

Interview with Hannah Schling



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Hannah Schling is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Queen Mary University of London. She received her PhD in Human Geography from King's College London.

You recently finished your PhD thesis on labour migration. Can you briefly comment on what it is about and how you arrived at your topic and your field?

So at the most concrete level my PhD research examines the role of work agencies and worker dormitories within systems of migrant labour in the export-oriented electronics manufacturing sector in the Czech Republic. I did my fieldwork in worker dormitories in Pilsen and Pardubice, which I chose because these are major industrial centres in the Czech manufacturing sector. The sector employs both EU and non-EU workers: men and women from Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, Mongolia, Vietnam — and dormitories are essentially multi-national spaces with highly complex internal social relations. I did ethnographic research in the dormitories, seeking to understand everyday life and struggles within them. But I also examined how dormitories and their everyday life exist systematically, within the broader regime of labour and migration in the export-oriented manufacturing sector.

I examined labour migration to the Czech Republic through a social reproduction analysis. Very broadly, I was interested to see how the daily and generational reproduction of the labour force encompasses social relations and forms of unwaged work far beyond the workplace itself. This asks how workers themselves are reproduced as classed, gendered and racialized labouring subjects, and I ask how in addressing the question we are trying to understand the fundamental importance of material life outside of work to the operation of labour regimes and associated regimes of value accumulation. Workers' dormitories are concrete ways of addressing this question: how are these migrant workers produced as temporary and 'disposable' workers, and how is that bound up with particularly gendered, racialised and classed notions of their 'foreignness'? How does this occur partially through the organisation of their (permanently-temporary), daily reproduction in the dormitory system?

How did you choose the sector of electronics in the Czech Republic as your field?

I looked at electronics manufacturing because it encompasses specific temporal imperatives — much more seasonal production, and with contract manufacturing in particular, production orders go up and down, there are often very short turnaround times and the size of the required work force consequently constantly fluctuates. So



the temporariness, or rather the disposability, of labour is a constant question, which employers are trying to construct or manage in the interest of maintaining low labour costs, but also as a kind of disciplinary labour management practice.

As such, my thesis is both very empirically focused. I was trying to chart the relations and infrastructures of the system of migrant labour, to find out how exactly work agencies operate to manage the logistics of migrant labour supply in this context, how workers negotiate the agency system, what consequences this has for everyday life in the dormitory, and so on. And at the same time I was trying to think conceptually — about how to theorize social reproduction as an analytical lens.

In approaching the dormitory ethnographically, a core question I had was: how does everyday life in the dormitory operate in relation to the system of work. You have eight or twelve-hour shifts, mixtures of day and night shifts sometimes each week, and complicated regulation of workers' availability on a day-to-day basis. How does the dormitory regulate the everyday "biorhythms" of the workers in relation to work, but also how do contradictions emerge within the dormitory space. I understand those contradictions both as contradictions for labour — the regime of work and the deteriorated conditions of the dormitory are in many ways damaging to workers' health and well-being, meaning the 'disposability' of labour is fundamentally embodied. The strains of both shift work and the deteriorated conditions of reproduction in the dormitory space are written on the bodies and subjectivities of workers. But this also creates contradictions for employers as well in that system of labour. Such 'disposability' for workers is not only produced by work agencies, or by the timetable of HR managers at factories.

Within that context the contradictions produced by the dormitory also include where workers' own circulation, quitting or leaving the workplace does not match the temporality desired by employers. One of the things I tried to theorize and also investigate empirically was the way that workers — in an absence of other forms of labour organising — actually use quitting or exiting from the workplace as a means to contest their working conditions and also the living conditions in the dormitory. As an infrastructure, the dormitory produces a broader social temporariness for migrant workers, bordering off the life of migrant workers from the broader city, producing a broader marginality. But I argue that workers try to navigate this temporariness — to use dormitories as an infrastructure to their own advantage. They use them almost as nodes within broader migration trajectories, within and beyond the Czech Republic. A lot of workers come to the Czech Republic to make money to fund future labour migration to Western Europe — Germany, the Netherlands, the UK. I examined how the temporalities of migrant labour are a terrain of struggle between workers and capital in which the infrastructure of workers' reproduction, the dormitory, is fundamentally at stake. This brings in questions of mobility and movement, and it implicates questions of how borders and migration regimes also embedded strongly in regimes of work and the production of labouring subjects.

Could you give an example?

One factory I examined was employing high numbers of EU workers from Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia through work agencies. During the course of my fieldwork they



fired agency workers and brought in new core workers from Mongolia. These workers have a very different mobility in the labour market — their status as third country nationals means their legal residency is tied to their employers in ways that EU workers are not. The employer brought in the new Mongolian core workers because the turnover of EU workers was too high. So, I also tried to think about how these relative positions of EU and non-EU workers are used by employers, but also how workers navigated it themselves. For example, some non-EU workers use semi-illegalized routes to gain some level of mobility in the labour market. But I also discussed how EU workers' seemingly universal free movement is also conditioned, contained and disrupted by the system of employer-provided housing, which is what the dormitory is. Actually quitting one agency and moving to another often means navigating the risk of homelessness, because housing is tied to employment through a particular agency. If you lose or leave the job, you are immediately evicted from the dormitory. So I tried to think critically about how EU and non-EU workers are produced in relation to each other. And having done extensive fieldwork on this question, I could see it is much more complicated than the formal legal status alone might suggest.

What challenges did you face in your fieldwork and research in general — conceptual, methodological, personal ones?

In many ways, my fieldwork was quite complicated. Most importantly, because ensuring the safety of my interlocutors and workers I was meeting and speaking to was my biggest priority. I had to be careful that their participation in my research would not jeopardize their position as already quite precariously employed people. That raised questions about the visibility of the research. I undertook different kinds of security practices to make sure that I would not pose a threat to the people I was meeting. Secondly, in undertaking fieldwork in the workers' dormitory I was initially met with a lot of warnings from Czech people about going into dormitories, concerning my safety as a single woman. This was especially strong during my fieldwork in Pilsen, because at that time there was a large media campaign that focused on the supposed criminality of migrant workers. In a way, my research also confronted how Czechness is produced in relation to dormitory spaces and the foreign workers they house. This is also at the heart of what I tried to do in my thesis: to understand the productive power of the stereotypes — and the things people were telling me about dormitories from outside them. Those stereotypes assert what normative gendered constructions of masculinity and femininity *should* be, or of where the boundary between 'Czech' and 'foreigner' is and what that means. At the same time, living in the dormitories was, as with ethnographic research in many contexts, extremely complicated and I had to navigate intense and often complicated social dynamics in gaining trust, negotiating my positionality especially as a single woman in that space. Navigating these gendered relations inside the dormitory then gave me another perspective into how gender is produced within this context.

Who are your favourite authors? Which books influenced your research most?

First of all, there are many workplace ethnographies I am influenced by, primarily feminist ethnographies that span anthropology and feminist political economy.



Leslie Salzinger's 2003 book *Genders in Production* has been very influential in thinking about how the gendered subject is produced in the workplace. Secondly, Melissa Wright's (2006) book *Disposable Women and other Myths of Global Capitalism*, examining how women working on assembly lines in Mexico and China are produced as 'disposable' workers through both management practices and patriarchal relations outside of the factory. As for work on social reproduction, the work of materialist and Marxist feminist such as Silvia Federici (2004, 2012) and Maria Mies (2014) who centred women's unwaged labour and social reproduction as a category of analysis. There is excellent work being done on social reproduction in geography, for example Kendra Strauss and Katie Meehan's (2015) edited volume *Precarious Worlds: Contested Geographies of Social Reproduction*, and Mitchell, Marston and Katz's (2004) now classic essay on 'life's work'. I would also say my PhD supervisor Nicholas de Genova's work on racialization, borders and migration, both his earlier ethnographic work on Mexican migrant labour in the USA (2005), his conceptualisation of deportability (2002, 2010), as well as his more recent theorisations of 'the European Question' (2016). Finally, Bridget Anderson's (2010, 2015) analysis of the power of immigration controls to produce 'precarious workers' and the ways labour market status of EU and non-EU workers are produced in relation to each other in the UK, and Gabriella Alberti's (2014, 2017) work on intra-EU labour migration and worker exit as a terrain of resistance. And as a geographer, my work has been influenced by critical geographers like David Harvey and Neil Smith, and critical feminist economic geographers such as Marion Werner and Kendra Strauss.

Is there anything you would have liked to research more, but did not have a chance to? What is next in your research of labour migration?

One thing that I see as a big gap is the history of the dormitory in the Czech context. What is very well studied is the dormitory as a form of labour management in places like China, or various forms of temporary accommodation in agricultural sectors globally. But in Central and Eastern Europe, the dormitory is entirely under-studied. My thesis was one of the first attempts to do that systematically. I hope that anyone reading this who is working on dormitories in CEE will get in touch with me! Alena Alamgir who works on Vietnamese labour exchange programmes under state socialism has done archival research which shed some light on what life was like for Vietnamese workers in dormitories under the former regime. But what is completely unknown is what happened post-1989 and in the period between 1989 and 2016 when I did my research. The big boom in export-oriented manufacturing has brought a proliferation of work agencies and worker dormitories. There is a complete gap in understanding how dormitories came to be such a dominant part of the contemporary labour regime in the Czech Republic and in the system of labour migration. What are the historical continuities and discontinuities between the dormitories Vietnamese workers were living in in the 1970s and 1980s and what we see today in and around the new industrial zones? What does that tell us about regimes of work and of social reproduction, which are dramatically different for working classes then and now? Secondly, I would like to think more about how the Czech Republic is geographically situated in broader trajectories of internal labour migration in the EU. Particularly



Romanian, Slovak and Bulgarian workers in the Czech Republic have huge experience working in different EU countries. For example, Romanian workers who worked in Spanish agriculture pre-2008 crisis Slovak workers in German warehouses etc. I am part of a group of scholars examining intra-EU labour migration, and thinking beyond simple linear moves from east to west, which is the dominant idea of how labour migration works in the EU. Currently we are working on a special issue for the journal *International Migration* on this question, with which we hope to discuss how various kinds of national bordering and social exclusion of mobile EU workers are emerging in this supposedly 'free movement' space of the EU.

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