

PANOS THEODOROPOULOS

THE PRECARIOUS MIGRANT WORKER

The Socialization of Precarity



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Panos Theodoropoulos

polity

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Introduction

Alexia works while her son is dreaming. She dreams – can she remember her dreams? – while her son is at school. She wakes up around two hours before he returns; just enough time to cook something and share a few words about their day. She will then take a strong painkiller to ignore the pangs in her back and in the nerves of her arms, get dressed, and slide into Bradford’s neglected landscape for another twelve-hour night shift.

She worked next to me for a few nights. I was struck by her smile: a ray of light amidst decay, the hope that was the last to rise from Pandora’s box. Nobody smiled here. The production line and the earplugs never allowed for much conversation, but the mere *existence* of a smile in this environment that was built to drown all manifestations of human warmth was soothing. Yet, one night, the smile crumbled. Unnoticed by everyone else – the production line, alongside stifling conversation, is also proficient at stifling humanity – and while maintaining her excellent production rate, Alexia was crying. At around 2 a.m., during our single half-hour break, I approached her and asked what was wrong. Thinking back, there was probably a selfish element to my impulse – I *needed* that smile to survive the shift – as much as genuine care. Her reply was simple and devastating: ‘I am thinking about my son. And I am thinking that by the time I will be able to really get to know him, and enjoy him, I will have already grown old.’

We are in a large printing press in Bradford. The year is 2014 or 2015. All around us, the howl of machines and the icy glare of fluorescent lights, contrasting sharply with the darkness outside the windows. Throughout the warehouse’s many crevices, precarious migrant workers – mostly from Eastern Europe, their high-vis vests harshly demarcating their status as non-permanent staff – are feverishly working in the different stages of printing, cutting, checking and packaging a beloved product that features in every British household: greeting cards. Their colourful layout and cheery inscriptions are so contradictory to the anxiety, alienation

and exploitation that are imbued within them that, when looked upon from the perspective of a worker, it seems as if they are jeering at you: as if they are laughing at your pain. I do not remember the precise words on the greeting cards. However, the feeling of revulsion towards them is unforgettable.

This is one of the first jobs I accessed as a migrant worker in the UK, and one that I would keep on returning to when I couldn't find anything better. It is a place where the asphyxiating working conditions ensure a constant turnover of staff, and the company is always in need of more fodder for its production lines. This fodder – us – is sourced from two employment agencies, who have stretched their tentacles deep into migrant communities and supply a steady stream of precarious, dependent, disoriented and exploitable migrant workers. Production never stops, which is why this dreary machine needs workers around the clock: there is almost always work, and, in those pre-Brexit years, there are always more migrant workers coming in that need it. As is typical for these types of jobs, we are paid the minimum wage.¹

Everyone working alongside me is a migrant. We are all on zero-hours contracts, our lives tethered to the business's epochal fluctuations. If they receive a big order, we might be required for a few weeks; in the months before Christmas, work is almost guaranteed. We also know that we can be replaced at any moment. As non-permanent staff, we cover most of the posts that are designated as 'unskilled' – for me, this mostly means packing the various greeting cards in plastic sleeves, separating the cards from each other after they have been printed, or wrapping thousands of cards on pallets, ready for them to be shipped to stores across the UK. We don't really speak to the permanently employed, British workers operating the printing machines, and, when we enter the workplace, they rarely acknowledge us. We are but objects that cover a specific need – once it has been addressed, we are thrown back into the labour agency's pool of available workers, to be shunted to the next workplace. Sometimes the agency will call you without warning and demand that you present yourself for work in a few hours; once that phone rings, you must be ready to upturn your whole life. If you aren't, they'll just hire someone who is.

Our presence there is contingent upon our performance. The production line's pace does not stop, and if you cannot keep up you are replaced. Yet, we have more reasons to overexert ourselves than simply fulfilling

this specific order: we know that there is a small, yet important, chance that we might impress one of the British managers and be offered a permanent contract. We also know that we are building a reputation: if the agency considers us to be ‘good workers’, our chances of being offered future jobs *before other workers* are increased. We are therefore compelled to work as efficiently as possible, with the constant threat of dismissal – and the latent sense of competition amongst ourselves – saturating our every moment.

Precarity breeds insecurity and feeds a constant cycle of anxiety that is *intrinsically* disempowering. One day, I noticed a problem in my payslip: I had been deducted half an hour’s wage for every shift I had done that week. Upon asking the agency why this deduction had been made, they told me that it was because I received two unpaid, half-hour breaks per shift. Yet, the workplace only allowed us one half-hour break. When I asked my fellow temporary colleagues about this, it emerged that everyone had been subject to the same deduction and had received the same explanation. I was dismayed at their acceptance of the situation: wage theft was perceived as just another lousy aspect of a generally lousy job. The most common response was a shoulder shrug: ‘they do that all the time’. When I suggested bringing a union in to help us reclaim our stolen wages, I was met with anxiety, abjection and apathy: nobody was willing to even consider doing anything that they feared would jeopardize their already precarious job. This is when I began to think about the socialization of precarity: it seemed that precarity does not simply ensure a steady supply of insecure workers – it *creates* a specific *type* of worker. Once you realize that everyone else has accepted these conditions – and that you are therefore alone in opposing them – you quickly fall in step.

The cameras above our heads that monitor our performance transmit the image of workers bent over a production line, hastily performing nimble movements and sorting through thousands of cards an hour. What they don’t show are the physical and mental outcomes of this labour: the thumping aches in our calves and the back pains that result from standing and performing very specific, repetitive motions for twelve hours; the blue veins staining the backs of our legs; the bleeding fingers from the paper-cuts, which we must quickly bandage up and keep on working; the piercing fatigue that stems from monotonous night-shifts; the deep, dark circles around our eyes; the papery taste of dust that

we inhale; the humiliation of being screamed orders at by the British managers, of not being able to respond in the way that they deserve; the gnawing sense of stress at having to blindly fight for a job that is never guaranteed; the fear of falling sick and missing a shift, which means that you will be replaced; the anxiety every single evening of waiting for the bus, knowing that if it is late, your tardiness will at the very least cost you an hour's wage, or, at the very worst, your job; and the misery of isolation that comes with working the night-shift. Finally, they don't show the critical mental recalibrations that operate inside our heads in order to allow us to survive these conditions whilst maintaining our senses of self and dignity.

As I am struggling to ignore my throbbing joints, I wonder if the consumers realize the amount of pain that has gone into these greeting cards. I wonder whether a greeting card tainted with blood from a frantic finger has ever made it through the checks, and whether it has been opened by someone wanting to surprise a person they love. I wonder whether, if people knew about the pain behind the words, they would still buy them. To my dismay, I think I know the answer.

Will Alexia ever give her son a card for his birthday?



This is another book about migration. Migration is as old as humanity itself, inseparable from our collective history, firmly engrained in our myths and our collective narratives. It involves a departure and a becoming, an immersion into the unknown that leads to knowledge and experience, an adventure that also longs for stability. It is personal, and yet reflective of wider, collective forces; simultaneously, it is spurred by those collective forces and is still – always – intimately personal. Its essence contains the material of our greatest stories, and no matter how much we discuss it, analyse it, historicize it, glorify or vilify it, it still stands shoulder to shoulder with war and love in capturing our imaginations in a way few themes can. Our need to wrap our heads around its

constantly changing nature leads to the development of archetypes, in a doomed attempt to control the uncontrollable: the Economic Migrant; The Refugee; The Fraudster; The Smuggler; The Stranger. Migration induces the writing of books, the production of songs and movies, the publishing of legislation, the organization of protests and campaigns, the patrolling of borders, and the deaths and sufferings of so many within and in between them. It also helps people build their lives. And yet, no matter how much work is being done on migration, it seems that the questions – and answers – never cease.

So, what is the use of yet another book on migration? For the lay reader, what will it tell you that you don't already know, that you haven't already picked up through the social osmosis of existing in a world in which migration is seemingly at the forefront of every second public debate? For the scholar, what contribution can it make that has not already been touched upon by a myriad of articles, conferences and canonical texts?² For the activist, how could it possibly enhance the understandings that you have developed through a history of standing in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed, of listening to their stories, and partaking in their struggles? And, for the migrant, what could it provide that you haven't already perceived through experience, having *lived* the issues that it discusses?

My goal was never to provide *the* definitive answers, solutions or pathways towards the emancipation of migrant workers. I firmly believe that these only emerge collectively, through the activities of the working, oppressed, precarious and marginalized sections of society in their daily attempts to negotiate and escape the economic and cultural shackles that organize our collective existence. Yet, in order to do so, we need to be aware of precisely what we are escaping, as well as of the ways in which our current existence confines, directs, and ultimately owns our imaginations and our ideas about ourselves. I attempt to contribute to these efforts by drawing upon a sliver of our collective social reality – working alongside, and speaking to, migrants in precarious occupations in Glasgow – to explore how migration and our daily experiences in precarious work structure our understandings of ourselves as migrants and as workers. Similarly, by looking at our society from the standpoint of the migrant worker, we might be better equipped to critically analyse the social realities that *all* of us are confronted with. This is not just a

theoretical exercise: by exploring how precarity socializes us, we might be better equipped to think – and act – beyond it.

This book is thus also necessarily about work. Work is an aspect of humanity as old, and as complex, as migration. However, in contrast to migration, the everyday aspect of labour does not animate the public imagination with the same vivacity. Gone are the days when, in the West, one's status as a worker formed the basis of imagining an alternative future in which the working class – by virtue of its position as the producers of what society needs to survive – would liberate the whole of humanity. Instead, the defeat of mass working-class movements and the triumph of neoliberalism have dispersed us into a multitude of individuals. We think of ourselves as businesses, projects, works-in-constant-progress, with our status as workers being perceived as the most banal – and shunned – aspect of our lives. And yet, this change in our imagination is a product of a momentous mystification, because the cogs of the world *still* turn thanks to the labour of billions of workers, while the profits of this labour are *still* appropriated by a meagre minority. And what is more heroic, more tragic, more adventurous than workers' repeated, dismissed, arduous struggles to make ends meet – amassing a plethora of physical and mental ailments in the process – in order to secure an existence that should have never been in question?

Work remains the quintessential feature of our reality; our need for wages organizes our lives – when and where we wake up, when and what we eat, whether we have the energy to play with our children – and this work makes possible the lives of everybody else (whose work, in turn, makes our own life possible). And yet, despite its totemic role in arranging our existence, work has become more precarious, insecure, dangerous and taxing across the Western world. In contrast to the previous epochs of historic working-class struggles, it is no longer something that is perceived as having the potential to liberate us; it is simply something that we must survive through. Alone.

Migration and work come together in the figure of the migrant worker, the child of wider geopolitical injustices and relations that traverse the world and lead to humans leaving their homes to sell their labour in other lands.³ The poverty that underdevelopment creates – the same poverty that is the condition for other nations' development – fuels ever more profits for the businesses of the receiving countries, as migrants

are swiftly inserted precisely into the most precarious, underpaid and highly exploitative occupations, their lack of secure labour rights making it possible to use and dispose of them according to the fluctuations of an intensely competitive and unregulated neoliberal market economy. Indeed, despite vehement official proclamations to the contrary, Western economies are organized in a way that umbilically depends on the labour of precarious migrant workers. Crucially, precarious workplaces are often also completely bereft of any form of trade union presence. Migrant precarity also extends beyond the workplace, as migrants often must grapple with a myriad of other factors such as citizenship and residency restrictions, housing barriers, racism and xenophobia, language and cultural barriers, and a disorientation produced by their arrival in an unfamiliar country. In short, while precarity in the West increasingly touches everybody, migrant workers are *more* exposed to its most destructive, and most acute, manifestations. Any attempts at thinking and organizing around social justice therefore necessarily pass through the sphere of migrant work and migrant precarity.

We thus come to the gaping question that has been haunting social movements since at least the Industrial Revolution: *how do we organize?* The seas of ink that have been spilt over this question, the historical splits in the labour and radical movements, and our current impotence in the face of a rampaging neoliberal assault suggest that we are still far away from developing adequate answers (or, at least, agreeing to them). Rather than examining the rare successful instances of migrant-led collective struggles in the West in order to contribute to these explorations, I opted to analyse their wider absence: what prevents some of the most exploited sectors of society from seizing the power that their objective position in the economy affords them? As a migrant worker in precarious occupations myself, I was convinced that any answer would be incomplete if it did not depart from the corporal, minute, banal, but cumulatively decisive effects that labouring under conditions of insecurity and over-exertion have on the bodies and psyches of workers.

These threads bring us to the book's subheading, the socialization of precarity. All labour regimes socialize workers: they aim to sculpt specific behavioural traits that will increase workers' productivity. I argue that the insidiousness – and, perhaps, the relative novelty – of the current conditions of precarity *amidst a wider absence of collective narratives that*

foreground an alternative to this mode of existence lies beyond the anxiety, stress and bodily harms that labouring under its shadow produces. The fact that class no longer forms the basis of an inspiring, radical collective identity does not mean that it is no longer *felt*; in the context of our daily labour, class is now experienced individualistically rather than as an aspect of a wider collective identity and narrative.⁴ This is a structural feature of precarious contractual relations: it breaks workers into units, atomizes them, and renders them individually responsible for rights and securities that were previously guaranteed. Workers are thus forced to continually and frantically overexert themselves under conditions of competition with their peers for a limited number of limitedly secure occupations, mirroring and responding to a wider mass culture of competition and individualism. This suffering – both dull and intense – is presented as the only pathway towards security, in an endless Darwinian rat race where the strongest and most efficient live to work another day. The bonds that lead to affinity and solidarity between workers are thereby ruptured, and the glimmers of solidarity that emerge are also precarious.

In the absence of any other collective forms of security, one's individual capacity to labour *becomes* one's security. The scars, pains, fatigue, anxiety and isolation experienced in the course of daily precarious labour thus turn into badges of self-worth: this is the socialization of precarity. It is a socialization that, beyond forming workers that are trained to respond to the demands of flexibility, availability and overexertion, leads to a proud internalization of, and identification with, the precise conditions that one is attempting to overcome.⁵ In so doing, the foundations of neoliberalism are fortified, having emerged victorious as unchangeable. In the absence of inspiring contestational narratives that offer alternative imaginaries, the socialization of precarity sculpts workers whose identities are attached to *surviving* conditions, rather than *changing* them.

Therefore, while the research that informs this book focuses on precarious migrant workers in Glasgow, the implications of recognizing the socialization of precarity extend to all precarious workers in the West. They point to seemingly insuperable difficulties in the emergence of radical, emancipatory identities, since they suggest that neoliberalism grounds itself in workers' psyches and tightens its grasp on the imagination even *through* attempts to escape the precarity that it has created. And yet, not all is lost. Because, as I will argue in the forthcoming pages,

neoliberalism is unable to circumvent workers' experiential awareness of class-based injustice, daily confirmed through the fatigue of the mind and the body. For migrant workers, despite all its proclamations at equality of opportunity, it is similarly unable to dispel the knowledge that their intensified exploitation is connected to their status *as migrants*.

While this might initially seem like a trivial insight, it is vastly important in the context of the retreat of social movements from most workers' everyday lives. The disparate identities that proliferate in the absence of a wider working-class identity and the transience, isolation and disconnection induced by precarious lives are *still* connected through workers' common, daily experiences of the injuries emerging from their class status. Precarity, and the socialization it produces, has succeeded precisely in rupturing the *feeling* of this common predicament; it has not succeeded in changing its reality, or dulling workers' awareness of injustice. It thus becomes possible to imagine new, intersectional solidarities and alliances, whose embeddedness in the social reality of migrant workers and other precarious groups has the potential to highlight the precise connections that precarity so insidiously mystifies. As always, these initiatives must depart from the objective labour conditions, and communities, within which workers find themselves.

Building on failures and gaps

These objective labour conditions that structure precarity in the UK form the foundations of this book. Escaping the Greek economic crisis, I started working in the migrant-dense city of Bradford in 2013. Bradford is one of the UK's most deprived areas, and this dubious accolade was reflected in the available jobs. My obvious foreignness (most people thought me to be Polish) immediately positioned me at the lower rungs of the labour ladder: indeed, not a single employment agency whose office I entered ever bothered asking me for a CV, instead almost immediately assigning me to a warehouse with many other men who looked like me. These travels included various stints as a kitchen porter (a job I revisit in the subsequent pages), a long stint in a shelf-making factory, numerous emergency pit stops at the printing press presented in the first pages of this book, bartending and leafleting simultaneously, and a dramatic exit from the hellhole of a factory that produced medical furniture after they

refused to give me a day off to attend a friend's funeral. These were the years that Nigel Farage and his nationalist party, UKIP, were rising, Brexit was brewing, and migration was widely portrayed in the media as a plague that was almost exclusively responsible for Britain's declining standard of living. Fascist marches were regular occurrences, and our British colleagues' attitudes towards us mirrored the violence that we were threatened with on the streets.

Instinctively, my group of friends and anti-fascist comrades began organizing something like a labour and social solidarity initiative around 2015. The aim was to establish a migrant-led group that would offer advice and support against labour exploitation, alongside maintaining a physical space in the community that would allow migrants to autonomously organize (I would later find that such formations figure prominently in the relevant scholarly literature as supporting some of the few victorious instances of migrant mobilization). Despite our best efforts, we failed magnificently, marking the first of many unsuccessful or mildly successful attempts that I would be involved with concerning the organization of migrant workers. Paradoxically, despite the glaring exploitation and mistreatment migrant workers in precarious jobs were experiencing, both trade unions and *most workers themselves* seemed uninspired to do anything more than saying that it was 'about time' that someone did what we initiated. In the meantime, mistreatment at work, the withholding of wages and holiday pay, and punitive dismissals remained daily occurrences of our precarious lives.

This passive acceptance of reality perplexed my early-20s brain and became the trigger for me to venture more deeply into theory. In contrast to the UK, Greece is a society where memories of revolution coexist with our daily realities. My grandmother's side of the family was heavily involved with the Communist Party of Greece; her father had participated in the revolutionary process of the mid-1940s, and had been punished by imprisonment, torture and exile. When she refused to denounce his beliefs, she was denied access to university and entered the textile industry, proudly participating in historic strikes. My own father – a lawyer supporting the rights of refugees – was active in the movement that toppled Greece's military dictatorship in 1974, eventually meeting my mother – a schoolteacher and organizer – in a Free Mandela group in 1990. Such family histories are firmly rooted in Greece's collective

memory. Their legacies were still being expressed when I left Greece in 2011, with millions of people on the streets resisting austerity.

The sharp contrast between my home and host countries was extremely difficult for me to digest. How could one of the most exploited and stigmatized sectors of society not rebel? I worked the same long hours and lived in the same decrepit, rat-infested neighbourhoods as them; were our different attitudes merely attributable to divergent levels of politicization? Moreover, how could trade unions, those organizations that supposedly existed to serve the workers, not be passionately and ceaselessly active to support the class's most exploited segments? The more I found out about Bradford's radical history and the role of migrant and Black Power movements within it, the more I struggled to comprehend the glaring retreat of these empowering narratives from our lives.

I decided to study the theory of organizing migrant workers in order to answer these questions and inform my organizing activities. However, the more I read, the more convinced I became that both scholarly and movement literature was ill-equipped to understand the complexity of the forces that structure migrant workers' choices in the current precarious socioeconomic context. I observed that the literature that did exist was either completely detached from the working realities of migrant workers, did not actually speak to those workers, or was concerned with only surveying the rare success stories of migrant mobilizations while overlooking the vast, much bleaker reality of defeat that permeates most parts of the West beyond the metropolises.⁶

This lack of migrants' participation in the research that directly concerns them leads to the omission of valuable nuance. Such exclusions also contribute to further perpetuating the marginalization of oppressed groups, as their perspectives are implicitly or explicitly relegated, their interpretations of their own experiences silenced. According to Paulo Freire, a foundational feature of oppression is that the oppressed have had their means of articulating their reality 'stolen from them' (1993 [1970]: 115). The reclamation of speech, discussion and self-organization emerges as a prerequisite for empowered political action. Regrettably, much of the literature that explores the lives of migrant workers partakes in excluding their voices.

I also noticed that the bulk of the writing that explored the barriers that precarious migrant workers experience in mobilizing was generally

split into two strands, both of which lacked an analysis of how precarity socializes workers. The first tended to look at how the architecture of precarity makes it difficult to organize migrant workers. This strand would, for example, note how labour insecurity makes workers reluctant to organize for fear of being fired from their insecure jobs, or how the transience associated with precarity – with workers never staying in a workplace for long – curtails the development of bonds of solidarity. The other strand focused on factors emanating from the condition of being a migrant. This generally looked at elements such as the fear of deportation, the short-term, economistic outlook that is associated with the initial stages of migration, or aspects such as language barriers and migrants' unfamiliarity with the host country's labour market. It was very rare to encounter a text that connected these realms: namely, how do structural features (such as precarity or the lack of secure residence status) interact with subjective factors (such as the disorientation one experiences post-migration) and the wider cultural associations of migration (which migrant workers do or do not internalize) to reinforce the exploitability of migrants? More importantly, how does working daily in acutely insecure conditions, while being a migrant, impact migrants' ideas of themselves as workers, as migrants, and as migrant workers?

Another set of questions that led to this research involved whether migration could be the impetus for forging communities of resistance. As a migrant worker who was also involved in anti-fascist organizing, I did perceive my migration through a political lens – but was this a wider reality? I wanted to understand whether migration had the potential to develop into a 'politicized identity' – an identity encompassing political understandings that leads to organized action (Bradley 2016). I also wanted to investigate whether the accentuated xenophobia and social marginalization experienced by EU migrants during and after Brexit had the potential to forge links between them and other exploited and historically racialized migrant groups. Finally, I wanted to find out simply whether the naturalization of their inferiority as 'migrants' played a role in their accepting of exploitative conditions.

When I was offered a PhD scholarship by the University of Glasgow in 2017, I was afforded the rare privilege of having money and time to explore these precise questions.⁷ Following the work of others such as the Angry Workers group (2020), Seth Holmes (2013) and Barbara

Ehrenreich (2021 [2001]), I assumed work at a total of six precarious workplaces in and around Glasgow.⁸ These included kitchens, factories and warehouses.⁹ After formally concluding my research, and with my PhD funding running out, I accessed an Amazon warehouse and had the opportunity to explore one of the richest and most controversial companies in the world.¹⁰

These immersions were critical for developing the concept of the socialization of precarity. They enabled an in-depth exploration of precarious jobs, disturbing popular conceptions of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ labour and highlighting how these definitions – which directly determine conditions and remuneration – correspond to norms that disempower workers and migrants (Anderson 2013; Bauder 2006). The experience of actually performing the tasks that I was analysing helped me understand the roles of dignity and ability in forging our senses of self, even in the most exploitative conditions (Sennett and Cobb 1972). Paradoxically, one of the key elements that is missing from academic and social movement analyses are discussions of *pain* and *fatigue*. The issue of how we experience our bodies during work – and, in turn, how this experience is metabolized in our conception of ourselves – is central in developing my understanding of the socialization of precarity. Finally, the everyday aspect of working alongside other humans was perhaps the most important feature of this process: the jokes, the exasperated proclamations, the sighs expressed over a cigarette break, and the way that people carried themselves conveyed a universe of signals about how work and migration are individually negotiated in the contemporary neoliberal landscape.

From 2017 to 2021, I also interviewed other precariously employed migrant workers to ensure that their voices formed a central pillar of whatever analysis I would go on to write. I conducted twenty-one formal interviews – most of which figure in the subsequent pages – and hundreds of informal discussions across the UK.¹¹ Whether we were sharing a coffee in someone’s living room or a pint in a noisy Glasgow pub bent over a portable recorder, it became apparent that people very consciously wanted to speak; they *wanted* to be heard. What always started with the intention of lasting about an hour would become a two- or three-hour conversation as they recounted their stories of work, migration, nostalgia and struggle, as well as their hopes and desires for the future. These exchanges revealed the ways that migrants experience their own identities

as migrants in the UK. However, their most critical contribution was in helping me understand that no matter how deeply the socialization of precarity penetrates our senses of self, it cannot dispel our awareness of the fundamental inequalities that we are subject to.

This research was made possible because of my position as a migrant worker who was already familiar with the landscape of precarious employment. However, this precise position also limited my reach. Western labour markets push certain migrant groups into specific sectors, in a dynamic that reproduces itself. As a white man from Southern Europe, this meant that I generally found work in places that were largely staffed by migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The labour process in each workplace significantly impacts its ethnic composition. In Amazon, the workforce was diverse because of the high turnover and the very little need for in-depth communication between workers. However, precisely because Amazon represents the most isolating and intensive of the labour regimes that I accessed, it was where the fewest conversations could be had.

Similarly, because I was relying on various personal informal networks to interview migrant workers, most of the people I spoke to are white, status-secure European immigrants. This does not mean that they were not precarious or marginalized; everybody's working lives had resulted in adverse physical and mental impacts. Furthermore, particularly during the years before and immediately after Brexit, European workers were the most vilified social group of the UK's public sphere, regularly experiencing violence in the context of their daily lives. However, it does mean that most of the workers I interviewed did *not* experience the haunting effect of having migration controls – and the spectre of the detention centre – determining their every move in society and in work.¹² Also, even though their whiteness in the UK is perceived as a 'degenerate whiteness' (Anderson 2013: 45) similar to that of the Irish in the nineteenth century, it still affords them certain privileges – or a respite from certain attacks – that other migrant groups do not experience.

Despite the limits of my reach, I believe that the focus on these groups of workers is particularly useful for examining the socialization of precarity. As Bridget Anderson writes, status-secure European workers in the UK 'are a group where it is possible to examine migratory processes separately from immigration controls because, as EU nationals they are

not subject to immigration controls' (2013: 82). Their experiences in precarious work are therefore connected to two factors: migration *as such* – the feeling of being foreign, of having left your land in search of something better, of attempting to negotiate the new landscape you find yourself in – and precarious work. One can only presume that, if the traumatic effects of racism and deportability are added to the equation, the debilitating effects of the socialization of precarity become even more potent.

Precarity and resistance

Migrant labour in the West takes place within a wider environment structured by neoliberal economic policies. It is therefore imperative to develop a foundational understanding of what the context looks like before delving into the more specific details of migrant labour. Inside a capitalist system that is based on the unequal access to resources between labour and capital, neoliberal policies introduced since the late 1970s have accentuated class inequality and disrupted the post-Second World War Western class-collaborationist infrastructure. Austerity policies, particularly intensified following the 2008 economic crisis, disproportionately affect minorities and those in the working class and lead to ever-increasing pressures to accept whatever work is available, irrespective of conditions or wages. In the sphere of work, these changes are most directly experienced as a rise in insecure and exploitative labour conditions.

The concept of 'precarity' has become increasingly used by theorists and social movements to describe these converging processes (Jørgensen 2016; Casas-Cortés 2014; Standing 2011).¹³ The violent disruption of previous, Fordist labour regimes in the West, especially in the lower rungs of the job hierarchy, forms a central facet of the turn towards precarity. Many industrial occupations have closed, with capital moving to other parts of the world that offer cheaper production costs. They have been replaced by a proliferation of jobs in the service sector, including in hospitality, logistics and care. These changes are characterized by part-time, flexible, individualized contracts (as opposed to collective agreements), the outsourcing of employees and the stripping back of labour rights. As we shall see in chapter 3, precarious work is often complemented by the