individuals start something new, such as a course or an apprenticeship, the coaching ends.” (EXPERT 04)⁶

The neoliberal logic of short-term profit maximization and efficiency ignores the necessity of long-term integration and support for YMI. As a result, they are frequently compelled to assume roles that are perceived as “shortage occupations”, which constrains their potential for professional advancement.

“There are many young people who are very motivated, but they lack the formal competencies. They end up doing tasks such as kitchen help or dishwashing (...) where there is no opportunity for further qualification (...) it's just about cheap labor.” (EXPERT 06)⁷

A further issue is that of the recognition of qualifications. It can be observed that YMI from countries of origin that exhibit economic and cultural similarities to the destination country typically experience a more straightforward integration process. Nevertheless, they continue to confront bureaucratic impediments and an arduous recognition process. One expert explains:

“Most of our clients are under 30, however our aging society offers potential synergies. Their different social conditions or attitudes towards older generations

6 Team Leader at an Employment and Integration Services Organization.

7 Representative of a Regional Social Services Organization.

facilitate better relations with older employees, which makes it much easier for older employees to relate to them. (...) They are always seen as the boss or addressed as ‘mom,’ ‘dad,’ or ‘uncle.’ Younger employees are viewed as equals, but when someone is clearly older, they simply comply.” (EXPERT 06)

It becomes evident that the cultural values of YMI are aligned with the established norms of the older, native generation with the objective of fostering potential synergies and mutual benefits. The “us/them” structures that depict older native generations as norm carriers and YMI as “others” reflect not only cultural adaptation requirements but also the legacy of colonial hierarchies. In this context, the older native generation is regarded as the custodian of the established dominant culture, whereas YMI are required to adapt to these norms in order to achieve social and economic advancement. This illustrates the persistence of colonial power relations in contemporary labor market and integration discourses, whereby YMI are classified as subordinate and their integration is portrayed as a process of adaptation to the dominant culture.

In the context of the care sector, this issue is particularly evident in the stereotypical assignment of migrant women, which is predicated on biologicistic discourses that ascribe ostensibly “natural” care competencies to them on the basis of their country of origin and gender.

“No one leaves Syria or Somalia with the goal of becoming a care worker here. However, among these groups, there is an immense potential to enter these professions because they have a very different attitude towards interpersonal relationships and, especially, towards older people. In many of these societies, caregiving is still handled within the family.” (EXPERT 06)⁸

The practice of stereotyping in the labor market has the effect of marginalizing individuals by limiting them to certain occupational fields and failing to take into account their individual abilities. The biologicistic discourse, which places emphasis on characteristics that are perceived to be innate, impedes the professional development of these individuals and serves to reinforce colonial power relations and discrimination within the context of neoliberal capitalism. In this context, YMI are regarded as valuable workers who are willing to accept precarious working conditions and work overtime.

“If they don’t have the formal qualification, I don’t have to pay them as a specialist. But (...) companies are happy to have people who actually support them in their work and thus also bring economic success with them.” (EXPERT 12)⁹

In contrast, young people from the host country are seen as unwilling to work,

“Generation management is the biggest issue (...), the young are lazy and the old can’t really do anything anymore, but the older employee is doing overtime.” (EXPERT 02)¹⁰

8 Representative of a Social Welfare Organization.

9 Coordinator of a Mentoring and Youth Support Organization.

10 Coordinator of a Mentoring Program within an Economic Interest Group.

Conversely, they are regarded as a potential source of optimism, with the expectation that they will contribute novel insights and a more receptive approach to migration at the managerial level. This reflects a colonial mindset that views native young people as a valuable and superior resource.

“Older people have a different approach to the issue of migration than younger generations, (...) you can already see that there are many people at management level who have no problem with whether this woman is called Öztürk or Maier.” (EXPERT 08)¹¹

In neoliberal capitalism, YMI are regarded as valuable workers due to their willingness to perform tasks in challenging circumstances. Such willingness serves to legitimize their integration into precarious positions that native workers tend to eschew.

“In many areas, it is difficult to find an Austrian worker. They say, I’m not interested, I don’t work ten hours a day under those conditions for that salary.” (EXPERT 08)

Origin

The labor market integration of YMI is inextricably linked to their origin and colonial logics, which serve to reinforce stereotypical ideas about identity at the symbolic level and create additional obstacles, including limited access to employment and educational opportunities and limited support at the structural level.

In the context of migration research, the category of origin is of central importance and must be considered when analyzing other social categories and their intertwining. The concept of origin, frequently associated with factors such as nationality, sovereignty, and political alliances, exerts a considerable influence on the relationships and interactions between these categories. National affiliation plays a pivotal role, influencing not only individual life trajectories but also the structural conditions of migration and integration. The concept of origin has a profound impact on the formation of national and international relations, informing migration policy decisions and, consequently, the interpretation and evaluation of other social categories. The status of citizenship plays a pivotal role in the formulation of migration policies and exerts a considerable influence on the living conditions and rights of YMI in destination countries (cf. Ha, 2018; Steuten, 2019). This can be exemplified by the case of Ukrainian citizens.

In Germany, Ukrainian citizens are entitled to receive more comprehensive social benefits, such as the “citizenship money”, which offers higher support without the restrictions of the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act, which only allows for basic care during the asylum procedure (see Information Network on Asylum and Migration). Asylum seekers are permitted to engage in certain facilities during the asylum procedure, however, the maximum hourly wage is set at 80 cents, which represents a significantly con-

11 Advisor at an Occupational Health and Employment Support Program.

strained opportunity for gainful employment (see German Bundestag, 2015). Similarly, the 2017 Integration Act in Austria employs a “promote and demand” approach, necessitating participation in German language and orientation courses to qualify for social benefits (see Österreich.gv.at, 2020; ÖIF). Third-country nationals are only entitled to minimum benefits after five-years period of residence, whereas recognized refugees are entitled to them from the moment they are granted refugee status. Asylum seekers are not eligible for these benefits and are only entitled to basic social services (see BGBl. I Nr. 80/2004). Nevertheless, individuals from Ukraine have been granted temporary protection status under the EU Directive on Temporary Protection (2001/55/EC). This entitles them to immediate access to social benefits, including basic care and subsequently to minimum security benefits. Furthermore, they are permitted to engage in employment from the initial day of their registration (ÖIF).

Since 2008, Switzerland has pursued an integration policy that is also based on the “promote and demand” principle, which, as in Germany and Austria, entails a pronounced sense of nationalistic and cultural exclusion. Additionally, specific regulations pertain to individuals from Ukraine. The so-called S-status is conferred without the necessity of a formal asylum procedure, thereby entitling individuals to accommodation, medical care and social assistance. Furthermore, Ukrainian citizens are permitted to enter the labor market without first undergoing a formal asylum procedure (cf. Dahinden, 2022; Manser-Egli 2023; Piñeiro et al., 2009; Wicker 2009).

In Poland, analogous structures can be observed, yet the demarcations are drawn with even greater explicitness. While undocumented migrants crossing the Polish-Belarusian border are rigorously turned back, a special law (*Specustawa*) has been enacted for Ukrainian war refugees, granting them extensive rights and support, including social benefits that were previously reserved for Polish citizens (cf. Andrejuk, 2023; Bodnar and Grzelak, 2023; HFHR, 2022; Zdanowicz, 2023). This disparate treatment of asylum seekers is indicative of a politically motivated divergence in integration policy, particularly in comparison to the strict migration policy towards other asylum seekers.

These examples illustrate how migration policy is influenced by political and social factors, and how these factors shape the experiences of YMI across various countries. At the meso level, these examples demonstrate how differences in treatment and specific institutional conditions have an additional impact on integration.

Meso-level

The preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees in Austria compared to other asylum seekers exemplifies a discriminatory migration policy that reflects historical and cultural prejudices. The EU Temporary Protection Directive, which has only been applied on a single occasion thus far, confers upon Ukrainians a series of specific privileges that facilitate enhanced opportunities in the labor market and with respect to social benefits. Conversely asylum seekers from other regions frequently encounter

skepticism and are compelled to accept positions that offer minimal social recognition and economic stability.

“The EU’s Temporary Protection Directive has been applied to Ukrainian refugees for the first time, they have freedom of movement throughout the EU. (...), free access to the labor market and don’t have to go through the asylum process.” (EXPERT 01)¹²

This differentiated perception reflects deeply rooted power structures and cultural prejudices that serve to reinforce inequality and have a negative impact on employment opportunities, housing and social integration.

“It is difficult to find a job and to keep it. It is certainly a challenge to adapt to the conditions that we have here and to understand how things work. (...) but the way the system is set up, it doesn’t work.” (EXPERT 05)¹³

YMI from disparate countries of origin experience different treatment. Ukrainian refugees receive preferential support, whereas asylum seekers from the Global South are disadvantaged. This unequal treatment is indicative of the persistence of colonial ideologies and serves to perpetuate existing power structures and discriminatory practices.

“The wave of solidarity with the persons from Ukraine was very strong (...). They are more similar to us in appearance, they almost have the right religion, (...) the further away from Austria, the more difficult it is for the sides to get along with each other.” (EXPERT 06)¹⁴

The concept of a dominant culture has a profound effect on the integration of YMI, with language occupying a pivotal position. A lack of proficiency in the German language can impede social and economic participation, thereby reinforcing colonial and neoliberal power structures. The assumption that certain migrant groups are more valuable is supported by colonial logics, while neoliberal logics place the responsibility for integration, including language acquisition, on the YMI themselves without providing adequate resources. These dynamics serve to reinforce existing power structures and inequalities, given the absence or inadequacy of the necessary structural support.

“We have a lack of German courses and German teachers, (...). There are German courses, but people are usually on the waiting list. And if there is no budget, there are none at all.” (EXPERT 09)¹⁵

12 Representative of an Asylum Advocacy Group.

13 Representative of a Social Innovation and Integration Company.

14 Representative of a Regional Social Services Organization.

15 Representative of a Migrant Integration and Employment Support Organization.

Class

The relationship between class and access to the labor market and the availability of educational resources is shaped by the disparities in education and qualifications that are reflective of class relations. These discrepancies influence the prospective career pathways and social integration prospects of YMI, and are particularly salient in the context of the current dearth of skilled laborers.

In Germany, the law on the recognition of foreign professional qualifications (BQFG) regulates recognition, whereby the 2023 Skilled Workers Immigration Act prioritizes non-regulated professions regardless of training and recognizes professional experience without formal qualifications through a point system (see BMAS, 2022; Recognition in Germany, 2021).

In Austria, the Foreign Employment Act, which was introduced in 2022, is designed to facilitate access to the labor market for skilled workers from third countries and address the labor shortage in various sectors. The Red-White-Red Card initiative is designed to attract highly qualified individuals to Austria. Reforms to the points system have facilitated access to the labor market by re-evaluating the importance of age and professional experience, and by introducing English language proficiency as a new point criterion, in addition to German language proficiency (cf. Fassmann, 2013; Heilemann, 2020).

In Switzerland, a demand-oriented system regulates the admission of third-country nationals, with only those who are absolutely necessary being admitted as qualified workers. Since 2019, provisionally admitted persons and recognized refugees have been allowed to work anywhere within Switzerland. Asylum seekers, like in other countries, are subject to a general employment ban for the first three months after submitting their application, although there are significant differences between the cantons (cf. Aerne and Bonoli 2021; Asil.ch 2022; Leyvraz et al., 2020; Malka, 2024; SEM, 2023). In contrast, Poland has undergone a significant demographic shift, evolving from an emigration to an immigration country over the past decade (see Okólski, 2021). However, there is a dearth of a unified strategic document on migration policy. The regulation of various aspects of migrants' lives is the responsibility of different ministries, which gives rise to coordination problems. The primary point of contention is the tension between economic necessity and the imperative of national security. A migration strategy proposal from 2021 met with significant public resistance and did not proceed to a vote in parliament (see Łodzinski and Szonert, 2023).

The national integration strategies for YMI strongly emphasize qualifications and work experience to combat the shortage of skilled workers, reflecting the neoliberal focus on efficiency. The disparate political and regulatory approaches have a considerable impact on the career prospects of YMI.

Meso-level

Access to education, particularly language courses, is of paramount importance for the integration of YMI, and is significantly shaped by class affiliation. It has been observed by experts in the field that the number of German language courses available within the basic care system is limited. Furthermore, it has been noted that refugees originating from countries with a high probability of recognition, such as Syria, are often granted preferential access to these courses, while others are frequently excluded. Regional disparities, such as the allocation of a dedicated budget (EXPERT 06) for German language instruction in Tyrol, exemplify the influence of social inequities on access to integration resources and the labor market.

“As long as people are in the asylum process, they are not entitled to a German course, only those from exceptional nations with a high probability of being recognized or allowed to stay.” (EXPERT 12)¹⁶

YMI with academic qualifications benefit in the labor market, whereas YMI from countries with less developed educational systems encounter considerable integration challenges. In a neoliberal economic system, educational deficits are frequently perceived as individual shortcomings, thereby obscuring structural inequalities and rationalizing precarious working conditions rather than addressing unequal starting points and inadequate social support.

“Especially Syria women are often disappointed (...). We always explain that even we had to work hard to become qualified. Then they realize, even those born here had to work and prove themselves to achieve their goals.” (EXPERT 07)¹⁷

The relationship between social and economic class and access to housing and employment opportunities is a significant factor in contemporary society. YMI frequently encounter difficulties in locating suitable and affordable housing, as high demand and limited supply in desirable locations force them into precarious living situations.

“Most clients find work before securing housing.” (EXPERT 08)¹⁸

“Housing is a constant issue in Tyrol, with many, especially those with positive status, being hidden homeless.” (EXPERT 09)¹⁹

The insecure housing situation of YMI is indicative of a more profound symbolic marginalization, which in turn affects their social and cultural capital. Inadequate housing reinforces prejudices and discrimination, which in turn lead to perceptions of lower integration and capability. Housing access issues are frequently misattributed to personal failure, thereby exacerbating social inequalities and segregation. The absence

16 Coordinator of a Mentoring and Youth Support Organization.

17 Representative of a Refugee Support Organization for Women.

18 Advisor at an Occupational Health and Employment Support Program.

19 Representative of a Migrant Integration and Employment Support Organization.

of political and social support results in individuals residing in substandard housing being forced into suboptimal living conditions, thereby exacerbating the challenges associated with securing adequate housing.

“The challenge is that if individuals on basic security start working, they lose their basic security benefits, which include housing.” (EXPERT 02)²⁰

A discrepancy between the qualifications required for a position and the qualifications possessed by the available candidates frequently results in suboptimal employment conditions.

The non-recognition of foreign qualifications forces highly skilled individuals into low-paid positions, which reflects the neoliberal labor market’s emphasis on flexibility. This dynamic results in a disproportionate concentration of young, mobile individuals in the low-wage sector, where roles are typically characterized by low qualification requirements and high turnover rates. This offers limited opportunities for professional development or social integration (cf. Carstensen et al., 2018). Consequently, the targeted recruitment of foreign workers for these positions addresses short-term economic demands but also serves to perpetuates structural inequalities. For instance, second-generation migrants from low-income families may attain higher levels of education than their parents, yet this does not necessarily result in more favorable economic outcomes compared to their native peers (see Zuccotti and Platt, 2023).

Furthermore, second-generation immigrant women frequently encounter obstacles to upward social mobility, as they must negotiate traditional gender roles that may conflict with their career aspirations. In contrast, men more often benefit from conventional arrangements that prioritize their careers (see Nadim and Midtbøen, 2023). This situation reinforces existing social inequalities and perpetuate heteropatriarchal and colonial biases that systematically disadvantage certain groups. Moreover, the deterioration of the welfare state and reduction of social expenditure intensify the sense of insecurity pertaining to pension and social security systems, thereby further constraining opportunities for integration.

Discussion

This paper examines the construction of YMI in the European labor market as “useful others” under neoliberal capitalism. This construction reflects both structural and symbolic dimensions shaped by political and institutional frameworks. It is influenced by a number of factors, including gender, origin, age, and class relations, and takes place within a heteropatriarchal-colonial context.

From a macro perspective, state-level regulations, including those pertaining to residence and educational qualifications, exert a considerable influence on the accessibility of employment opportunities and the receipt of social benefits. At the meso level, the recognition of qualifications and the availability of suitable employment opportunities

20 Coordinator of a Mentoring Program within an Economic Interest Group.

are of paramount importance. The analysis demonstrates that YMI in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Poland frequently occupy insecure employment, particularly in the health and social sectors, thereby reinforcing existing segregation.

A neoliberal capitalist system gives rise to a multifaceted classification of “foreigners”, wherein YMI are regarded as beneficial if they provide economic advantages but are expected to align with cultural norms. Despite employment and social changes, hierarchization persists, with new distinctions being justified by colonial, heteropatriarchal, and neoliberal structures. This reflects Kourabas’ concept of “ambivalent simultaneity”, which demonstrates the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of YMI, akin to a “reserve army of migrants” (Robinson and Santos, 2014) in which individuals are marginalized at varying levels of the hierarchy.

The analysis reveals that young female mobile individuals are subjected to a distinct form of segregation that is closely associated with their engagement in reproductive labor. The employment of women from the Global South and Eastern Europe in the care sector has been increasing, a field that is distinguished by significant gender-specific and geographical inequalities. These workers are frequently subjected to insecure working conditions, which serve to further marginalize their social and economic positions.

The concept of the “useful other” emerges from the intricate interweaving of age, class, origin, gender, and neoliberal discourses, which assess certain labor forces as economically beneficial and culturally aligned. In this context, YMI from specific regions are preferred when they both maximize economic benefits and exhibit cultural proximity to the target society. This dynamic results in a spectrum of usefulness, with the value of these workers varying depending on the context and specific requirements.

The study underscores the necessity for an intersectional analysis of the macro and meso-structural relations between the categories of gender, origin, age and class in a neoliberal context. The study recommends policy and institutional reforms to enhance accessibility to education, employment and social services, as well as a shift in public perceptions of YMI to facilitate equal opportunities. However, the focus on the Austrian labor market and the use of qualitative data restrict the extent to which the findings can be generalized. It is recommended that future studies include more comprehensive comparative and quantitative analyses in order to validate the findings and to provide a more detailed assessment of the impact of policies.

Conclusion

This study examines the construction of YMI in the European labor market as “useful others” within the context of neoliberal capitalist social order.

The intersectional perspective illuminates the manner in which structural and symbolic inequalities in labor market integration are (re)produced through the interplay of social conditions, including gender, origin, age, and class within the prevailing heteropatriarchal-colonial logic.

Nevertheless, it is erroneous to view YMI as lacking agency or as mere victims of policy. Notwithstanding the prevailing structural conditions and dominant discourses, they possess agency, which enables them to proactively advocate for their interests, establish networks, and engage politically. This agency endows YMI with the capacity to exert political influence and develop collective strategies that enhance their rights and promote their social participation. Consequently, they are not merely passive recipients of political decisions; rather, they are active agents in political and social discourse.

The findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive policy and institutional reforms to guarantee greater equity in education, the labor market, and social services. However, the study's focus on the Austrian labor market and its qualitative methodology restrict the extent to which the findings can be generalized. It would be beneficial for future research to integrate broader comparative analyses and quantitative methods in order to more effectively address intersectional challenges and assess the impact of specific policy measures.

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