



# Labour Migration, Employer Preferences and Symbolic Boundary Work

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## ABSTRACT

A critical stream of scholarship from North America and Europe, on employer preferences for low-wage labour migrants, suggest that the discourse of ‘the migrant work ethic’ works as a euphemism for the exploitability of this mobile, flexible and deferent workforce. In this article, we combine the literature on employer preference and the symbolic boundary approach, to tackle the question of how employer preference for the ‘migrant work ethic’ gains legitimacy. Drawing upon in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork within the fruit and vegetable industry in Norway, we detail how employers narrate the declining employability of the domestic working class, and how migrant workers ascend into the ‘good worker’ category. The recruitment and hiring decisions of the employers form part of a broader moral economy of establishing boundaries to the categories of desirable and undesirable workers. We document how employers establish legitimacy for their recruitment preferences through this boundary work. We argue that this boundary work gains its legitimacy as part of a wider moral economy of ‘employability.’

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## INTRODUCTION

What is a good worker? Judging by the recruitment and hiring decisions of employers in low-wage labour markets, in Norway and beyond, a good worker is a low-wage labour migrant. Since the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, which established a common labour market across the 'old' east-west European division, Norwegian employers within low-wage occupations used Norway's membership in the Schengen Area to spearhead the hire of migrant workers from the 'new' EU countries. In little more than a decade, migrant workers from Eastern and Central Europe became the preferred labour force across industries such as the construction industry (Friberg 2012; Haakestad & Friberg 2017), hospitality and tourism (Jordhus-Lier & Underthun 2014; Underthun & Jordhus-Lier 2018), care work (Isaksen 2012; van Riemsdijk 2010) and food production (Rye 2017; Rye, Slettebak & Bjørkhaug 2018; Stachowski 2020). The critical literature on employer preferences argues that it is the class interest of employers that moulds their preference for low-wage labour migrants and their 'migrant work ethic' (Scott 2013b).

This paper explores the role of employer preferences in driving the rapid shift towards migrant labour in the horticulture subsector in Norway since the EU enlargements. It locates employers' preference for migrant workers within a wider moral economy of employability, where employers use their labour market power to influence what is considered 'a good worker.' Employers in the horticultural industry exert considerable discretion in terms of hiring decisions. Yet agriculture as an industry depends on popular support and political legitimacy for its sustainability, as farmer unions each year negotiates the terms of production and market prices with the government. This arguably makes the horticulture industry a particularly interesting case from where to probe deeper into how employer narratives are part of establishing boundaries and content to the category of 'the good worker.'

Drawing on qualitative research in the horticulture industry in Norway, focussing on the employer perspective, we argue that the cultural and political economic framework of employers, and their narratives of what constitutes 'a good worker,' while influenced by their class interest, need continuous work to gain legitimacy as new labour channels emerge or old ones ebb out. To make this argument the paper links the literature on employer preferences with the literature on symbolic boundaries. In sum, we make the argument that to explain the link between legitimacy and class interest for the migrant work ethic, research needs to combine an analysis of boundary work that shapes the legitimate criteria for employability with an analysis of the shifting structural terrain upon which the industry moves.

## EMPLOYER PREFERENCES, SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND 'GOOD WORKERS'

The preferences of employers for migrant workers are a key driver behind the increase in migrant workers in the lower tiers of labour markets in Europe and the USA (Anderson 2000; Ruhs & Anderson 2010; Waldinger & Litcher 2003). A robust literature on immigrant niches and labour market segmentation have established that a migrant division of labour exist across Europe and North America, where migrant workers are allowed entry into core economies labour markets in order to perform '3D jobs' (dangerous, demeaning and dirty; Castles & Kosack 1973; de Haas, Castles & Miller 2020; Lusis & Bauder 2010; Rye & O'Reilly 2020; Waldinger 1994; Wills

et al. 2010). Meanwhile, the domestic working class have been cleft between those who move 'upwards' within the hierarchy of work and those who are pushed to the fringes or outside of the workforce altogether (Peck 2001).

How does the literature explain the preferences of employers for low-wage labour migrants? Soft skills such as motivation, feeling of responsibility for work-tasks, responsiveness to commands and their deference, are often highlighted by employers within low-wage occupations when they explain their preference for international labour over domestic workers (Findlay & McCollum 2013; McCollum & Findlay 2015; Rye & Scott 2018; Scott 2013a; Scott 2013b; Scott 2013c). The critical literature on employment preference for low-wage labour migrants highlights how the 'migrant work ethic,' cherished by employers, works as a proxy for recruitment based on ethnic stereotypes (Dawson, Veliziotis & Hopkins 2018; Findlay et al. 2013; Friberg & Midtbøen 2018; McDowell, Batnitzky & Dyer 2009; McLaughlin 2010; Moss & Tilly 2001).

The critical literature on employer preference makes the key argument that the soft skills that migrant workers display, and which are preferred by employers, are inseparable from the fact that low-wage migrant workers are a particularly exploitable workforce (Scott & Jakobsen forthcoming; Farinella & Nori 2020; López-Sala 2016; Mitchell 1996). In short, the class interest of employers shapes their preference for the migrant work ethic, while the degree of exploitability in turn shapes the 'migrant work ethic' (Scott 2103b).

While categorical stereotypes and/or veiled class interest for exploitable workers goes a long way in explaining why international labour migrants are preferred by low-wage employers, there is still a need to explain how practices of selecting and deselecting workers, spurred by class interest and ethnic stereotypes, becomes legitimate. To fill in the blanks between class interest and legitimacy, we here explore employers' social 'praxis' of hiring and preference within what we term a moral economy of employability. The idea of moral economy has long roots, developed early by Polanyi (2001), Thompson (1971) and Scott (1977), and is an attempt to theorise and tackle scientifically how the economy is imbued with moral sentiments about justice and worth. From this perspective, class is something more than socio-economic inequalities, and involves the power to make claims on what counts as valuable and esteemed within different social realms (Bourdieu 1989; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 2004).

Lamont (2000), Sayer (2000, 2011) and Skeggs (1999) more recently extended the moral economy approach to also include a focus on the moral judgements by lay people upon issues that are of concern to them, such as masculinity, taste, respectability and fairness in the distribution of wealth. Lamont's studies of the judgements of working-class men on race and masculinity (2000) point to the central place that moral judgements have in creating and legitimising a social order, partly established around class difference (Lamont 2000; Lamont, Beljean & Clair 2014; Wimmer 2008). The object of study for the symbolic boundary approach, developed by Lamont and her colleagues, is acts of boundary drawing (Bourdieu 1984; Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Lamont, Beljean & Clair 2014; Lamont & Molnár 2002). Moral judgements work to establish boundaries and associations, distance and closeness, between social groups and social behaviour. Certain forms of behaviour works as a 'currency' within a particular social realm for a particular group as it is considered more esteemed.

That is, judgements about what is just and fair are central for understanding how actors take part in (re)producing the limits and associations to symbolic categories such as 'the good worker.' Moreover, these judgements need to be 'grounded' within a broader social field from where they gain legitimacy. We make the case here, that the moral economy of 'employability,' is where employer preferences for the 'migrant work ethic' grounds their moral claims and gains legitimacy.

Building on the symbolic boundary approach, we here analyse the cultural and political economic framework of employers concerning how they evaluate 'employability' of different groups of workers. Employability, which concerns decisions over who to hire, retain and fire, are also imbued by moral judgements about worth, desirability and ultimately, what characterises a 'good worker.' By focussing on the judgements of employers, and understanding them as boundary work, we analyse how they work to produce associations between desirable/undesirable workers and their hiring decisions. We argue that the judgements about who are desirable and undesirable workers take place within a moral economy of employability where what is at stake is the ongoing symbolic struggle to 'claim' what is just and fair in terms of hiring decisions. Moreover, these judgements, and the categorical constructions of 'good workers' which they give rise to, have material effects in that they serve to justify the sorting criterion of 'employability.'

When we say that employers claim and mould the category of 'the good worker,' we are conscious of how they are far from alone in this construction, and that their constructions are not always consciously strategic, overtly intentional or bring the result they desire. The latter becomes clear below when we look at how they need to adjust the content and boundaries of the category of 'the good worker' as market forces exert determining pressure on their social praxis. Nonetheless, employers in the low-wage labour market exert considerable market power, both in terms of decisions on who to hire, and by shaping the meaning and 'grounding' the legitimacy of the sorting criteria to 'employability.' Through unpacking the judgements made by employers with regards to the category of 'good worker,' we make the case that this category works to establish legitimacy to the limits drawn and associations made between particular social groups and particular jobs.

## **NORWAY FOOD INDUSTRY CASE STUDY**

The fruit and vegetable industry in Norway have over a relatively short period of time since the 1990s, which accelerated with the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, become dependent on a low-wage migratory workforce from Eastern and Central Europe (Rye 2017). By 2020 about 200,000 immigrants from EU-countries in Central and Eastern Europe had settled in Norway. These figures include family member and children of labour migrants (Fafo 2022). By contrast, an estimated 30,000 international labour migrants are hired each season on Norwegian farms. Most of them work in the horticulture industry, and most of them are from Central and Eastern Europe, though there is also a minor group of about 2000 to 3000 workers in the industry that come from outside the EU. Though we do not have official register data on the whole population of workers in the industry, including country background or length of stay, research and accounts from employer unions suggest that few farms focussing on berries, fruit or vegetables employ Norwegian workers (Rye & Frisvoll 2007).

Agriculture is one out of nine industries in Norway where there is a minimum wage. Minimum wage laws put a floor under work conditions for whole industries where there is a considerable presence of migrant workers. Migrant workers from within the EU work on the farms in Norway with few visa restrictions and can move back and forth between their home country and country of work without a prior work visa. Non-EU nationals, by contrast, need to apply for a work-permit visa before entering Norway, where they need to show a job offer of full-time employment. Migrant workers in agriculture are seasonally employed and most of them return to their country of citizenship in the 'off' season (October–April). During their work period in Norway, most migrant workers live on the farm, in accommodations they rent from their employer. Recruitment in the horticulture industry is generally organised directly between the employer and the employee without the involvement of staffing companies (Rye 2017). Nonetheless, 'labour brokers' play an important role in facilitating recruitment. These labour brokers are mainly family or friends of workers who are recruited.

The field work was conducted on various farms in a municipality located in the south-eastern part of Norway, with a population of about 25,000, where fruit/berries and vegetables production have a long history. Most of the farmers have for many years relied on large migrant labour stocks during harvest (Rye 2014). An estimated 1500 labour migrants are employed in this region during the harvest.

The empirical material for this article consists of both semi-structured qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between the years of 2017 and 2020. The two authors did their recruiting and fieldwork separately and at different times, however, in the same municipality and with some overlap regarding the choice of farms/communities. The first author conducted 16 interviews with farmers (5), migrant workers (6, with/by a colleague) and local community stakeholders (5) in 2019. The second author's ethnographic fieldwork consists of three consecutive weeks of participatory observation on a moderately large fruit and berry farm during the harvest season in 2018 – picking fruit and berries, making informal small talk and joining people at various points in their daily schedule. The second author also conducted 20 interviews solo, with farmers (4), seasonal migrants (13) and settled migrants (3). In addition, the second author participated in a field trip with colleagues as part of larger research project in 2017, resulting in 9 interviews with farmers (3), seasonal migrants (1) and local community stakeholders (5). Of the total number of interviews (45), it is the employer/farmer interviews (12) that will be the focus for our discussion in this article, although observations from the field and impressions from the rest of the interviews form part of the analysis.

Data from the ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to observe and examine how employers and workers gave meaning and value to work 'here and now,' while the interviews allowed the informants' to illuminate new and habitual interpretations of their memories and experiences (O'Reilly 2009; Weiss 1994). By combining these two forms of data, ethnography and interviews, we went back and forth before we structured the analysis around how present ideals and values of employability gave meaning to employers' memories and experiences of a shifting workforce at the farms. This 'here and now' meaning of employability and the textured interpretations employers gave to its shifting content through time, is what we have termed the moral economy of employability.

For both authors, employers/farmers were recruited through snowballing and subsequently approached through e-mail or by phone. Potential informants were presented with information about the project and the researcher, and about

anonymity and consent, including the possibility to withdraw their consent at any time, also after the interview. While there is no bulletproof way to ensure the anonymity of our informants, we have taken several steps to safeguard their identities. Among other things we have not identified characteristics of the municipality, places and farms, save for approximate sizes and numbers. We describe a few common crops and workers' national backgrounds, which makes it difficult for insiders of the municipality to identify the individual employers or particular farms. The research has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The interviews typically lasted about an hour, were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interviews with employers were done in Norwegian, and quotations are translated into English by the authors. Interviews with employers were conducted at the farms.

Most of the employers had decades of farming experience, which made them able to reflect upon the changing composition of the workforce, the content of skill and the structural conditions of the industry (i.e. agricultural politics, competition, agricultural subsidies, vertical integration of supply chain) in addition to the particular experiences of their own farm. During the interviews we asked employers to tell us about their farm operations, recruitment strategies, their relationship to the workers, internal differentiation of the work process on the farm and to reflect upon changing labour needs and supply. The interviewees were generally forthcoming and talked candidly about the different skills and work ethic of different employee groups. Informed by Creswell (1998) we analysed the data in several steps, by highlighting significant statements, developing these statements into thematic clusters of meaning, structural descriptions, and essence. We detected common themes in terms of how employers rationalised their employment strategies of who to employ, how to organise the work process internally, and how the work ethic within and between groups was changing. The aim of the following analysis is to detail how employers make sense of their hiring preferences and explore how these rationalisations are part of the work to establish and adjust the boundaries of the category of 'good worker.' We interpret the accounts by the employer interviewees against the shifting industrial terrain upon which they gave and continue to give meaning. Below, we focus on the way employers engage in boundary work that in sum (re)produce the category of 'the good worker.'

## **CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE 'GOOD WORKER': SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND CLASS INTEREST IN HORTICULTURE**

The horticulture industry is characterised by a high demand for seasonal manual labour, physically demanding work, little formal skill requirements or language requirements, low wages, high turnover and unpredictable length of stay. These factors clearly influence the employer's perceptions of what constitutes a 'good worker.' Judging by the accounts of the employer interviewees, a good worker possesses stamina, motivation, flexibility, no union membership and a deferent attitude in terms of pay and workplace hierarchies. Furthermore, a good worker takes little sick leave and does not complain about work tasks.

In the following we detail the judgements made by employers about what 'kind' of workers are employable and not, and how this relates to a shifting terrain of worker availability and industrial restructuring for the horticulture industry in the Norwegian case.

## TRANSITION FROM DOMESTIC WORKING CLASS TO THE MIGRANT WORK ETHIC

While farms in the area have employed migrant workers for more than three decades, these workers used to work alongside a Norwegian workforce consisting of underemployed locals and youth. It was not until the early 2000s with the EU enlargement that Norwegian workers were sorted out of the hiring queue.

Similarly, to what has been identified in many other studies that highlight employer preference for the 'migrant work ethic' (Waldinger 1994), though this is seldom dwelt upon in the wider literature on immigrant niches (Friberg & Midtbøen 2019: 324), employers we spoke to brought to the fore the declining motivation and abilities among the domestic working class to perform the work, when they explained their initial motivation to hire workers from overseas. As explained to us by one farmer, when asked to reflect upon why it had become difficult to recruit from the domestic working class:

Well, I guess it was a combination of how they didn't need it [to work in agriculture] and [...] my impression is that maybe they [...] you know, picking strawberries is a physically demanding job and with time they were not fit to do it [...] of course I cannot prove this, it is more a feeling I have. When it hurts you have to [...] if you feel that the pay is good and need the money you are able to endure more pain than if you from the onset are living comfortably. So, it is probably more to the picture than the fact that they were not fit to do the work anymore. Motivation I think. (Fruit farmer, started hiring migrant workers in the 80s, now hiring mostly from Poland)

From this account it is a combination of declining physical stamina and work motivation that explains the retreat of the local working class from the fields. Employers frequently told us that local workers were not consistent in terms of showing up for work throughout the season. Rather, they would turn up for work on Monday and by Friday the same week they had already quit to find another job. The unreliability of the work ethic among the domestic working class further escalated with time, as argued by employers, as

local workers did not endure for the whole season even. And it kept getting worse and worse. No, I cannot remember the last time I employed a Norwegian to do the work. (Fruit farmer, started hiring migrant workers in the 80s, now hiring mostly from Poland)

Declining endurance in terms of stamina and motivation among local workers, is explained by the interviewees as the result of improving living conditions, which makes working in the fields less attractive and less necessary. Implicitly, there is also an acceptance in the narrative of the employers, that wages in the industry are too low, and despite the negotiation of a collective agreement in terms of minimum wages and work conditions between the employer and employee associations in 2010, the wages are still among the lowest found within the Norwegian labour market (Grini & Berglund Johansen 2021).

In addition to the low pay, the domestic working class, we were told repeatedly, were not attracted to working in the fields as the occupation did not match their aspirations. This was particularly the case for the young generation. Norwegian youth would rather prefer white collar work or leave the region altogether for study or work. Thus,

aspirations for either social or geographical mobility placed barriers to the recruitment of Norwegian youth to the farms. The barrier for Norwegian youth to enter the fields, the employers kept telling us, was mainly a mental one as these youth do not want to work below their aspirations. As remarked upon by one employer

to recruit Norwegian youth to work on the farms is difficult and that is just something we have to realize, their attitudes and work ethic is just not good enough [...] you cannot have employers that make you lose money time by time. No. That is not something you can do. (Vegetable farmer, started hiring migrant workers in the 90s, now hiring mostly from Poland and Latvia)

In contrast to the work ethic of the domestic working class', either implicitly or explicitly expressed by the interviewees, was that of the migrant workers. According to a local entrepreneur with years of experience in both farming and hiring,

Lithuanians clock in at 07:00, you can basically set the clock after their schedule. They have a higher work ethic and take pride in their work. The Norwegians drag the morale down. You cannot have that here, so you have to make sure not to have Norwegians. (Former farmer, now businessman, mostly hiring Lithuanians)

Punctuality and the feeling of responsibility for the job are qualities that employers bring forth when speaking of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the consistency of the workers and their ability to endure the physical toil of the work was often highlighted. One employer, who had hired workers from Central and Eastern Europe (first Lithuanians and thereafter Poles) since the 1980s, proclaimed to us that

I have up until today not had one sick leave! Not one. [chuckles]. Of course, some days something [...] like somebody had [...] been unlucky with an arm or cut themselves extra, yeah like that, but not anything more. Then they have rather sat on the tractor and been driving.

In addition to endurance, work responsibility and flexibility in terms of taking on various tasks according to ability to perform, the motivation of Central and Eastern European migrant workers is held in high esteem by employers.

## **DIVISIONS OF LABOUR AT THE FARM AND INTERNAL BOUNDARY DRAWING**

As time passed, however, and farms grew larger and farmers relied more and more on their (mostly) Polish work leaders to manage the increasingly specialised work process, fine grained boundaries emerged to take account of the internal hierarchy of 'good workers' on the farms. This increasing reliance on international labour migrants to fill the labour needs in the fruit and vegetable industry in Norway, has happened at a time when we have seen an increasing vertical integration of this segment of the food industry, as a handful of large food wholesalers procure fresh produce directly from farms on a 'just-in-time' basis, while the three big retailers – Rema 1000, NorgesGruppen and Coop – procure either from wholesalers that they partly own or directly from farmers. The vertical integration of the food industry places competitive pressures on all actors involved. Down on the farm it is particularly



the standardisation of crop aesthetics (size, colour and shape), quality (ripeness and structure) and quantity, and the demand to deliver these standardised products at the right moment to wholesalers or supermarkets, that works as structuring forces on the production process (Bjørkhaug, McMichael & Muirhead 2020). Meanwhile, the number of fruit and vegetable farms in Norway declined by 40.5% between 1999 and 2010, while the production output remained stable (Rye, Slettebak & Bjørkhaug 2018).

Thus, within the food production value chain employers are positioned between ‘a rock and a hard place,’ trying to accumulate capital and maintain profitability within a challenging market situation, while at the same time maintain good relations with their neighbours, preserve a good reputation among the taxpayers and consumers of their products, while making sure that they can retain their most motivated workers from season to season (Holmes 2013, Rye & Scott 2020). This balancing act takes place amidst a rapidly changing labour supply, starting before the COVID-19 situation, and accentuated further by the pandemic, where it has become increasingly difficult to recruit Poles with the desired skills.

From our fieldwork, and talking to employers across several farms, it is evidently the case that the internal division of labour on the farms is increasingly specialised. On the farms, in practical terms, this means that some Polish workers have been promoted into middle and top tier positions within the internal workplace hierarchy. On the farms we typically found a three-tiered employment hierarchy, when asking the employers about the labour organisation, consisting of ‘pickers,’ ‘foremen’ (referred to as sergeants) and daily manager (often the farmer, but now also carried out by Polish nationals on some farms). A handful of foremen and managers are working the whole year on the larger farms, with maintenance, labour recruitment and other tasks. When making decisions on who to promote, the employers would typically point to the consistency in performance, eagerness to learn, managerial skills and language as criterions sorted by. Moreover, the employment is also internally differentiated between groups of different nationality, a trend that has become more accentuated in recent years. It is to this shifting relationship between symbolic boundaries and structural context we now turn.

## **INDUSTRIAL RESTRUCTURING: THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF ‘GOOD WORKERS’**

This process of border work was further accentuated by the opening of recruitment channels to Ukraine and Vietnam, as employers currently brace themselves in response to the recent difficulties of recruiting Polish workers. This situation was brought to the fore in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the infection prevention travel restrictions to and from Norway, as the dependency upon international labour migration to solve the labour needs in horticulture, sparked a heated national debate. Much of the debate concerns how to get Norwegian youth and unemployed workers back into the fields; however, Norwegian farmers are not eager to employ locals, citing the locals’ lack of skills and deplorable work ethic.

To reduce the risk for the capital owner, the candidate for the job needs to meet the requirement of being flexible. Flexibility becomes an important ‘skill’ required for the job, as employers need workers that are ready to do what it takes to get the job done. Including bending maximum work hour regulations, working on piece-rate or hourly pay below the collectively bargained salary, and putting any family or community obligations on hold for their employer. This also generates a kind of ‘revolving-door’

imperative, where workers need to be replaced continuously as they age or become exhausted (Rogaly 2008). While individual workers need to be replaced, however, the association between 'good workers' and a particular ethnic group need to remain stable and is only in need of adjustment if the work ethic or labour supply changes.

The association between ethnic group and who are considered 'good workers' is indeed in need of adjustments lately, as farmers in recent years have started noticing a decline in the work ethic among their Polish workers. As explained to us by a seasoned employer at a farm specialising in broccoli,

I see a trend during the last few years that there are more substitutions and that the interest to come here is not as big as it has been, earlier. And they are not that eager to keep their job, it's like, "we come over here for a while, but it is not certain that we will return next season." So, it is [...] they are not as motivated, not as eager, as they were a few years ago. Because we have to require that they do a reasonable effort during a workday. That is something we have to do. So, there is a bit more supervision required now than it used to be, before. Things used to be on track, we did not have to tell them, and we knew that when the day was over so many crates were harvested. When we see now what [...] what they do now compared to fifteen, twenty years ago, the tempo of work is much reduced.

As the work ethic among the Poles appears to be declining and farmers report that it is becoming more and more difficult to recruit workers from Central and Eastern Europe, and especially Poland, farmers are starting to explore other recruitment options. Thus, as a response, farmers have started recruiting, or at a minimum started bracing for a time, beyond Central and Eastern European workers being the most employable workers around.

This is most visible with the recruitment from Vietnam in recent years, a trend most pronounced within the fruit industry. A small number of farmers have long-standing traditions for hiring Vietnamese workers, related to the arrival of boat refugees from Vietnam to Norway in the period between 1975 and 1995, some of whom now, decades later, function as 'labour brokers' for horticulture employers by offering their services by recruiting through their transnational social network. This availability of Vietnamese seasonal workers impacted the recruitment of workers in the whole industry, seen as during the recent five-year period more farmers have shifted their gaze towards this stream of workers. Interestingly, farmers point to the superior work ethic of their Vietnamese workers, and Vietnamese workers are typically paid by piece-rates while the foremen from Central and Eastern Europe are paid an hourly wage.

Thus, similarly to the Polish workers who arrived in the early 2000s, Vietnamese workers are preferred due to their work ethic. Moreover, in the fruit industry, particularly with strawberries, there are good opportunities to differentiate the work processes by allowing some workers to work by piece-rate. The higher work ethic of the Vietnamese workers allows them to earn more than the minimum wage, according to farmers.

In the discussion below we return to the question of how legitimacy is produced in low-wage labour markets characterised by a high degree of migrant labour.

## DISCUSSION: 'GOOD WORKER' AS BOUNDARY WORK AND SORTING DEVICE

The 'migrant work ethic' is not set in stone, and the wider literature on employers' preference for the migrant work ethic have documented how their preference change from one employment 'channel' to another as a previously preferred ethnic group's work ethic declines (Friberg & Midtbøen 2018; Rye & Scott 2020; Waldinger 1994). Employers explain this shift in the work ethic with reference to the changing attitudes of 'their' migrant workers who gradually 'Westernise' or 'Americanise' (Waldinger & Litcher 2003). In the critical literature on employer preference, the argument is that as migrant workers gain more market power, for instance as their options in the host country labour market improves or they gain more access to the welfare state and/or climb the host country citizenship 'tier,' employers make the case that the work ethic is in decline. Thus, one might argue that the preferences of employers are not changing, rather, they retain a stable preference for exploitable workers. What changes is, rather, when faced with more demanding workers, employers start recruiting from another source country.

From this perspective, the changes in employment preference from one group to another, and the accommodating discourse of the declining work ethic of previously esteemed workers, is explicable by way of how it serves to justify the accumulation strategies of employers (Moss & Tilly 2001). However, as hiring based on ethnicity, race, gender or other categorical divisions, as well as degree of exploitability, is sanctioned, employers rather talk about the declining soft skills of their previously esteemed workers and evade ethnicity or class interest when discussing why they start hiring from a new 'labour pool' (Ruhs & Anderson 2010; Scott 2013b).

While we agree that the stable class interest of employers, and shifting sources of labour supply, does much work in explaining the shifting of hiring practices of employers, an explanatory gap exist in demonstrating how employers can legitimise their hiring practices. Legitimation, we are reminded, is the recognition that some existing or prospective social arrangements are just and valuable in a social sense (Lamont, Beljean & Clair 2014: 593). Importantly for the arguments here, legitimation of social arrangements does not follow directly from class interest but requires work to instil a sense of necessity and acceptance (Bourdieu 1991; Lamont 2000). Thus, class interest cannot by itself explain legitimacy.

Here, we make two related arguments to bridge the explanatory gap between class interest and legitimation. First, as demonstrated in our study, employers justify their hiring decisions by appealing to notions of 'the good worker.' Rationalising hiring decisions based on sole class interest, such as preference for exploitable workers, most probably would have a hard time gaining legitimacy beyond and even within the particular social interest group that it would serve. Appealing to meritocratic ideals of employability side-steps the issue of class interest and has currency within a broader moral economy within labour markets. As such, the category of 'good worker' serves a 'bridging' role in legitimating the presence of a low-wage labour force in agriculture. That is, by rationalising the decision to hire migrant workers by appealing to the criterion of 'who is most skilled for the job,' employers can legitimate the turn to a migrant workforce at the farm with reference to a broader moral economy of employability.

The farming sector in Norway enjoys widespread popular support, and farmers are well organised through a centralised farmers union, which gives it the necessary political clout to negotiate a share from the national revenues (Rye 2017). However, this also means that the farming sector needs to be sensitive to public opinion. For the arguments here, this means that for farmers, gaining at least a reluctant form of acceptance for deploying a low-wage migratory labour force in the fields, and deselecting the workers from the remnants of the domestic working class, is important. We here make the case that this reluctant acceptance to employ a low-waged migratory labour force, is at least in part an outcome of the ongoing claims farmers makes on the content and boundaries to the category of employability. Justifying their acts of hiring by referring to how they recruit the best workers for the job, these justifications work to legitimise recruitment in a labour market context where hiring is expected to be based on meritocratic criteria. Moreover, as farmers generally enjoy respect in terms of being the experts of the work that is required, and farms are quite close-knit units where people outside the workplace only have limited access and knowledge, their judgements carry strong weight. This is also, arguably, the case in terms of their preference for migrant labour.

The cumulative effect of the symbolic boundary drawings around the category of the 'good worker,' we argue, is the production of legitimacy within a wider moral economy of employability. Thus, the urge to justify the deployment of an admittedly exploitable workforce on the farms, we interpret to stem from the class interests of employers. However, class interest does not explain how this social arrangement gains acceptance. Here we have suggested that the broad social praxis of boundary drawings do.

Second, and following on from the argument that the talk among employers involves justifying their hiring decisions within a wider moral economy of employability, the content of 'the good worker' in secondary labour markets is particularly malleable, adaptable and stretchy. This argument follows from the observation that the sorting criterion between desirable and undesirable workers in secondary labour markets is weakly embedded in formal institutions and as such, more open to being 'worked on' by the employers. In secondary labour markets, there are few discernible and institutionalised criteria for sorting between who to hire and not for employers (Moss & Tilly 1996; Pager, Bonikowski & Western 2009).

This malleability to the category of 'the good worker' and the market power of employers in these labour market contexts was particularly visible in the way interviewees adjusted their preferences to 'fit' the changing structural terrain that the industry moved upon. Here the market power of the employer, in employing workers and 'moulding' the supply of labour but also as part of a larger competitive environment as noted above such as just-in-time delivery demands or supply chain pressure, also affects the judgements employers make of who are, and who are not, employable. Thus, while the class interest of employers plays a key role in explaining their preference for migrant workers, the content of their moral judgements concerning what constitutes 'a good worker' does not follow directly from class interest. Here we have suggested that the content of class interest is shaped within a shifting market context, and that employers need to gain at least a minimum of acceptance for their shifting labour market preferences. Establishing new associations between groups of workers and particular jobs, and eroding old associations, in terms of moral sentiments of who are considered 'good' and 'bad' workers, is part of the work of gaining that acceptance. Moreover, the labour market context matters, as in

secondary labour markets employers enjoy considerable discretion in determining the criteria for what constitutes 'a good worker.' Thus, it follows, that in order to explain the shifting moral judgements of the employers, and their ability to gain legitimacy for these judgements, there is a need to combine the study of symbolic boundary drawings and structural context.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, this article tries to bridge the focus of the existing literature on why employers prefer the migrant work ethic, explained with reference to the class interest of employers, with an examination of how the talk about 'the migrant work ethic' allows employers to justify their hiring decisions. We made the argument that to tackle the question of how the class interest of employers and the legitimacy of their hiring decisions are linked, through studying employer preferences, a fruitful way forward for the critical literature on 'the migrant work ethic' is to trace the wider moral economy upon which these practices take place. This entails understanding class as something broader than exploitability and economic interest. We have suggested here, building on the symbolic boundary approach, that judgements concerning the moral character of groups of workers play a key role in facilitating the class interest of employers in the labour market. We propose that employers' cultural powers within the labour market become visible through how they give meaning and content to symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries in terms of what makes up 'a good worker,' in turn, gives rise to the legitimacy of the criteria for employment in particular contexts. More broadly, we argue that the content of 'the good worker' in secondary labour markets, and as such the association between 'the migrant work ethic' and criteria for employment, is particularly malleable, adaptable and stretchy. This argument follows from the observation that the sorting criterion between desirable and undesirable workers in secondary labour markets is weakly embedded in formal institutions and as such, more open to being 'worked on' by the employers. These market contexts provide employers with considerable leverage to shape the content, and by extension, the legitimacy of the category of 'the good worker.'

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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