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**“ȘTIU EU PE CINEVA” SELF-ORGANIZED MOBILITY, LABOR  
INTERMEDIATION AND THE TWOFOLD EXPLOITABILITY OF  
ROMANIAN WORKERS IN THE AUSTRIAN FRESH FOOD SECTOR**

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# **“Știu eu pe cineva” Self-Organized Mobility, Labor Intermediation and the Twofold Exploitability of Romanian Workers in the Austrian Fresh Food Sector**

Paul SPERNEAC-WOLFER<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The workings of expansive Romanian migration networks across Western Europe as forms of self-organized migration are well-documented. Yet, transnational relations have rarely been examined outside of Romanian migrant networks, namely in their potential source of value extraction in broader accumulation processes. This article thus attempts to look at the self-organization of mobility of Romanian workers - in particular, the practice of labor intermediation - in relation to its exploitation in highly segmented labor markets. In the following, I ethnographically substantiate the view that in my examined field site, the Austrian fresh food sector, it is precisely the self-organization of mobility among Romanian workers that became exploitable by Austrian growers in highly efficient ways. Based on findings from a year-long and ongoing ethnography in an Austrian greenhouse complex, I show how growers capitalize particularly on the practice of labor intermediation to maintain the resilience and profitability of local agricultural businesses in the restructured Austrian agricultural market. The resulting workplace regime constitutes workers in a twofold exploitability: not only is their labor power, but also their interpersonal relations subject to value extraction. 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 labor markets in Europe.

Keywords: informalized labor, mobility strategies, Romanian migration, agriculture, seasonal recruitment.

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## The Role of Self-Organized 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-organization stands out as a relevant modality of westward migration (Horváth, & Anghel, 2009). Personal relations among kin and kith 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; Șerban, & Voicu, 2010). Yet, transnational relations have rarely been examined outside of migrant networks, namely in their potential source of value extraction in broader capitalist accumulation (Rubio, 2018; Schmidt, 2021).

Against this background, this article thus attempts to look at the self-organization of mobility practices of Romanian workers *in relation to* its potential affordance as value extraction. By understanding labor intermediation as both social re-/productive practice (Shah, & Lerche, 2020) that provides employment opportunities along intimate and distant relations across Europe, I ask: How does the self-organization of mobility among mobile Romanian workers can turn into a significant source of value extraction in segmented Western European economies?

I ethnographically substantiate the view that in the Austrian fresh food sector, it is precisely the self-organization of mobility among Romanian workers that became exploitable by growers. Based on findings from an ethnography in a greenhouse complex, I show how growers capitalize particularly on the practice of labor intermediation to maintain the resilience and profitability of local agricultural businesses in the restructured Austrian fresh food sector. The resulting workplace regime constitutes workers in a *twofold exploitability*: not only is their labor power, but also their relationality subject to value extraction.

To this end, I begin by reviewing how labor intermediation as part of the Romanian migration phenomenon is commonly understood in the literature. Therein, I note the limits of framing transnational relations as social capital, as this brackets out their subsequent valorization within wider accumulation circuits. To incorporate these, I draw 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 labor (2020). In two subsequent analytical sections, I then offer a brief recount of the historical role of migrant labor and labor recruitment practices in the Austrian greenhouse complex in the course of European liberalization, to then analyze my findings from a multi-sited ethnography between Austrian greenhouses and Romania.

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## A Question of Capital? Self-Organized Mobility, Migration Networks, and the Other Side of the Wage Relation

The post-1990 scope of Romanian migration is exceptional: in only three decades, around 20% of the active Romanian labor force became involved in temporary or durable migration patterns (Sandu, 2006; World Bank, 2018), with numbers being tendentially underestimated due to difficult-to-measure conditions in which labor mobility takes place (Rubiolo, 2018). The migratory condition of contemporary Romania is enacted in highly diverse and complex ways: beside of formalized and privatized mobility arrangements (Horváth, & Angel, 2009; Voivozeanu, 2019), studies frequently highlighted the high degree of *self-organization* as a characteristic of Romanian migration: that is, intermediating job placements through direct relations within vast and rapidly emerging networks across Western European space (Hartman, 2008; Potot, 2010; Șerban, & Voicu, 2010).

Hereby, the capacity of mobile workers to self-mediate employment opportunities in the European context is conceptually interesting in its own right. Labor 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-organization 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*, or “the third who benefits” (Bessy, & Chauvin, 2018). Oftentimes forming crucial nodes in migration industries (Gammeltoft, Hansen & Nyberg Sorensen, 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 & Shah, 2020).

Yet, the type of labor intermediation in the Romanian context is seldomly informed by a commercial purpose that would characterize these migration patterns as *industries* and some actors as *tertius gaudens* (Potot, 2010). In the absence thereof, horizontal modalities of labor intermediation are commonly examined through the lens of the *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). Hereby, the framing of interpersonal relations as “social capital” features centrally, as networks are seen as manifestations thereof (Sandu *et al.*, 2006; Șerban & Voicu, 2010). While this perspective is reviewed elsewhere in more depth (Sha, 2021), I am particularly interested in how it is applied to understand Romanian migration dynamics.

Here, studies have documented the high degrees of self-organization of Romanian migration across European space (Horváth & Anghel, 2009). Oftentimes,

individual forerunners inhabit crucial roles in paving migration corridors which are then utilized by kin and kith, rendering migration as a self-perpetuating and highly dynamic phenomenon (Șerban & 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 fulfills a “sponsor function” in the course of migration, including job distribution, among other things (ibid., 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 I show below, this perspective provides only a partial understanding about the full implications of self-organized mobility in accumulation circuits. When inserted into highly segmented Western European economies that became structurally dependent on migrant labor (Castles, 1986), Potot’s conclusion can be analytically inverted: a globalizing Europe was well adapted to make thorough usage of the rapidly expanding Romanian migration phenomenon. Put differently, inasmuch as migrant networks are utilized to evade precarious working conditions, they also form channels into the latter. 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 labor in the competitive globalized European agricultural market (2020, 2021). It is in this light that framing the value of transnational networks as “social capital” which pertains exclusively to migrants (which is then convertible into economic resilience, for instance, by being able to mediate labor niches across Europe, Potot, 2010, 4ff) is problematic: it implies to analytically bracket out the manifold actors on *the other side of the wage relation* who might benefit from the self-organization of migrants while not 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 valorization processes (Rubiolo, 2018).

In a recent publication, Shah and Lerche (2020) insist that a systemic understanding of the exploitation of migrant labor necessitates to account for what they call “the invisible economies of care”, namely the wide-spanning sets of intimate relations within and across “spatiotemporally divided households that sustains workers” in which “productive and reproductive activities are analytically and empirically intertwined” (ibid., 721ff). While their analytical interest is in the manifold gendered and generational forms of care work that constitute a “invisible economy because it is never considered in worker remuneration” (ibid., 722), this

perspective is also useful to reconsider labor intermediation as a practice that sits between both spheres 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 hand, labor intermediation can become a modality of labor recruitment for employers, with potential economic benefits. This view addresses the relevance of migrant labor for both sides of the wage relation. Furthermore, it opens ways to consider the underlying sets of interpersonal relations that mobile workers are embedded in –described here as the *relationality* of mobile workers (Millar, 2018) – as the potential object of value extraction to trace the broader “machinations of capitalist growth”, in agriculture and beyond (Shah, & Lerche, 2020).

By understanding, with Shah, & Lerche, labor intermediation as both social re-/productive practice that mobilizes intimate and distant relations towards ensuring employment opportunities, I ask: How does the self-organization of mobility among mobile Romanian workers can turn into a significant source of value extraction in segmented Western European economies?

After describing my research design, I root this question in the specificities of my field site, an Austrian greenhouse complex. In two analytical sections, I first recount the role of migrant labor in restructuring the Austrian fresh food sector by drawing on biographical interviews with growers and some statistical data. Given limits of space, I can only sketch some of the legal/economic aspects of Austrian EU accession. Then, I turn to examine of my ethnographic material, acquired in Austrian greenhouses and Romanian communities.

## Research Design

In August 2021, I began research by following labor union activists on folder distribution walks in the greenhouse complex and additionally approaching Austrian growers and Romanian workers on my own. Eventually, two growers agreed that I participate in the greenhouse work. This included activities ranging from sewing, crop and plant maintenance, pesticide spraying, the harvesting of mostly cucumbers, tomatoes, and eggplants to the cleaning of greenhouses after the crop production cycles. While growers were informed that my employment is part of an ethnographic research project on agriculture, I did not fully disclose my interest in the role of migrant labor therein. This decision was made due to the highly isolated and partly illicit labor practices that constitute the norm in the Austrian agricultural sector (Sezonieri, 2017), a norm that I also observed in greenhouses in Austria. As a result, I anonymized persons and altered non-essential descriptions of workplaces and geographical locations.

In total, I worked for six months twice a week in the greenhouse before I worked full-time and lived in a greenhouse dormitory from July to October, and December 2022. The usual workday comprised twelve hours a day for six

days per week, sometimes including Sundays. This extensive presence allowed me to build proximate relations with workers. Besides sharing the workday in the greenhouse, I spent many evenings in various dormitories and accompanied workers to appointments at banks or municipal offices and on private occasions such as weddings and birthdays. Additionally, I conducted one month of fieldwork in Western Romania by following workers to their home communities during short vacations.

## **Emerging Opportunities: Migrant Labor in the Restructured Austrian Fresh Food Sector**

Historically, the greenhouse complex spanned over two thousand hectares in the Eastern part of Lower Austria. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> 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 globalizing vegetable market either pushed growers into business closure or led to the upscaling of production through economies of scale (see Schmidt, 2021, 139ff for similar dynamics in Germany). 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 January 1<sup>st</sup> 1995, and only within a few decades, the landscape became fully defined by plastic and glass greenhouses (Mejchar, 2008). Crucially, greenhouse-based production increased the demand for cheap and flexible labor power, met through migrant labor: from the 1970s onwards, a variety of bilateral programs between Austria and former Yugoslavia and subsequent national labor market quota (*Kontingentregelung*) regulated local labor demand. From the 1990s onwards, the share of workers from Romania grew up 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 business size. The area serves as an agricultural powerhouse in the Austrian fresh food sector: yearly, every two of three Austrian cucumbers are produced in this place, followed by slightly fewer numbers for eggplants 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 for 2020 (LGV, 2020).

Conforming with insights from the literature on agricultural intensification, a central mechanism in the industrialization of food production is the employment of a migrant workforce (Rogaly, 2008; Zloliniski, 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 a 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 realized that we need additional hands in there. This is when we had to become actual employers (...) But the first labor 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 labor contingents sufficiently increased, mainly consisting of Yugoslavians.'*

This quote illustrates how increased labor demand in intensified production was first covered by domestic marginalized groups, whose structural vulnerability rendered them exploitable for low-wage, labor-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 Ceausescu regime, the massive exodus of Romania through westwards-oriented migration flows increased in the late 1990s (Sandu *et al.*, 2006) up 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, neighbors, and whatnot. 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 would have to stop in every village in Romania.'*

Especially the last sentence illustrates the occurrence of a deep connectivity between Romanian households and Austrian greenhouses. As part of their westward migration journeys, Romanian workers self-organized employment by literally knocking at 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 utilized these emergent workplace relations to intermediate work in the greenhouses to their kin and peers.

The increasing presence of Romanian workers in the 1990s not only marked a new period of labor 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 socio-economic 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 governmental representatives, who would inhibit the import of particular vegetables as soon as they would be available for harvesting in Austria. This remarkable level of institutionalized agrarian protection dissolved during EU accession. After a brief transitory period, Austrian greenhouse growers would find themselves in the European Single Market (ESM) and its relentless competition with greenhouse-producing companies from Spain or the Netherlands, resulting in drastic price drops for vegetables. Parallel, the once diversified Austrian fresh food market became dominated by powerful corporative actors up to the point that nowadays, 83% of the 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, for instance, in the altering of payment practices: while pre-1995, the price of a cucumber was set in advance and the payment would follow immediately, it now takes four to six weeks, and the eventual price fluctuates based on the calculated offerings of the supplied retailer and negotiations with 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 oftentimes detrimental ways from the perspective of greenhouse growers, new European modalities of *mobility* policy turned out to be quite advantageous. Whereas former labor recruitment proceeded through state-regulated guestworker programs, Romanian workers were recruited in increasingly informalized ways until 2003, when visa restrictions were lifted and Romanians in the agricultural sector were granted work permit through the *Saisonier-Regelung*. Eventually, the Austrian labor market was fully opened to Romanians and Bulgarians on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Asked about the differences in recruitment patterns in the course of Austrian EU accession, a 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 is allowed to work. And the application procedure was totally dumb (deppert): it required that he already resides in my business while applying for the job. Imagine, this worker sleeps 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 confirms 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 parallel to the increase of informalized labor recruitment in the greenhouses as a suitable means to upkeep production. Confronted with dense state bureaucracy, growers began to prefer Romanian labor to previous forms of contracted migrant labor due to its local availability and convenience. Seemingly paradoxical, Romanian workers already formed most of the local labor force, even though visa restrictions were erased as late as 2003. Yet, this can be explained by what is commonly observed in the literature as early characteristics of self-organized migration in Romanian networks, including overstaying visa stays abroad, illegal border-crossing, and other practices (Horváth, & Anghel, 2009). As the first arriving, often illegalized workers began to intermediate employment opportunities in the greenhouse to their kin and kith, Romanian workers soon covered most of the local labor demand, often with lower salaries than their Eastern European counterparts. Thus, the eventual ease of visa restrictions in 2003 was only relevant in dislodging major obstacles of recruiting not only workers but also their acquaintances, close and distant.

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent how growers could navigate the ambivalent effects of EU accession *through* the utilization of the expansive Romanian migration: forced to adapt to the new uncertainties caused by economic liberalization, growers profited from the simultaneity of large-scale self-organized mobility practices of Romanians and its first informal, then formalized 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 “californization of agriculture”, namely meeting the challenges of a retailer-driven agricultural intensification by employing a migrant workforce (Rogaly, 2008; Zlolniski, 2022). In Austria as elsewhere, the availability of fresh food is dependent on its laboring others (Bolokan, 2022). I would additionally insist that a close reading of this process further reveals that in Austrian greenhouses, not only the Romanian workers themselves became indispensable for maintaining profitability, but also their interpersonal relations. As the growers’ remark that “they bring their family, neighbors, and whatnot” illustrates, self-organized mobility among Romanian workers became a self-perpetuating mechanism that met local labor demand in a flexible and reliable manner unmatched by pre-accession labor regimes. Since then, labor 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 liberalization of the 1990s and 2000s (Stan, & Erne, 2014), it created recruitment channels for Austrian growers that made Romanian rural labor directly available. In this context, “*Știu eu pe cineva*” (I know someone) remains a common phrase from Romanian workers when bosses inquire how to fill up the freed vacancies. To further substantiate this view, I will now turn to an ethnographic examination of labor intermediation and its systemic role for greenhouse businesses in terms of flexibility and profitability.

## “Știu eu pe cineva” – Labor and Intermediation in Austrian Greenhouses

On a hot Sunday afternoon at the end of July, a procedure repeated itself, which I observed many times during 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 straining work week, I sit next to Aurel and his wife Silvia, both employed for now 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 of them grew up in the same rural region in Western Romania and form the core personnel in the greenhouse for this year. In addition to us, one worker is employed in the high season between May and September.

This afternoon, we wait for the new worker to arrive to substitute for the former worker Marius, who arrived only two weeks ago through the distant acquaintances of Aurel but abruptly quit work three days ago. Before Marius left, he complained to me 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€ per hour, he waved aside and replied: 'it's not worth the effort of making trouble. I rather move on' and left to a friend in Belgium, who offered him a job at a construction site. The sudden departure of Marius three days ago left a susceptible gap in our working force in the greenhouse, as it occurred amid the high season. The daily cultivation of cucumbers by seven workers on two hectares of greenhouses demanded 66-76 hours of work per week. Having been approached by the greenhouse owner Harald for new workers, Aurel thought a bit and responded by saying: “Știu eu pe cineva”. In the evening, he reached out to acquaintances on the phone and a friend from Romania mentioned that his cousin named Silviu is currently in Germany and is searching for new employment.

This Sunday afternoon, Silviu arrived on a bus from a private microbus enterprise and was escorted by three companions with whom he had worked in German agriculture the weeks before and who are 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 câștigă bani] as much as elsewhere. 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 the things [Știu lucrurile]. If this is all fine for you, we would be happy if you stay. What do you say?'*

Silviu replied that he plans to stay, but he has some monetary issues since the first salary was not paid yet. Aurel continued to say: „well, that's no problem.

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Salary is paid every Friday in cash. Tomorrow after work, I can drive you to the supermarket and I can thrust out 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 labor rhythms was needed – Silviu was already used to greenhouse-based work, leaving when he was seventeen years old to greenhouses in Sicily with his father. The remaining little differences in the 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 a week of work, Silviu left the greenhouse by noting that he prefers to follow his companions to Italy. Soon after, another worker filled the gap who was again arriving through the networks of Aurel. Leaving his container in a mess, Silvia (Aurel’s wife) and I cleaned the place before the new worker arrived.

This short ethnographic vignette is illustrative of the broader labor dynamics observable in Viennese greenhouses. The combination of laborious workdays and unfavorable work conditions results in a high degree of turnover among workers. Over time, this created a *dual pattern* of the workforce: On the one hand, workers transition through the greenhouse complex as interim steps in their mobile labor 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 four months of my stay. I refer to these workers as more *transient workers*. On the other hand, 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 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 ‘foremen’ in the industrialized production in the greenhouse, they are usually not financially disbursed as such – with 5,20€, Aurel receives 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 recognize the relevance of established workers and the manifold forms of non-renumerated labor they perform. These range from providing transient workers with necessities after arrival, doing the groceries and organizing appointments of official institutions, cleaning the abandoned flats after workers left, to the needed teach-in of new workers to the daily labor tasks, as illustrated in the arrival of Silviu. These labors conducted by established workers are neither recognized nor recompensed by growers, yet they are essential to meet the daily demands of greenhouse work. This becomes most striking in the field of labor 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 can, 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 some 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 it. Life abroad [viață în străinătate] is not easy. I experienced it myself and I try my best to help. But Harald always complains that no one I would 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€, 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', utilizing their established position in Austrian greenhouses to intermediate opportunities to earn money for kin and kith who mostly try to either compensate insufficient wages in Romania or were unsatisfied with their former employment in other Western European countries. However, due to the low wages, many relatives and peers merely utilize this opportunity temporarily to then find more preferable work conditions elsewhere. This creates the transience of the group I refer to as transient workers. Furthermore, labor intermediation is enacted as a gendered and generational practice, as most established workers are older and male, and younger workers can recommend friends to them who then decide whom to suggest to the grower. Also, almost any worker I met once brought her children to the greenhouse. During my research, I worked along with five teenagers who just finished school in Romania and earned 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* spheres of ensuring the reproduction of workers' households and maintaining production in the greenhouse. Regarding reproduction for transient workers, it is a central mechanism to ensure continuing financial transactions back home by drawing on their extensive transnational relations to find ad hoc employment when necessary. The remarks of transient workers would oftentimes echo "I want to see how to make money there too" (Voivozeanu, 2020) to then move on due to adversity of labor conditions. Established workers facilitate movements by providing job opportunities to kin and kith, and manifold forms of support in the course of arrival. Rather than acting as commercial *tertius gaudens*, established workers form "internal" nodes within the vast transnational migration

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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, elderly care, and child education in Romania. Labor intermediation is thus central in ensuring the reproduction of workers and their domestic households and is embedded in the self-organization of occupational mobility in the European economy.

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 that workers are embedded in – constituting the relationality of workers – serves as a remarkable source of value extraction, as it is precisely this relationality of workers that growers tap into when they continuously approach established workers about potential new transient ones. By drawing on the self-organized mobility of workers, growers 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 labor agencies or other intermediaries.

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

Thus, extracting value workers' relations becomes a systemic feature of the current labor regime in Austrian greenhouses. Following this thought further, I suggest that this constitutes workers in their "twofold exploitability": growers capitalize not only on the labor power but also on the relationality of Romanian workers to meet the economic pressures in the liberalized European agricultural markets. This type of labor 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 to "*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 homestay

in Western Romania, I asked his younger son (who also worked in the greenhouse complex for four years) about his upbringing. While we drove through neighboring 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 saw the village we've just passed? 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 are grown out of the specificities of shared living in rural Romania, which forms the relational basis of the subsequent self-organization of mobility. In the course of westward migration, intimate and more distant relations are mobilized to find employment abroad, while maintaining social ties at home. Oftentimes, the ability to be engaged in simultaneous settings of domestic life and foreign labor 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 haven't seen my wife once because she works as a caregiver in Italy, and it was not possible to schedule our home visits so that we can see each other. Now, I earn less than half of the money than before, however, I could take a bus and arrive in my village in eight hours anytime'.*

As this statement further demonstrates, the ability of maintaining intimate relations over distance plays a powerful role in accepting otherwise exploitative working conditions. These statements resonate with what I observed as a frequent practice among established workers to leave for Romania for weekends in order to meet and cultivate the relational obligations that they are involved in: caring for elders, participating in weddings, house maintenance, 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 for possibilities to meet 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 getting accustomed to otherwise adverse and exploitative working conditions. This adds a further

strand to my examination of how value extraction is not limited to the productive capacities but also encompasses the reproductive capacities of Romanian workers. Inasmuch as workers assign value to the possibility to meet 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 labor regime.

## **Conclusion: The systemic Role of Migrant Labor in Segmented Labor 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’ (ibid., 721ff). I attempted to locally specify and ethnographically substantiate this broader argument through my examination of the systemic role of self-organized Romanian labor mobility in the Austrian fresh food sector. By going beyond traditional distinctions that analyze labor intermediation either in terms of migration industries or migration networks, I look at how labor intermediation is embedded in both spheres of reproduction *as well as* production and is enacted along intimate and distant relations. Thus, the relationality of workers became valorized as a crucial economic resource, resulting in the maintenance of profitability and resilience for greenhouses businesses in the restructured Austrian agricultural market. Through the dual workforce pattern of established and transient workers, growers tap into the relations that underlie labor intermediation among Romanian workers. The resulting labor regime constitutes Romanian workers in a *twofold exploitability*: not only is their labor power, but also their relationality subject to value extraction. As such, it foregrounds the reliance of employers on not only migrant workers but their underlying, socio-spatially separated, interpersonal relations (Shah, & Lerche, 2020). Reiterating insights from this strand of the migration literature that examines the systemic role of migrant labor in capitalism, the explanatory value of the twofold exploitability of workers in Austrian greenhouses goes beyond a view that Romanian labor is simply ‘cheaper’ – rather, networks currently form the most available and flexible source of labor power for capital in comparison to other ways of organizing local production towards capital accumulation (Burawoy, 1976; Shah, & Lerche, 2020).

Given that 40% of fresh vegetables are produced in the examined field site, the notion of the twofold exploitability of Romanian workers thus denotes a central mechanism that ensures the availability of fresh and cheap vegetables on Austrian tables. In addition to the well-documented workings of Mediterranean agriculture (Corrado, *et al.*, 2016; Scott, & 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 further understand the underlying regulatory frames that govern vulnerable workforces, recent studies usefully highlighted 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, & Costamagna, 2022). While this article was limited in accounting for this aspect, further research is needed to examine the multiscalar constituency of agricultural labor regimes, and the legal and political entanglements that sustain precarious and wage-suppressed labor markets.

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