

Intra-European Mobility and the Agency of Migrant Labour

Lisa Berntsen: *Agency of labour in a flexible pan-European labour market. A qualitative study of migrant practices and trade union strategies in the Netherlands*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015, 180 pp. ISBN 978-951-39-6214-2.

In Agency of labour in a flexible pan-European labour market: A qualitative study of migrant practices and trade union strategies

in the Netherlands, Lisa Berntsen sheds light on the nature of agency of migrant workers under European economic integration, particularly European competitive market processes and dynamics. The author remarkably attempts to theorize around the issue of agency of migrant workers by using the “moral economy” sociological framework of Bolton and Laaser (2013, in *Work, Employment and Society* 27:3). In so doing she responds to how the European competitive market dynamic affects the individual and collective agency of migrant workers employed on short-term contracts in a particular institutional setting in Europe, such as the Netherlands. Combining agency as a classical sociological concept to the study of labour migration is ambitious and theoretically relevant. It also adds analytical relevance to employment and industrial relations, labour markets, and welfare states. Lisa Berntsen does it in a solid and coherent, analytically and theoretically well grounded manner. She also offers an empirically rich evidence of what I personally think has been a fascinating and laborious “parkour” through the understanding of the social effects of the processes of Europeanization on migrant labour.

The thesis consists of different chapters clustered into two parts, which all together provide

a clear illustration and analysis on migrant practices and trade union strategies in the Dutch labour market, and how this has been impacted by European regulations on intra-European mobility. The first part of the thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 focus on the social and market context of labour migration more broadly. Chapter 3 describes the migration context within which temporary migrants move within the EU and how this impacts migrant workers' working lives and social living conditions abroad. By looking at some examples Chapter 4 focuses on firms' recruitment practices towards labour costs savings. The second part consists of three chapters that explore the agency of temporary migrant workers and Dutch trade unions. Chapter 5 examines the ways migrant workers exercise their agency in collective or organized ways. Chapter 6 is a case study of trade union efforts to represent hypermobile migrant construction workers and highlights the difficulties trade unions face in enforcing labour rights. Chapter 7 further discusses the potential for organizing among migrants with a case study of collective action by Polish temporary agency workers. In this chapter, the importance of building solidarity among fragmented workforce is highlighted.

I have enjoyed very much reading the different chapters of *Agency of labour in a flexible pan-European labour market*. What I liked most about Bernsten's work is the scientific rigor, the ability to use different analytical frameworks and sociological theories embedded into diverse – but not so distant – fields of study, and the capacity to make out of all this a fascinating and interesting story on migrants' working conditions and their distinctive capacity to act upon all this. The methodology of the thesis fits nicely with the book's main analytical and theoretical aims and objectives, which is to provide an in-depth examination of the social processes underlying the practices of migrant labour as well as the strategies of the trade unions aiming at improving the working conditions of migrant labour. Within this context the thesis uses individual narratives of migrant workers' life, which adds value to several studies and current sociological research on migrant labour. It paves the way for innovative further research into the field. Moreover, it is evident that there is some passion in this study and this is something I would also like to mention here because it makes a difference when somebody studies something he/she cares for or not.

I see the "moral economy" analytical framework as appropriate to the current work. However, I wonder how it effectively contributes to understand in a more encompassing way the "social segregation story of migrant workers" presented in Chapter 3; the "social dumping story" presented in Chapter 4; the "agency (individual) story" of Chapter 5; the "union organizing and representing migrant" (collective) story presented in Chapter 6 and 7. Therefore I critically claim that a more compelling indication of how the "moral economy" framework accompanies the different stories of which this study consists of would have been needed in order to shed much more light on the way how the book's main argument adds innovativeness to the study of migration and agency. I argue this particularly in the context of what advocates of moral economy are highlighted, which are the possibilities this framework opens for people to defend social commitments and obligations from the erosive tendencies of economic processes. At the very end, it can be argued that this defence derives from well-known traditional Gramscian consciousness philosophy, which is based on shared experiences in the material world and labour processes. Thereby, explication of what and how the book highlights

specificity and originality in the understanding of migrant workers as a whole, as it is expressed in the conclusive part of the thesis, would have been perhaps needed.

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