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Metropolitan Mobilities: Transnational Urban Labour Markets

Cathy McIlwaine and Megan Ryburn

Abstract

This chapter explores the nature of transnational urban labour markets from the perspective of migrant labour with a specific focus on low-paid exploitative work in both global North and South. Conceptually, the chapter assesses the utility of some core conceptual tools in understanding transnational urban labour markets with an explicit focus on learning from the global South as a key element of this process. In doing so, we analyse the nature of transnational migrant divisions of labour, precarity and precarious employment in relation to a continuum of labour exploitation, as well as deskilling and occupational mobilities among migrants. While much research on these theorisations of metropolitan mobilities has focused on cities of the global North, we suggest that these play across North and South in transnational ways. This is linked with the global nature of the transnational movement of goods, capital and people, the volume of international migrants moving from cities in the South to those in the North, and the importance of South-South flows of migrant workers. The chapter draws empirically on analyses of migrant workers in London, especially Latin Americans, and makes reference to Bolivian migrants residing in Santiago, Chile to highlight how ‘metropolitan mobilities’ are deeply imbued by global, transnational and intersectional inequalities and exploitative labour relations but also that migrant workers also exercise their agency as they move.

Introduction

Cities around the world are increasingly reliant on migrant labour to maintain the health and wealth of their economies. While this phenomenon has extensive historical antecedents, it has arguably accelerated in recent years as a result of the economic restructuring and de-regulation of labour that prevails in many metropolitan areas, but especially in cities in the global North and South. On one hand, this has created increasingly dense and complex transnational ties across global urban systems. Yet on the other – and related to the increasingly restrictive nature of immigration regimes – it has produced a range of deeply divided and unequal urban labour markets, especially along gender and racial lines. This chapter will outline these processes with reference to a number of key conceptual issues including the ‘migrant division of labour’ [MDL] (Wills et al. 2009; 2010) whereby international migrants tend to become concentrated in low paid, low status jobs at the bottom end of a labour market hierarchy. This migrant division of labour is also inherently transnational as it is invariably underpinned by a range of gendered and racialised international spatial dynamics, such as ‘global care chains’ (Hochschild, 2000; also McIlwaine, 2010), that create and sustain these inequalities, which are also characterised by high levels of precarity. The notions of precarious employment and precarity (Butler 2009; Standing, 2011) will also be discussed in relation to migrant labour (Anderson, 2010), along with the notion of deskilling and downward occupational mobilities. Also important is that analysis of transnational labour markets tends to assume that migration flows are South to North despite a growing recognition that South-South flows are increasingly more widespread (Hujo and Piper, 2010; Melde et al., 2014; see also Ryburn 2016). In turn, this chapter is situated within wider calls to recalibrate urban theory from a global perspective that challenges a Northern-centric vantage point and assumes that the global South provides

the empirical setting for conceptualising cities (Myers, 2011; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2009). Indeed, not only should we theorise from cities of the South, but we should also recognise that urbanisation processes are themselves part of global urban systems underpinned by flows of capital, information and of particular relevance in the current case, of people (Chant and McIlwaine, 2016).

This chapter will therefore outline some core conceptual tools that we argue are useful in understanding transnational urban labour markets in global context. In doing so, we analyse the causes and consequences of precarious work as part of a transnational MDL, including the exploitative working conditions and the downward occupational mobility experienced by many migrants in cities in both global North and South. Whilst acknowledging that migrants work in all sectors of urban economies and that they are extremely valuable in contributing skills, productivity and so on, this chapter focuses on low-paid migrant workers, not least because they form the majority of foreign-born workers in cities around the world. The chapter draws empirically on analyses of migrant workers in London, especially in relation to Latin Americans, and makes reference to Bolivian migrants residing in Santiago, Chile to highlight how ‘metropolitan mobilities’ are deeply imbued by global, transnational and intersectional inequalities.

Migrant divisions of transnational labour

Conceptualisations of a ‘migrant division of labour’ have their origins in theoretical analyses of the evolution of urban labour markets and concomitant intersections with immigration regimes. Such conceptualisations have been developed especially in global cities such as London over the last 25 years in order to understand the increasing reliance on foreign-born

workers. In part, this draws on classic Marxist ideas around the ways in which immigration is functional to capitalism. This is because the demand for employees who can be paid little and work flexibly can be supplied through a ‘reserve army of labour’ (May et al, 2007) consisting of migrants. The provision of cheap labour by migrants has increased as the state has opened its borders, albeit selectively and with recent retreats from this stance in the UK and elsewhere. This ties in closely with Piore’s (1979) seminal analysis of urban labour markets which suggests that immigrant labour is preferable to that of ‘natives’ because costs can be kept down as migrants have few other options but to accept poor working conditions (Wills et al, 2009). Such acceptance is reinforced by migrants’ ‘dual frame of reference’, which validates low pay in destination labour markets compared to their conditions back home (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In cities such as London, the migrant division of labour emerged and was consolidated throughout the 1990s and 2000s as dependence on such workers increased. This was facilitated by a selective immigration regime that focused on migration from the EU and on certain sectors such as construction, hospitality, transport and care work (Wills et al, 2010).

Research in London has highlighted how the migrant division of labour functions on the basis of reproducing poor working conditions among low paid migrant workers in these sectors. These entail low levels of pay, long and fragmented working hours, a high incidence of having two or more jobs, and limited entitlements to sick pay, holidays, and maternity leave (Wills et al, 2010; see also McDowell et al, 2009). Migrants are actively sought and employed in jobs such as cleaning, catering and construction not just because of their willingness to work under these poor conditions, but also because of a presumed propensity to work harder and more efficiently than their ‘native’ counterparts (ibid; also Stenning and Dawley 2009). Yet, a so-called ‘hiring queue’ (Wills et al, 2009: 259) also means that

employers create a workforce on the basis of national and racialized stereotypes, thus creating deep-seated divisions among migrants. Therefore, a ‘new hierarchy of inequality is developing *within* the migrant division of labour in Greater London’ (McDowell et al, 2009: 20) based on gender, ethnicity, skin colour, nationality and legal status (Datta et al, 2009). As part of this, new EU migrants tend to be favoured over those from the global South, and especially those from former Commonwealth countries who are non-white, although certain EU nationalities are also preferred over others. This has therefore created a dynamic ‘rotating membership’ within the migrant division of labour in cities that changes depending on the needs of employers, the state and the city more widely at a given time (Wills et al, 2009: 268).

Especially important within these processes is the role of immigration status, with irregular and undocumented migrants often providing the most flexible form of cheap and flexible labour within the MDL (Bloch 2013). Employers are able to avoid meeting basic employment rights thus allowing them to maximise profits and maintain low costs through this ‘hyper-flexible’ labour force, while irregular migrants are able to access paid work, however exploitative it might be (Anderson 2010; Wills et al, 2010). Also significant is that irregular migrants are often integrated into formal urban labour markets especially through paying taxes (Wills et al, 2010), yet they are excluded from claiming other state resources because of their lack of citizenship (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006). There are also other ‘grey areas’ in that many migrants may be ‘semi-compliant’ in that they might reside legally in a country but work in contravention of the conditions of their immigration status, such as the number of hours of paid work associated with a student visa, for example (Ruhs and Anderson 2010). Such processes of irregularity thus bolster the MDL, but they also allow migrants themselves

a degree of agency to negotiate both the immigration regime and employers' recruitment requirements.

In the case of Latin American migrants in London, nationality and immigration status have been shown to be two major axes of differentiation within the MDL even within one community, albeit a diverse one (McIlwaine 2015). For example, Latin Americans without regular status (especially Bolivians) were able to access the office cleaning sector through a range of 'invisibility strategies' such as borrowing, renting or buying false working visas or passports and false National Insurance (social security) numbers in a process sometimes called 'irregular formality' (Vasta and Kandilige 2010). While this gave Bolivians in particular access to the jobs, they invariably had to work in the lowest status positions such as cleaning toilets. Colombians, on the other hand, who were more likely to be regular and more established (and therefore speak some English) were more likely to be cleaning supervisors. Despite some agency in accessing the labour market, irregular migrants have no comeback when they are exploited; one of the most common practices was employing irregular migrants for a month and then withholding their wages in the knowledge that they could not contact the police or labour unions (McIlwaine 2015).

In addition to 'rotating membership' based on nationality and immigration status, amongst other factors, the MDL is also inherently dynamic in other ways. One key aspect of this is how the MDL is affected during economic downturn. While some argue that there is not enough evidence to suggest that migrants in the low paid sector fare worse during economic recessions (see Findlay et, 2010), others have highlighted how they have faced considerably increased economic insecurity and erosion of wages and working conditions, and unemployment (Datta 2011). More specifically, it has been shown that the MDL in London

has remained extremely resilient during the 2008 economic downturn (McIlwaine and Datta 2014). Indeed, demand for labour in low-paid work has remained fairly constant (unlike in other European countries such as Spain) but working conditions worsened and jobs became more exploitative. This was evidenced through, for example, those working in the cleaning and catering sectors (where fragmented working hours are already the norm) having their hours of work reduced yet still being expected to complete the same tasks as previously as well as having pay cut. Other benefits have also been withdrawn such as chefs and catering assistants no longer being provided with free food in their workplaces. Such exploitative practices have been experienced more intensely among those with irregular immigration status who also reported greater difficulties in securing work in the first place (McIlwaine and Datta 2014).

The resilience of the MDL is also related to the need to recognise it as inherently transnational, especially during economic recession. Not only is it powered by foreign-born migrants, but these people are themselves constantly thinking in terms of their ‘dual frame of reference’ (see above) which is itself a transnational gaze (albeit not explicitly perceived as such by Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In London, the main reason why migrants had moved was economic hardships back home where recession had also affected their livelihoods, as well as the draw of work opportunities in the city even if it meant marked occupational de-skilling (Wills et al, 2010; see below). Furthermore, this transnationality is even more complex in that the MDL also comprises migrants who form part of wider transnational social spaces, invariably moving from one part of the space to another. For example, the majority of Latin Americans arriving in London now migrate from other European countries and especially from Spain where they were initially able to enter and find jobs very easily in domestic care and construction work. However, with the severe economic collapse in 2008 –

which also entailed a mortgage crisis among Ecuadorians – many moved to London as they were unwilling to return to their home countries (McIlwaine 2012). Thus in 2010, 36.5 per cent of Latin Americans had migrated from an intermediate country before arriving in the UK, with 38 per cent moving from Spain (McIlwaine et al, 2011). Even more recently, it has been shown that 80 per cent of all Latin Americans who have moved from another European country to London come from Spain (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016). The MDL therefore stretches across space with the migrant ‘reserve army of labour’ moving to fill positions in labour markets wherever it is possible to secure openings, despite poor working conditions. These MDLs in different nations are held together through transnational social spaces entailing the movement of people to and fro as well as remittances, especially in cases where transnational families have emerged (McIlwaine 2012). This also highlights how migrants are not passive in creating the MDL in the first place, as well as being active in coping with its more deleterious effects, often drawing on mechanisms developed in home countries (Wills et al, 2010; see also Gilmartin and Bigge 2015).

Another key spatial dimension of the MDL relates to the transnational ‘chains’ of emotional labour that often underpins it. While in London, cleaning (and care) work is not always feminised but instead is performed by both women and men (McIlwaine 2010; Datta et al, 2009; McDowell 2008), generally, the MDL is deeply imbued by gender inequalities. The engine underpinning this is often the creation of ‘global care chains’ (Hochschild 2000) referring to what Parreñas (2000) had previously called ‘the international division of reproductive labour’. ‘Global care chains’ denote the transnational processes of gendering and racialisation of paid and unpaid reproductive labour whereby women, mainly from the global South, are paid to carry out reproductive labour previously carried out unpaid by women mainly from the global North who have now entered the paid workforce. The concept

also takes into account the caring work that the women from the global South leave behind, and the women who take their places to do this. While not exclusively, these processes occur from cities of the South to cities of the North and create not only gendered inequalities but also deeply racialized divisions (Ryburn 2016). In turn, it is not the poorest in the leaving societies who migrate to the cities of the North as part of ‘global care chains’, but rather the well-educated and middle classes, therefore also contributing to important class distinctions and complexities (Riaño 2011). While the concept of global care chains has been useful in highlighting the transnationalities of caring work on a global scale, it has also been criticized, not least on grounds that it excludes the role of male migrants and tends to focus only on caring and cleaning employment (Yeates 2012). Indeed, not only have there been calls to include male domestic workers in notions of global care chains but also to incorporate stereotypically male areas of domestic work, such as gardening and household repair and maintenance (Kilkey 2010), and to recognize the multiple ways that migrant men deal with the ‘transgressive performance’ of working in low-paid feminized work (Datta et al, 2009; McIlwaine 2010). Regardless of the specificities of the processes involved, it is clear that such reproductive work, whether carried out by female or male migrants, contributes significantly (although not completely) to the MDL, and plays a crucial role in the ‘invisible welfare’ of cities especially when migrants have no regular immigration status (Ambrosini 2013).

Also crucially important to note in relation to the spatialities of the MDL is that while it has mainly focused on global cities such as London, it is not peculiar to cities in the global North nor to cities normally thought to be global. As such, the transnationality of metropolitan mobilities plays out in many different geographical contexts. Indeed, the extent of international migration within the global South, especially from poorer countries to more

wealthy neighbouring nations and to large cities, is often overlooked (Hujo and Piper 2010). This also resonates with wider debates on the need to focus attention on cities of the South as important players both empirically and theoretically in understandings of global urban systems (Chant and McIlwaine 2016). These processes of South-South mobilities have been extensive in Latin American cities, especially in the Southern Cone of Brazil, Argentina and Chile, which are wealthier than neighbouring nations such as Bolivia and Peru.

The economy of Santiago, Chile, for example, which is increasingly being termed a ‘global city’, is markedly dependent on migrants to bolster its expanding economy (despite poor efforts to integrate them) (Leal Trujillo et al, 2016). Indeed, an MDL has emerged which consigns migrants to particular employment niches such as cleaning and caring work through processes of gendering and racialisation. Whilst in the past women filling these roles were predominantly from rural Southern Chile, from the late 1990s as Chile has experienced economic growth, they have increasingly been filled by migrants. There is a degree of continuity over time, however, in that, since colonial times and into the present in Chile, certain gendered and ethnicised bodies have been inscribed as appropriate for this kind of work. Illustrating this, a survey of urban Chilean newspaper adverts for domestic help from 1960 to 2000 indicated that possessing ‘*buena presencia*’ was a common essential characteristic required (Stefoni and Fernández 2013). This phrase euphemistically encapsulates the concept of a woman who does not appear too phenotypically ‘indigenous’, but is nonetheless easily distinguished from the (white) employer (ibid; cf. Canessa 2008). Female Bolivian migrants in Ryburn’s (2016) research contended that such racial hierarchies continue to function in the selection of migrant domestic workers. They noted that when potential employers interviewed various migrants of different nationalities and ethnicities at an employment agency, those who were Colombian or Peruvian with lighter skin would be

selected over and above Bolivians who appeared more ‘indigenous’ (ibid). A key difference in this Southern focused migrant division of labour in Santiago compared to the Northern case of London is the more extreme and precarious nature of low-paid migrant work. While conditions in London are certainly exploitative, work associated with the MDL in Santiago tends to be more precarious (see below) suggesting a place-based continuum of precarious work with precarity being more intense in the global South than the global North.

Precarity, precarious employment and migration in cities

The notions of precarity and precarious employment have been central to recent debates around exploitative labour relations among migrants. Deriving from the French *précarité* (Waite 2009), precarity is more general and ‘designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’ (Butler 2009, p.ii). Precarious employment is generally thought to be unstable, lacking security and protection and involving unpredictable shifts and anti-social hours (Lewis et al, 2015). Precarious work creates *précarité* and vulnerability in people’s lives beyond the labour market thus limiting their ability to anticipate the future (Anderson, 2010: 304). Therefore, a differentiation is usually made between two ‘camps’ of thinking between ‘precarious work and precarious lives’ (Lewis et al, 2015: 584) even if they are closely interrelated as concepts (Strauss, 2017). The emergence of precarity as a concept is relatively recent especially as it relates to the casualization of labour linked with neoliberal restructuring and globalisation that, according to Standing (2011), has created a contemporary ‘precariat’ or class of informalised worker. However, precarity is not necessarily a historically specific outcome of post-Fordist labour relations (Waite, 2009) and the precariat is not an undifferentiated class of worker

(Munck, 2013). Indeed, precarious work can be experienced by the working classes and professional classes and has been experienced in many countries of the global South for decades, albeit under the guise of informality or informal sector employment (ibid; Miller, 2017). Another important distinction has been made between precarious and vulnerable employment with the former affording greater agency to the worker and acknowledging a wide range of structural factors that create the exploitative conditions in the first place (ibid.; Waite 2009). In order to understand the nature of precarious employment in more depth, several scholars have used Skrivankova's (2010) 'continuum of labour exploitation'. This aims to move beyond the binary of forced labour and decent work to encompass the variety of discrimination and labour violations which range from more minor forms of exploitation such as breaches of contract to serious forms of forced labour.

Precarity and precarious employment have increasingly been associated with migration and especially low-paid, low-status work undertaken by migrants. Indeed, the notion of 'hyper-precarity' has emerged from these debates to denote the most extreme levels of exploitation, insecurity and 'unfreedoms' are experienced by irregular migrant workers employed in the lower echelons of the labour market (Lewis et al, 2015). Irregular migrants with no citizenship rights have therefore become 'emblematic' of severely exploitative employment conditions as 'precarious workers' (Anderson 2010: 304).

The utility of exploring migrants' working conditions through the combined framework of precarious employment and a continuum of labour exploitation has been indicated in the case of Bolivian migration to Santiago, Chile. While the working conditions of the majority of participants in Ryburn's research could best be described as precarious and on a continuum of labour exploitation, there were differences in the level of severity. For example, more than in

the cleaning sector where at least basic pay was usually provided, conditions of work in the garment industry were especially precarious with multiple abuses of labour rights including trafficking. Through a disorienting and coercive process, women workers had been brought from Bolivia to Santiago where they were forced to work sixteen hour days, with half a day off per week. They slept in bunkbeds in a room adjacent to their workplace. They were not paid, but were promised that they would be at the end of one year. Furthermore, they were made to believe that under Chilean law they were bonded to one employer for a year, which was not the case. This was a clear case of trafficking for labour exploitation – at the sharp end of the continuum of labour exploitation (Hopper and Hidalgo 2006).

In another case from London where onward migrants had full citizenship rights as EU citizens, a recent survey of 400 Latin Americans recently arrived from other European countries showed that half worked in contract cleaning jobs as their only option (usually because of English language difficulties), with most working fragmented hours late at night and early in the morning. In turn, over one third (35 per cent) had more than one job with 9 per cent having 3 or 4 jobs. Although everyone earned more than the National Minimum Wage, three-quarters earned less than the London Living Wage (LLW) at the time (the amount required to meet basic needs in the city) which was much more than the London working population as a whole. Therefore, although these migrants with full citizenship rights were integrated into the formal London labour market and earning legally minimum wages, their conditions of work were precarious, albeit not at the extreme end of the continuum of labour exploitation. Yet, 45 per cent reported having experienced problems in their workplace with some nationalities such as Bolivians being much more likely to discuss exploitation (74 per cent), such as not being paid for work carried out and verbal abuse. In addition, their wider lives were characterised by precarity and even hyper-precarity in that

nearly half had to share their accommodation with other families or individuals and nearly a third considered their housing to be overcrowded. Also significant was that half had borrowed money to ‘get-by’ since leaving their homelands (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016).

Therefore, low-paid migrant workers in cities across the world tend to live and work in more precarious circumstances than their non-migrant counterparts. However, and again thinking transnationally, migrants working in cities of the global South are more likely to work at the extreme end of a continuum of labour exploitation because of less developed labour legislation and/or less developed enforcement procedures and impunity. In all cases, however, it is also important to remember that migrants are also agents in these processes and not victims of wider forces.

Deskilling and occupational mobilities among migrants in cities

The creation of the MDL, which entails the precarious employment of migrants within a wider context of a continuum of labour exploitation, is usually predicated on processes of deskilling. This is indicative of a broader need to take into account the intersecting temporalities of metropolitan mobilities as well as the spatialities. Many migration regimes use a range of distinctions about what constitutes being skilled as a way of carefully constructing the nature of the labour market. This is done in ways that intend to enable the skilled and those required by the economy to enter, and to prevent entry of those perceived as ‘undesirable’, such as the unskilled and criminals (Anderson 2010; Wills et al., 2010). The reality tends, however, to be much more complicated than the strictures of migration regimes allow for. Definitions of skilled workers vary by context, immigration regulations and professional accreditation, although ‘highly skilled’ usually refers to those with tertiary

education and specialised experience in various fields. Yet many migrants who are skilled may not migrate as such, especially women (Kofman and Raghuram 2006) and those with relatively free movement such as those within the EU (Wills et al, 2009). Indeed, language difficulties and lack of recognition of foreign credentials serve as key barriers to entering through the highly-skilled migrant route and/or act to channel well-educated migrants into the low-paid, low status sectors of labour markets.

Several scholars have drawn on Bourdieu's institutional cultural capital to show how migrants' labour market integration is affected by their ability to mobilise educational qualifications, language skills or other embodied capital such as accents, race or ethnicity – collectively known as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986; Kelly and Lusi 2006). In the case of Latin Americans in London, 70 per cent of migrants had some form of tertiary level education, yet 30 per cent of all migrants were able to speak only a little or no English. This resulted in half working in elementary jobs, mainly in the cleaning sector, again with those who were irregular being the most marginalised by these processes. Indeed, the lack of linguistic capital among this group was one of the primary reasons for their lack of mobility in the labour market even though many had actively aspired to move to London to learn English, part of a suite of capital accumulation mechanisms that they were then unable to realise (McIlwaine 2012). Indeed, once working in destination labour markets, migrants continue to face significant obstacles to their occupational mobility. In what has been referred to as 'brain abuse' in the context of Vancouver, Canada, migrants also face active discrimination on the part of employers as well as lack of familiarity with workplace practices (Bauder 2003) making it difficult for them to move out of elementary jobs. However, it is often assumed that over time, migrants can gradually move into higher status work the longer they remain both in the country and in the specific labour market, learn the

language and integrate into the wider society (Gilmartin and Bigge 2015 on EU migrants in Dublin). While this is true in many cases, it is not universal. In Toronto, Canada, for example, Filipino migrants faced especially severe deskilling, which endures for a combination of reasons rooted in 'being Filipino' and being 'culturally read' in a particular way in a society linked with deep-seated racialisation and discrimination that is passed from the first to second generations (Kelly et al 2009).

Similar processes have been found in London in research with onward Latin American migrants moving mainly from Spain. Although these migrants have EU citizenship rights, patterns of extremely marked downward occupational mobility emerged. This was evidenced by the fact that 65 per cent worked in cleaning when they arrived in London compared with only 1.3 per cent back home in Latin America and only 9.5 per cent in their previous country of residence (i.e. Spain for the most part). Partly related to their concentration in cleaning in London, very low proportions of onward migrants had their own business (1.5 per cent) or were self-employed (9 per cent) reflecting their recent arrival and lack of economic and social capital to establish businesses (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016). This said, another study with Latin Americans in the city indicated that discrimination in work such as cleaning meant that establishing own account businesses, especially in restaurants, shops and cafes serving their own community was the only way that they could ensure some occupational mobility in a competitive labour market (McIlwaine et al, 2011). Indeed, this relates to wider labour market processes whereby ethnic minority and migrant entrepreneurs with access to resources, new market opportunities and business ideas transnationally, can develop a potential 'diversity dividend' to counteract their otherwise disadvantaged position in the MDL (McEwan et al, 2005; Portes et al, 1999). Given the number of migrants involved in these types of activities compared with the total number seeking decent work (Riaño 2011),

however, it is unlikely that such entrepreneurial activity will be able to provide for all those seeking to move out of precarious work.

The MDL is therefore dynamic in relation to its rotating membership and transnational variations in its composition, yet it is much more entrenched when it comes to migrants being able to develop skills and tools to move beyond the types of precarious work that characterises it. There is some potential to develop small businesses, especially in terms of capitalising on transnational linkages as a way of countering discrimination (Bagwell 2015), yet ultimately this is quite limited. Furthermore, entrepreneurial opportunities tend to be more developed in cities of the global North while migrants trying to get by in cities of the South will in effect join those making a living in the already saturated informal sector. However, it is also important not to lose sight of migrant agency in these discussions. Despite lack of occupational mobility, some migrants working in precarious employment still exercise agency in relation to their decision to move, their ability to challenge workplace abuses, collective workplace action, and organizing around other aspects of social life (Paret and Gleeson 2016). For example, in relation to temporary migrant workers in London, Alberti (2014) explores how some manage to escape poor working conditions through using their ‘exit power’ and move from one job to another within a given labour market or indeed to another country.

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on a series of core conceptualisations and related issues for understanding the role of low-paid migrant labour in urban labour markets across the world including the migrant division of labour (MDL), precarious employment, precarity and a

continuum of labour exploitation, as well as deskilling and occupational mobilities. While most research to date around these various aspects of metropolitan mobilities has assumed that these theorisations are relevant for interpreting processes in the global North and that the underlying phenomena are peculiar to cities located there, we suggest that these play across North and South in transnational ways. This is because, first, urban systems are increasingly global in nature in terms of movement of goods, capital and people, second, so many international migrants move from nations in the South to those in the North, and, finally, there are increasingly important South-South flows of migrant workers to cities. Indeed, we also argue that it is extremely important to take the spatialities and temporalities of migrant labour into account within cities, and especially their transnational dimensions and how these can change over time. Furthermore, while low-paid migrant labour across the world is invariably incorporated into urban economies in ways that advantage employers and capitalism, migrants are also agents of change within these processes. Although their precarious working conditions might be highly exploitative everywhere, those who move have the potential to improve their lives if not for themselves, then perhaps for their children in the future.

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