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Local labour market segmentation and migrant workers' experiences: The case of the hotel industry in Venice

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Abstract

Using Venice as a case study, this article seeks to analyse the experience of migrant workers in the hotel industry through a theoretical engagement with the local labour market segmentation approach. The global hotel industry relies on large numbers of migrant workers, who are often in their first job in the host context, as a solution to the problem of cyclical staff shortages. Previous studies have found that low barriers to entry into the sector and high staff turnover are the underlying reasons for this relationship. They have also shown that the same characteristics that make the hotel sector attractive to migrant workers also lead them to leave the industry shortly after entering it. However, this article reveals significant stability in the careers of migrants employed in Venetian hotels as well as heterogeneity in their individual experiences. Through identifying and analysing the factors underpinning the trajectories of these workers, the article emphasises the importance of local characteristics of production, consumption, institutional and welfare regulation patterns, workers' social stratifications and strategies of social reproduction in shaping the relation between migrant workers and the local hotel industry.

Keywords

Hotel labour, migrant workers, seasonal work, segmentation, Venice

Introduction

Hospitality is among the most labour-intensive sectors of the global economy that dominate the employment opportunities for migrant workers (Baum, 2012; Duncan et al., 2013).

Past and contemporary empirical research has stressed that hotels rely on migrant workers as a solution to the cyclical problems of local labour shortages, high turnover rates and the reluctance of local workers to engage in low-wage, precarious, physically demanding jobs (Duncan et al., 2013; Janta et al., 2011; Williams and Hall, 2000). The hotel industry is often where migrant workers find their first job in the host context, being a safe-haven occupation that is easy to get and an immediate source of income (Janta et al., 2011). However, the demanding working conditions and precarious employment of

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hotel work prevent them from advancing to medium- and long-term careers. Migrant workers are thus likely to develop strong feelings of disaffection in these jobs, relating to them in a purely instrumental way, and often end up leaving the sector after relatively short periods (Alberti, 2014; Janta et al., 2011; Williams and Hall, 2000).

Drawing on the results of qualitative research and adopting a spatial lens that considers the characteristics of local contexts, this article analyses the case of migrants employed in the hotel sector in Venice, Italy, revealing trajectories that differ from that found in much of the literature. The results show that for migrants, employment in Venice's hotels is often a means of exiting more segregated, demanding and informal jobs. Once they enter the industry, migrants establish medium- and long-term careers, often in the same firm. However, while this greater stability was common to all the migrant workers interviewed, their experiences of entrapment, satisfaction, working conditions and access to means of social protection were significantly heterogeneous.

By combining Peck's approach of local labour market segmentation (Peck, 1996) with studies that emphasise the role played by local conditions in modifying the quality of hotel jobs (Gray, 2004; Watt, 2012), this article aims to identify and analyse the factors underlying both the overall stability and the differentiation in the experiences of migrant workers.

While the trajectories of migrant workers in tourism are similar in different national contexts, gaps remain in understanding how they shift according to the spatial diversity of consumption, production, social protection and institutional arrangements in particular tourist locations. It is thus reasonable to expect that this variability also depends on how labour markets are regulated and segmented at the local level, consequently influencing migrants' individual experiences, work choices and mobility patterns (Hatziprokopiou, 2004; Markova et al., 2016).

Certain local features and industry heterogeneities make the Venetian hotel industry particularly suited to studying how labour market segmentation works at the local level. First, Venetian hotels' uneven organisational and market characteristics, which often translate into different working conditions, are seen as a key variable in influencing migrants' experiences of work. Second, the heterogeneity of the pool of migrant workers in Venice can help to better understand how social differences play a critical role in differentiating workers' experiences. Third, the combination of the local characteristics of seasonality – for example, the length or timing of the high season – and the social and institutional regulation of labour, including access to trade union support and social protection, are particularly important in the relationship between migrants and the hotel industry.

This article's empirical results and theoretical implications help to expand our understanding of the role of the local socio-economic context in shaping the experiences, strategies, and orientations of migrant workers (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009). Furthermore, by challenging the assumption that low wages, difficult working conditions, limited union presence and limited internal mobility are inherent characteristics of the hospitality industry (Gray, 2004), this article helps to shed light on the regulatory and institutional arrangements that influence the quality of these occupations locally.

The article is organised as follows. After this initial introductory section, the second section analyses the literature on labour mobility in the hotel industry and, based on the local labour market segmentation approach, develops a theoretical framework for analysing the empirical results. The presentation of the research method is followed by an overview of the production and employment context of the Venetian hotel industry. The following sections present the research findings, focussing on migrant trajectories and their overall experiences of working in the hotel sector. In the concluding section, the implications for research on labour market segmentation and hotel employment are discussed, and some directions for future investigations are explored.

Migrant workers in the hospitality industry

It has been extensively documented that hotels produce a wide range of occupations usually associated with secondary segments of labour markets (Lucas

and Mansfield, 2008), characterised by low wages, insecurity, challenging working conditions and lack of trade union representation (Duncan et al., 2013; Lucas and Mansfield, 2008; Riley et al., 2002). They are often 'dirty, monotonous and physically demanding jobs with an anti-social demand cycle and working times' (Baum, 2012). As argued by Riley et al. (2002), these occupational characteristics result in low barriers to entry into the sector, as well as severe limits to upward internal mobility. In turn, hotel workers tend to have a high propensity for labour mobility, frequently changing employers either by moving within the same sector or to other sectors.

It is commonly understood that the spatial and temporal dynamics of consumption and production are key factors in the low quality of work and high staff turnover in the hospitality sectors. Hotel activities cannot be spatially or temporally separated from places of consumption (Urry, 1990), and they also suffer from strong temporal fluctuations in demand, in particular seasonality (Lai and Baum, 2005), which impact job quality and income continuity, as the literature has thoroughly documented (Duncan et al., 2013; Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003). Seasonality and spatial immobility mean that the workforce must be available at consumption locations and in sufficient number to deal with the different temporal fluctuations in production (Duncan et al., 2013; Lai and Baum, 2005; Matthews and Ruhs, 2007; Williams and Hall, 2000). The inherent variability of consumer demand supports the industry's tendency to employ workers based on the hire-and-fire model (Matthews and Ruhs, 2007), that is, occasionally and seasonally, depending on temporal fluctuations in demand. Labour mobility has emerged as a key tool for managing these fluctuations and as a strategy for coping with the high turnover that characterises the industry.

While the dynamics of demand variability worsen working conditions and career prospects, making these occupations unattractive to those seeking stable employment, the same characteristics can help attract workers who cannot or do not want to be employed on a stable, full-time basis, such as students (Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003), or those with difficulties entering the labour market, such as migrant workers (Bianchi, 2000).

It is therefore not surprising that industry features such as seasonality, high labour turnover rates and poor working conditions have been seen as leading factors in stimulating the employment of migrant workers (Baum, 2012; Janta et al., 2011).

Some researchers claim that recruiting migrant workers can provide other benefits to employers in the hotel industry. First, the just-in-time and to-the-point management of migrant labour flows can enable employers to avoid changing – and improving – working conditions, thus reducing inflationary pressures on wages (Janta et al., 2011; Williams and Hall, 2000). Researchers have also explored the cultural and social benefits of employing migrant labour in the tourism sector, thanks to the cultural competencies of migrant workers, in particular language skills and cultural closeness with consumers (Janta et al., 2012; Markova et al., 2016).

Social and cultural benefits of working in hotels have also been considered for migrant workers. Working in the hotel industry should permit a certain 'visibility' and a high level of interaction with customers and other workers, thus improving opportunities for integration in the host context (Janta et al., 2012).

While those studies stress migrant workers' positive experiences, some scholars point out that these supposed 'cultural benefits' might stem from an essentialist view of differences, permeated by social and cultural stereotypes, which could further reinforce discrimination based on ethnic and gender biases (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; McDowell et al., 2009; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010). The supposed greater visibility and higher level of interaction provided by hotel work is often countered by the fact that migrants tend to be trapped in back-office tasks (Matthews and Ruhs, 2007) with limited opportunities to interact with customers.

The need for hotel and tourism businesses to secure a large labour pool on a cyclical basis leads them to create low entry barriers for jobs, making tourism an easy entry point into local contexts and labour markets, providing migrants with an immediate occupation and source of income (Janta et al., 2011). Indeed, hospitality is often the first job available to newcomers (Riley et al., 2002).

However, migrant workers' experiences in the tourism sector are often short-term (Baum, 2012; Duncan et al., 2013; Williams and Hall, 2000), frequently marked by other migration and career goals as well as individual orientations of an instrumental nature (Riley et al., 2002). Migrants tend to see these occupations as temporary stepping-stones towards better job opportunities (Williams, 2008). Analysing the trajectories of migrant workers in London hotels, Alberti (2014), for example, highlighted migrant workers' lack of attachment to their jobs, which they do not consider to be a source of cultural benefits, viewing them as a means through which to implement their migration strategies. To escape the sectors' low wages and difficult working conditions, they move to other sectors and/or engage in new migration experiences. A study carried out in an Italian tourist location (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2016) demonstrated that migrant workers tended to change jobs after a relatively short period of employment in hotels to improve their working conditions, even when this implied moving into occupations dominated by low wages, such as domestic care.

An important exception to this mobility dynamic was noted by Watt (2012) in his study of migrant workers in Toronto hotels. By casting light on the role that certain regulatory features of local contexts can play in influencing migrants' relationships with the hotel industry, Watt (2012) showed how working full-time in unionised hotels was experienced by migrants as an advancement in the class hierarchy. In line with these insights, the next section develops an analytical framework with which to grasp the role played by the local characteristics of labour markets.

Migrant trajectories and local labour market segmentation

Although the trajectories of migrant workers in the hospitality industry (as in other sectors) are structurally marked by the reproduction of 'ethnic punishment' (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011), as migrants suffer from greater occupational disadvantages, their experiences cannot be fully generalised (Lucas and Mansfield, 2008), since working conditions, job satisfaction and migration strategies can vary significantly depending on multiple 'local' conditions.

To analyse the conditions underlying trajectories and experiences of migrant workers in the Venetian hotel industry, I draw on Jamie Peck's (1996) approach, which combines the insights of 'third generation' theories of labour market segmentation with those coming from human geography. Peck's approach emphasises the role played by the local dimension in shaping the conditions of labour market segmentation. In contrast to the first two generations of segmentation theories, namely, labour market dualism and the radical approaches, the third generation of segmentation theories (see, among others, Picchio, 1992) highlights the role of social reproduction, conceiving segmentation as the outcome of the combined effects of three distinct but interconnected dimensions. These dimensions are: (1) the segmentation of the labour supply (including an analysis of social reproduction, the gender and racial division of labour, workers' participation in trade unions, etc.); (2) the segmentation of labour demand (including the characteristics of businesses, the target market, technological differentials, labour processes, etc.); and (3) the segmentation of labour protection models (the role of the state, welfare systems, labour law, etc.) (Peck, 1996: 60–61). While accepting this conception, Jamie Peck (1996) proposed that more attention should be paid to spatial dynamics to consider how segmentation works differently in each local context according to its political, social, productive, and economic specificities.

A joint analysis of these dimensions at the local level makes it possible to accurately trace the trajectories of migrant workers and to establish the determinants of their differences. First, it enables us to shed light on the diversification of business demand as a whole, considering which occupations are available to workers (migrants and natives), both inside and outside the local hotel industry. The fact that tourism is the main economic activity in Venice can lead to some specific employment outcomes, also involving the job trajectories of the native workforce. Italy's migrant inclusion model, which combines a low risk of unemployment with a high probability of segregation in low-wage and informal occupations (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011), may shape the relationship between migrants and the local tourism industry. Similarly, spatially uneven production

patterns, as well as firms' heterogeneity in terms of organisation, size, market demand, management styles and the presence or absence of trade unions, are all variables that crucially influence labour demand, working conditions, career opportunities, social security and contractual regimes. The way that tourism demand fluctuates is also important variable. Tourism consumption patterns can vary depending on the particular location and the length and timing of the high and low seasons, and thus have an uneven impact on the economic and employment structure. For example, many workers' cyclical exposure to unemployment is closely related to the temporal dynamics of seasonality, which differs considerably across different tourist areas.

Second, in contrast to the literature that recognises the fragmentation of migrants' experiences according only to skills and qualifications, it is argued that the social differences among migrant workers are not neutral when it comes to the definition of working conditions. It is widely documented that nationality-based stereotypes clearly overlap with perceptions of gender in processes of hotel labour recruitment (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Lucas and Mansfield, 2008; McDowell et al., 2009; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). For example, researchers reported that female migrants are usually employed in traditionally domestic and more invisible tasks (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; McDowell et al., 2009). In turn, these tasks are also those most affected by rationalisation and cost-cutting strategies such as outsourcing in response to increased international competition (Watt, 2012). Undoubtedly, each worker's position in the labour process also contributes to changes in their working and social conditions.

Finally, another critical element that helps us to understand migrant workers' diversified experiences and specific strategies is the interaction between welfare and institutional regulation regimes and the local labour market. While there is a tendency to consider institutional regulation as homogeneous because it acts on an administratively unitary territory (such as a nation-state), it can in fact have different geographical and local outcomes (Peck, 1996: 101–105). This is particularly relevant in Venice for at least two reasons. The first relates to social protection for seasonal work, which is proportional to the duration of the work period. Since Venice has a relatively long season, workers will receive more benefits than in most other tourist areas. The second relates to the presence or absence of certain actors, such as trade unions, which are unevenly spread in the Venetian hotel industry. Where unions are present, they 'make a difference' (Watt, 2012) to the quality of work and in facilitating migrant workers' access to social protection tools (Gray, 2004).

Method

This article is based on the results of broader research conducted between 2015 and 2018, which used qualitative methods to explore inequalities in the Venetian hotel industry. Part of that research concerned the trajectories of migrant workers employed in hotels.

Rather than focussing on individual workplaces, the research adopted the local hospitality industry as a case study to observe workers' trajectories according to the peculiarities of single hotels. Venetian hotels show marked differences in size, class of service; type of ownership and management (e.g. corporate or family-run companies); and consumer demands (Iannuzzi, 2021). To reduce this heterogeneity without running the risk of limiting its heuristic power in exploring the differences and convergences between the various hotel establishments, I classified them into two macro-types: upper-class hotels and middle- and lower-class hotels. This classification was not imposed by the research beforehand but emerged *ex post* from empirical observation and interviews with key informants. In the latter's narratives, this classification emerged as the main explanatory variable for describing the common differences between hotel segments in terms of seasonality patterns, workers' careers, and the management of labour relations, including trade union protection.

Between 2015 and 2019, 56 semi-structured interviews were carried out. Of these, 36 were conducted with workers (15 women and 21 men), of whom 26 were international migrants (12 women and 14 men). The interviews covered hotel workers in both service and market classes (upper and lower segments) and employed in different departments, tasks and contractual regimes (directly employed or subcontracted workers, seasonal workers, etc.).

Other interviews were carried out with trade unionists (7) and managers (13).

While trade unionists were contacted formally (by sending an interview request to their respective organisations), employers and managers were reached through formal requests to companies or via the author's social networks. For the workers, the sampling was built up using the snowball technique, using different starting points: trade unions, personal contacts, and local nongovernmental organisations.

At the time of each interview, all of the workers were employed in the hotel sector, except for one: an Italian worker who had started his trade union career. Despite the diversity among them, all of the non-European migrant workers held a long-term residence permit. A worker of Filipino origin had recently obtained Italian citizenship, while three workers (two Senegalese, one Albanian) were in the process of obtaining it. Some of those interviewed arrived in Italy as early as the late 1990s, but the vast majority arrived in the first decade of the 2000s.

The pool of interviewed migrant workers was heterogeneous when it came to educational background. However, none of them had had specific training in the hotel industry before working within it, and none had had any experience of working in the hotel industry before arriving in Italy.

While the topics covered in the interviews with migrant workers concerned their overall biographical path, their experience working in the Venetian hotel industry was the core focus of this work.

The anecdotal experiences gathered in the research guided the decision to adopt a thematic analysis of the empirical findings, following the process in consequential phases elaborated by Rubin and Rubin (2005).

The Venice hotel industry and the composition of its workforce

With 5.5 million overnight tourists in 2019 (Venice City Council, 2020), Venice is among the most touristic cities in the world. The hotel industry in Venice consists of more than 400 establishments, with a substantial expansion in recent years. Although the average size of the hotels is relatively small, Venice is characterised by a high incidence of upper segment hotels: there are 146 hotels with at least a four-star or five-star rating, compared with 184 three-star and 89 one-star and two-star hotels (Venice City Council, 2020). Since 1990, the presence of multinational hotel chains has increased continually, most of which are in the upper segment.

Although it cannot be generalised, according to our informants, upper segment hotels tend to be distinguished by not being family-run, the greater presence of specialised tasks, more systematic attention to workers' skills and training, a more structured internal labour market, the preservation of a system of formal industrial relations and the enforcement of integrative company bargaining agreements.

By contrast, in lower segment hotels, the management is frequently family-based, they employ a limited number of workers, and trade unions are usually absent. In addition, while these hotels formally adhere to the national collective agreement on hospitality, their adherence, albeit substantial, is limited to certain aspects (hourly wages, sick leave, insurance). Other things (overtime, tasks, training and skills recognition) are often handled informally between employers and employees. These characteristics result in worse working conditions and lower wages than in upper segment hotels. However, our informants did not perceive the unreported economy and the spread of undocumented workers as characteristic of any segment of the industry in Venice.

The Venetian hotel industry has seen significant changes in the last three decades. First, outsourcing processes have begun, mainly for cleaning and housekeeping activities. Outsourcing in the hotel industry is often accompanied by contractual and wage dumping, shifting from hourly wages to piecework, and the non-recognition of some contractual rights and benefits (Iannuzzi, 2021).

Second, the transformation of the (social) composition of the labour force, which has seen an increase in migrant workers. According to some estimates (Istat, 2019), there were about 10 thousand workers employed in the tourism industry in the city of Venice, of which 4300 are employed under contracts in the hotel sector. Among the 4300 workers surveyed, about 1300 were temporary workers.

International migrant workers make up about 40 per cent of the total hotel workforce (1700).

Meanwhile, female migrant workers account for 49 per cent of the foreign hotel workforce (Istat, 2019). Research participants revealed that the hotel sector in Venice employs workers from various countries such as Bangladesh, Moldova, Romania, Albania, Ukraine, the Philippines, Senegal, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Nigeria. There is a strong gender imbalance in terms of numbers of people migrating from Bangladesh, the Maghreb and the Middle East (majority male workers) and Eastern European countries (majority female). Other nationalities are characterised by a more balanced gender distribution (Istat, 2019)

Another noteworthy phenomenon over the same period was the growth of tourist flow. This has led to some profound adjustments in temporal fluctuations, making it possible to partly narrow the gap between high and low seasons. According to practitioners, as well as data provided by the Venice City Council (2020), until the 1990s, tourist flow was clearly concentrated in the summer period and suffered a substantial decrease during the winter. Prior to the pandemic, however, the high season in Venice had reached an average duration of 7–8 months. Moreover, even in the winter period, the tourist flow never stops and is helped by the fact that it is interspersed with some significant peaks (such as Carnival and the Christmas holidays). For example, in 2019, more than a million visitors spent at least one night in Venice in the winter. This meant that many companies – that used to suspend the production cycle in the winter and use a 'hire and fire' model due to seasonal fluctuations – started stabilising part of their employment and managing demand variability with temporary agency workers or part-time contracts.

The extension of the working period has had important implications for seasonal workers' access to social protection tools. In the 1970s, recognising the unique nature of these occupations, the Italian government introduced unemployment benefits (informally called 'seasonal unemployment') for seasonal workers. Seasonal employment is also associated with other social protection tools, such as the right of precedence if the company recruits for permanent positions and the right to annual recall by the same company. The Italian government modified the seasonal unemployment benefit in 2014–2015, tightening the requirements and proportionally linking the benefit duration to the number of months worked. On average, seasonal workers get unemployment for a period equal to about half the number of days worked. However, unlike in other contexts of Italian tourism characterised by short seasonal work periods (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto, 2016), the long high season in Venice mitigated the consequences of law changes for workers, preventing them from being left without income during the non-working periods.

Entering and working in the local hotel industry

According to informants, migrants' entry into Venetian hotel activities usually occurs after more or less prolonged working periods in other sectors, often alternating informal employment, and for non–European Union (EU) migrants, periods of legal residence alternate with periods without residence permits. The empirical data reveal some common pathways for respondent workers before entering the hotel industry, and shows a high degree of segmentation by nationality, gender and migration status. For example, respondent Filipino workers had often previously worked in industrial and/or domestic cleaning, while Senegalese, Moroccan and Albanian workers had experience in street markets, agriculture and heavy industry. Bangladeshi workers had commonly worked in the subcontracting of Venetian shipbuilding, where they often encountered employment schemes with multiple irregularities. Some respondents had been employed in the tourism industry in other places and had drawn from this experience to get a job in the Venetian hotel industry. Bato sums up this trajectory well:

> I travelled around half of Italy, mainly agriculture, and construction, different jobs almost always without a contract. Then in 2007, I did my first 'season' in Riccione. In 2009 I was hired in a Mestre restaurant, and in 2010 I started to work with an agency in a hotel restaurant in Venice. Then the restaurant closed for renovation and I was hired when it reopened. (Bato, hotel waiter, Albanian, four-star hotel)

Even for foreign EU nationals who do not require a residence permit, which in the Venice hotels are mostly Romanian women, employment in hotels was not immediate upon their arrival in Italy. All of the Romanian women interviewed had previously worked as domestic caregivers, which often has a totally or partial informal employment regime. As Adelina states,

> I came here to replace my sister, caring for an elderly woman. I didn't earn much. There was no contract. But I had somewhere to sleep and eat and started speaking Italian [. . .]. I got into the hotel thanks to one of my co-nationals who worked there. (Adelina, chambermaid, Romanian, outsourced worker)

Certain trends emerged in how respondents found jobs in hotels. Recruitment practices were very uneven across hotel segments and reflect, as Markova et al. (2016) argue, the complex nature of employing migrant workers. For example, as an Italian union official stated, in the lower-middle hotel segment, social capital and word-of-mouth were among the most commonly used tools for recruitment, often favouring a more homogeneous workforce composition by nationality. An emblematic case is that of the kitchens of some hotels, which practitioners considered 'ethnic enclaves' of Bangladeshi migrants, where the hierarchical organisation of work (typical of kitchen brigades) merges with elements of community stratification:

> Certainly, community contact is very important. There are communities like the Bangladeshi one where everything is managed within the community, where there is a series of figures who select, lead, and control workers. There are many hotels, particularly small ones, and restaurants, where Bangladeshi workers fully manage the kitchens. (Union migrant support officer, Italian)

In this research sample, the most common strategy for migrant workers entering the luxury segment as direct employees was to use temping agencies, which handle most of the recruitment, training and labour supply functions for these hotels. The agency channel is even more crucial for female migrant hotel cleaners directly employed by hotels. This type of work requires short training periods – partly on-the-job – that these agencies take care of. However, as Amina – the only respondent who managed to get a hotel job soon after her arrival in Italy in 2007 – explains, once they are in the hotel sector, migrants tend to break off their relationship with agencies and aim for direct employment:

> I arrived as a result of family reunification. My husband also works in a hotel and asked the agency he worked for if they needed someone for housekeeping. So I went, and they trained me. I worked for them for two years, and then I was hired by a hotel nearby and then by the cooperative when the hotel decided to outsource. (Amina, chambermaid, Senegalese, outsourced worker)

Once employed in hotels, the workers we interviewed tended to develop medium- to long-term careers. Both the workers and the other research informants emphasised occupational stability in the sector. This reveals a double specificity in the relationship between migrants and tourist employment in Venice, constituted by the entry of migrants into these occupations after working in other sectors and career stability once they are employed in hotels. Several factors underlying this Venetian double specificity: the vital economic role played by tourism in the city; the high incidence of upper segment hotels; the presence of trade unions; the length and timing of Venetian seasonality; and social protection instruments. Key witnesses stressed that these elements have worked to sharpen the divide between the hotel industry and the informal economy and mean that hotel employment is desirable (even for natives), thus increasing barriers to entry and slowing down staff turnover:

> What I see is that they stay once they get in. They stay because they find these occupations better than what they can normally find. Look at the chambermaids; it is a low-wage hard job. But for them, it is always better than being caregivers [. . .]. It's not easy to get in, particularly in large hotel chains. [. . .]. The reason is that compared to other areas, the hospitality sector is regulated in Venice. Many hotels are also unionised. (Union official, Italian)

According to key witnesses, the heterogeneity between hotels is both the main cause of the varied working conditions and one explanation for migrant

workers' different degrees of penetration across the two hotel segments:

> Numerically, migrants are more prevalent in upmarket hotels because there are more of them; workers in these hotels make up a higher percentage of the overall [migrant] workforce [in hotels in Venice]. But in terms of percentage [of migrants working in each hotel], it is much higher in low-range hotels. (Union official, male, Italian)

The division between upper- and lower-class hotels also seems to affect the division of labour and the opportunities generated for migrant workers. The substitution process between native and migrant workers was more systematic in lower segment hotels. In the business and luxury hotels, however, most migrants are concentrated in back-office departments (except administration and management) and in hierarchically lower positions. According to Omar, a Senegalese security guard in a five-star hotel and union shop steward, these hotels still offer a broader range of well-paid and secure jobs, which are also attractive for natives:

> There are now also many immigrant workers in luxury hotels. They are mainly concentrated in cleaning, night work [night porter] and dishwashing etc. Still, finding them in other departments is common. However, the problem is advancing in the job and occupying better positions, because the Italians still occupy them. (Omar, Shop steward five-star hotel, Senegalese)

While male migrant workers, even in luxury hotels, can be employed in different departments, respondent female migrant workers are almost entirely confined to cleaning tasks. This means that female migrant workers are also the leading social group employed by subcontractors. In other words, migrant women are more likely to be segregated into domestic-reproductive tasks that are also the lowest paid and least stable (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; McDowell et al., 2009). In addition, differences in the hotel structure also seem to be reflected in the viability of unions, thus influencing their ability to penetrate different business settings or among subcontractors' firms. For example, in large hotels, due to their massive presence in specific departments, research has revealed that some migrant workers are involved in the union, with a small number even taking on particular responsibilities in the union (as in Omar's case above). In contrast, in smaller and less exclusive hotels and among subcontracted workers, there is significantly less union membership:

> Let's say that we have intense bargaining activities in large hotels and few difficulties. The big hotels are almost all unionised, while the smaller ones suffer because of the workers' close relationship with employers, and we also suffer in the outsourced segments. (Union official, Italian)

Strategic seasonality

While in the literature it has been identified as one of the most critical issues in tourism work, seasonality in Venice was not considered to be much of a challenge by both the native and migrant workers that we interviewed. They argued that this is due to the specific local combination of the temporal configuration of seasonality (long-lasting), its institutional and social regulation (priority and annual recall rights), and the availability of welfare tools (unemployment benefits). This combination results in lower turnover rates and thus a stabilisation of the seasonal workforce and means that the workforce includes many employees with long seniority in the same sector:

> In Venice, we have the phenomenon of 'seasoned' seasonal workers. This means we have a pool of workers who never work fewer than 7 months a year. They have usually been working for many years. Their average age is high, between 45 and 55, and many of them are foreign workers. The other fact is that even among our members, the number of seasonal workers is high. (Union official, Italian)

As the interviews implied, and contrary to what we might expect, seasonal employment does not challenge unionisation. In fact seasonal workers have high trade union participation due to protections associated with seasonal worker status not being automatic rights, but only enforceable through formal applications, which unions manage.

The evidence shows that for some migrant workers seasonal work is not seen as a second choice. These workers prefer this status as it allows for particular migratory and social reproduction strategies.

This is especially the case for those who experience 'relational transnationalism' (Boccagni, 2009), that is, those embedded in social relations at a distance, both affective and instrumental, such as having family in their countries of origin. The way in which seasonal work is configured in Venice helps them to maintain transnational ties, allowing them to return to their countries for long periods without the risk of losing their job position in the host context and transforming their migratory experience into a trade-off between stable and circular migration. This is certainly the case for Moussa, a night porter in a five-star hotel who clearly expresses his preference for seasonal work because it allows him to join his family for long periods of time:

> We work, and when the season ends, we return to our families. We work six, seven, eight months, and then we go home because you get unemployment benefit, and you can go home and maybe do something else or be with your family. (Moussa, night porter, Senegalese, five-star hotel)

While seasonality allowed these workers to accomplish their migration strategies and cope with their transnational relations, other respondents in different situations pointed to the weakness of seasonal employment contracts in comparison to full-time work. In some cases, workers change their preferences according to the transformation of their migratory condition, life-course stages, and their family and social reproduction strategies. Bassirou, for example, explains how the reunification of his family 10 years after having moved to Italy led him to change his preference:

> I used to prefer seasonal work. When I my family was in Senegal, I would return as soon as the season was over. Now that my family has been here for three years, I prefer to work full-time [. . .] being full-time is different. You work more, but you also have a higher income because unemployment benefit is always lower than wages. (Bassirou, kitchen porter, Senegalese, five-star hotel)

The relationship of the migrants interviewed with seasonal work is not only determined by social reproduction strategies and different life course stages. The specific pattern that seasonality takes in individual workplaces can also play an important role in influencing their experiences. The duration of seasonality can vary depending on the hotel. Some hotels, especially in the lower segment, continue to suspend and activate the production cycle according to fluctuations in demand.

Even if we intersect gender and migration status, we can see the differentiated impact of seasonality. As we have seen, migrant women are mainly employed as hotel cleaners. They are also those most frequently employed by subcontractors, with part-time or short-term non-seasonal contracts. As Romina, a Romanian seasonal worker who alternates between the summer season in Venice and the winter season in mountain resorts, explains,

> I would have very low unemployment benefit because I have very few working hours. From March to June and from September to mid-November I work part-time; I only have more hours at weekends. Of course, if you earn very little, you get even less unemployment benefit. (Romina, chambermaid, Romanian, three-star hotel)

Migrant workers: between satisfaction and entrapment

The diversity of our respondents' trajectories in the hotel sector creates differences in terms of both workers' satisfaction and their individual experiences. This is mainly due to gender and national stratifications interacting with occupational positions and hotel type.

While male migrant workers working directly for hotels in the upper segment continue to be engaged in more demanding but hierarchically lower positions, they evaluate their work positively. For them, it provides an escape from more precarious occupations, such as those on the edges of the informal economy. As one interviewee said, they wanted to 'keep the job because it is clean and better paid'. These migrants also see moral and cultural benefits to working in hotels, such as the possibility of an occupation which involves less segregation and often leads them to interact with locals and visitors, but also a certain pride in working for 'world-famous luxury hotels' frequented by 'rich and famous people':

> I like this work, I enjoy speaking to the people who come, and our hotel is frequented by famous people, V.I.P.s. [. . .] have a contract. They pay on time. I have everything, the union, I am a union shop steward. (Omar, shop steward, Senegalese, five-star hotel)

According to the informants, in addition to elements such as the institutional regulation of seasonality and the presence of trade unions, factors such as the quality of human resources management and the possibility of access to company training also influence their stabilisation:

> In the upper-class hotels you often find international management investing in worker training and offering more possibilities for advancing in your career. Many have things such as integrative bargaining contracts and even company welfare. These things are important for worker loyalty. (Union official, Italian)

Although following similar trajectories, migrant workers in lower-category hotels have a slightly lower opinion of their work. The more demanding working conditions, greater seasonality and the lack of structured trade union support clearly limit their status and possibilities of rising through the ranks. Basu, for instance, while acknowledging some cultural advantages of hotel employment during the interview, pointed out that some managerial practices in his hotel are not very different from those he encountered during his previous jobs in other sectors:

> I worked in a bakery, and a lot of overtime hours were not paid. Here I was hired on a lower contractual grade than the work I actually do. It's normal that if you're in a bigger place, more organised, you have your specific tasks. Here, you are a bit of a all-rounder without being recognised. (Basu, night porter, Bangladeshi, three-star hotel)

The experiences of female migrant workers employed in housekeeping departments were characterised in the interviews by strong dissatisfaction with regard to working conditions, greater exposure to job instability and low wages. In addition, the limited possibilities for upward occupational mobility and the lack of opportunities to enjoy the moral and status benefits associated with hotel work, such as earning tips and having interactions with customers, play a role in job dissatisfaction:

> There are no opportunities because a career for a chambermaid means becoming a housekeeper. But there are 20 maids and 2 housekeepers, and it's clear that there are not many opportunities [. . .] Some customers leave tips in the rooms, but we don't meet them because we usually work when they are out, and there is not much interaction. (Regina, chambermaid, Filipino, four-star hotel)

This frustration is even more evident for those who have experienced the outsourcing process, since they can compare their previous condition as directly employed workers with their current condition as outsourced workers. These respondents unanimously argued that outsourcing has lowered wages and worsened working conditions. Despite this, the research revealed that once in the sector, these workers stayed in it, even when facing particularly harsh working conditions and even when they wanted to leave:

> You leave one hotel to do what? Find another one? It's not even certain they'll take you on because they talk to each other, they know each other. Or you go to the seaside for the season for three months per year? (Isabel, chambermaid, Ukraine, outsourced worker)

The lack of local job opportunities that escape gender stereotypes and so of possibilities of breaking free from degrading conditions increases the risk of being trapped in demanding, precarious and low-wage occupations or returning to jobs that they left to work in hotels.

Discussion and conclusion

At least until the Covid-19 pandemic, the international hotel industry was among the main providers of employment opportunities for migrant workers, often in their first job in the host context (Baum and Hai, 2020). It has been highlighted that the occupational characteristics of the sector, such as low barriers to entry and exit and demanding working conditions, lead migrant workers to consider hotel work as an entry occupation and to leave it as soon as other opportunities present themselves

(Alberti, 2014; Baum, 2012; Janta et al., 2011; Williams and Hall, 2000).

However, the case of Venice shows that the relationship between labour mobility and the hotel industry may, in specific locations, be much less generalisable than previous studies have held. For the migrant workers included in the research sample, hotels in Venice are not an entry-level occupation but a point of arrival after many jobs in other sectors, often characterised by low wages and informality.

This study showed that underlying this Venetian specificity are the better working conditions offered by Venetian hotels in comparison with other jobs generally held by migrants (McDowell et al., 2009). These occupations are often considered opportunities for workers to free themselves from more precarious jobs, especially in the Italian context, which is characterised by the strong presence of the informal economy and by a model of migrant labour insertion that traps them in certain jobs (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011).

This article identifies a set of local conditions that could shape this employment dynamic. First, characteristics such as the dominant role of tourism in the city compared with other sectors affect hotels' labour demand, which is characterised by a relatively high incidence of high and medium-skilled occupations compared with other tourist industries (Riley et al., 2002). Second, research informants pointed to the role played by the large presence of upper segment hotels. The management of these hotels create an internal labour market with more structured career paths and offer employees more training opportunities and benefits than lower segment hotels. Although it is not a deterministic relationship, the characteristics of upper segment hotels seem to allow greater opportunities for trade union viability, which has positive consequences on collective bargaining, labour stability and worker satisfaction. Finally, the interaction between the features of seasonality in Venice and the availability of social protection tools have made these jobs more stable and secure relative to seasonal work in other locations. Previous research has shown that seasonality can be considered a pull factor for certain workers who do not want to commit themselves full-time to the labour market (such as students). This article has found that seasonality, when it takes a certain form, can also support social reproduction strategies for workers such as transnational migrants. For some migrants interviewed, balancing work and non-work periods covered by benefits allowed them to better reconcile periods of work with cyclical family reunifications in their country of origin. Nevertheless, the preference for seasonal work is conditional on a certain condition of 'relational transnationalism', and thus can change according to different strategies of social reproduction and life course stages. Shedding light on local conditions, the results help to dispel the dominant conception of seasonality as an endemic challenge to employment quality and stability in hotel and tourism work.

However, a high degree of heterogeneity in the individual trajectories of workers and their different experiences of working conditions threaten this increased job stability. The diversity of local hotel establishments, in particular the differences between the upper and lower segments and their range of different occupations, as well as the persistence of a division of labour that distributes employment opportunities according to gender, have been identified as key factors to this differentiation.

Greater satisfaction was found among interviewed male migrant workers in upper segment hotels. They work with more secure contracts that allow them to access social protection and union support. Furthermore, as with the Polish workers in the United Kingdom studied by Janta et al. (2011), these workers clearly enjoyed some cultural and moral benefits.

As Watt (2012) already argued in the case of Toronto, in a highly segmented local labour market, working permanently with better contractual conditions and union support represents a significant advancement in social hierarchies and positively influences the self-representation of migrant workers. Yet, this article more systematically examined the role of job heterogeneity, differences among hotels and how they interact with elements of social differentiation.

For example, among those who worked in lower segment hotels with more demanding working conditions and less structured internal labour markets, the benefits appeared more blurred and, consequently, job satisfaction was less evident. The working conditions in these jobs did not differ greatly

from those in other sectors. Moreover, the female migrant workers we interviewed were more likely to experience worse working conditions, less stable contracts, and fewer benefits than their male colleagues, and thus reported strong job dissatisfaction. The condition of these workers reflects the findings of Alberti (2014) in her research on London hotels. However, unlike in Alberti's research, female migrant workers in this sample tended to develop medium- to long-term careers in hotel work. For those unwilling or unable to undergo a new migration experience, the desire to find another job or move to another company comes into conflict with the strong segmentation of the local labour market and with limited possibilities to escape from gender ghettoisation.

Research results add new empirical evidence to Peck's (1996) claim that segmentation processes are internationally and historically constant in labour markets. However, the way they operate differs from one place to another, according to each local context's political, social, productive and economic specificities (Peck 1996). Local variations in working conditions and the labour market are relevant to the hospitality industry since its spatial ubiquity allows it to come into contact with heterogeneous local contexts in terms of institutional regulation, labour protection regimes, migration patterns, types of firms and different fluctuations in consumer demand.

I therefore argued that in an economy strongly embedded in specific locations, such as the tourism-hotel industry, the local dimension is the most appropriate spatial scale for assessing employment patterns. Focussing on the segmentation of local labour markets does not mean downplaying national patterns in the regulation of economic activities (Hatziprokopiou, 2004) but considering the different outcomes of these national institutional dynamics in different localities. The effects of local conditions are very clear in national reforms on seasonal unemployment, which had limited consequences for workers in Venice due to its particularly long high season.

The inclusion in this analysis of locally inherent elements that influence migrants' experiences of work can provide us with new interpretive tools for analysing the relationship between migrants and the tourism industry, as well as producing more contextual knowledge that can help to explain the heterogeneity of migrants' career paths in the hotel and tourism labour market within and between localities. Finally, studying a context in which there is relatively strong institutional and social regulation of hotel labour helps to challenge the dominant conception of tourism-hotel work as innately a low-value activity with poor working conditions, adding new evidence to Gray's (2004) assertion that the characteristics of particular occupations are a consequence of how the labour market is institutionally and socially structured (and segmented) in a specific place.

Research limitations include the inability to generalise from the specific experiences of the research informants, particularly in relation to the more positive role of human resources management in multinational companies. Any generalisation would risk considering management practices as an inherent quality of that specific type of enterprise and not as the result of the joint action of social, economic and political regulatory forces (including trade unions).

The role of multinational enterprises in a low-value-added sector should be further explored to identify whether these companies are in fact innovative in their relationship with workers, trade unions and city stakeholders and what locally embedded characteristics influence their actions.

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