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Dynamics of precarity among ‘new migrants’: exploring the worker–capital relation through mobilities and mobility power

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises the role of mobilities within precarious working and living conditions, drawing on qualitative analysis of interviews (n = 52) and a policy seminar (n = 50) in North-East England. It focuses on refugees, asylum seekers, and Eastern European EU migrants, as policy-constructed groups that have been identified as disproportionately concentrated in precarious work. The article develops three ‘dynamics of precarity’, defined as ‘surplus’, ‘rooted’, and ‘hyper-flexible’, to conceptualise distinct ways of moving that represent significant variations in the form that precarity takes. The article concludes that understanding precarity through mobilities can identify points of connection among today’s increasingly heterogeneous working class.

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Asylum; refugees; UK; precarity; EU; migration; mobility power

Introduction

Precarious conditions of work and life, or ‘precarity’, have received increasing attention across a number of disciplines and fields, including Sociology, Geography, migration studies, labour studies, and urban studies (e.g. Standing 2011; Meehan and Strauss 2015; Jirón and Imilan 2015). Precarity has been identified as characteristic of the experience of growing numbers of people, yet highly varied in its intensity and form. This article examines precarity among a particular subset of the population (new migrants) in a particular place (North-East England), and uses a focus on mobility to conceptualise differences and points of connection between varied forms of precarity. Through this analysis, the article draws attention to: (a) capital’s simultaneous reliance on migrant labour en masse and migrants’ disposability as individuals; (b) the importance of migrants’ lives beyond the workplace for understanding the way mobilities are exercised; (c) the significance of mobility as both a central characteristic of precarious work and a field for workers’ agency.

The article draws on empirical research during 2013–2016, using in-depth qualitative interviews with 40 migrants and 12 practitioners, and a policy seminar. This project focused on migrants from the ‘EU10’ countries¹, refugees and asylum seekers², all of whom are included in the definition of ‘migrant’ adopted by the United Nations Statistics Division (2013). These migrant categories were selected because they have all been stigmatised, have had their mobility problematized by significant sections of the media and political establishment (Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013; Allen 2016), and exhibit concentrations in various forms of precarious, low-paid work and worklessness (Lewis et al. 2014; McCollum and Findlay 2015). These categories also present significant differences in countries of origin, immigration status and associated rights, and employment