

Sistemul Infinit.

A Multiscalar Perspective on Romanian Greenhouse Workers in the Austrian Fresh Food Sector

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Abstract

40% of Austrian vegetables are produced in greenhouses on the outskirts of Vienna. Yielding two out of every three Austrian cucumbers, this scale of production has recently earned Vienna the sobriquet "Cucumber Capital of Austria". What remains bracketed out in this celebratory narrative is the integral historical role of non-domestic labor therein: since the emergence of greenhouses in the 1980s, some 1000 workers, currently from Romania, have been performing the year-round labor. Currently, greenhouse workers face highly exploitative conditions, encompassing cases of stark underpayment, withdrawal of labor benefits, and disinvestment in accommodation.

This MA thesis puts forward two related arguments. First, it ethnographically substantiates the idea that the labor recruitment regime in the greenhouse complex runs on the twofold exploitation of Romanian workers: not only is their labor power subject to value extraction but so are their interpersonal relations. Second, this type of recruitment as a strategy of wealth creation is stabilized through a current scaled arrangement. It operates through the targeted disempowerment of institutional power on regional, national, and European scales that renders the monitoring of labor protection highly ineffective. Taken together, both twofold exploitation and regulatory neglect perform a vital role as strategies to sustain the economic resilience of the domestic class of growers in a restructured Austrian Fresh Food Sector at the expense of migrant workers' rights.

This research draws on a) a one-year-long and ongoing ethnographic engagement with Romanian greenhouse workers; b) a workplace ethnography based on a four-month employment and residency in a greenhouse; c) interviews with relevant institutions (Labor Unions, NGOs, and Chamber of Agriculture); d) extensive analysis of relevant policy documents (Austrian Parliamentary debates, European Council). By examining my material from a perspective that is sensitive to history, social reproduction, and scale, this thesis both critically engages and thereby contributes to the literature that a) examines the current migration-agriculture nexus in Europe and b) studies Romanian low-wage migration as embedded in European circuits of value creation.

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1. What's in a Cucumber

Forty percent of Austrian vegetables are produced on the outskirts of Vienna. Scattered across several districts in the south-eastern directions of the urban agglomerate, nearly 250 hectares of plots are cultivated by 100 families, who are traditionally involved in horticultural production in the fifth or even sixth generation. Nowadays, the land is covered by plastic/glass greenhouses. This greenhouse complex provides Vienna with a distinct reputation: it is considered the European capital with the highest agricultural production within its municipal borders. Therein, cucumbers stand out in particular. According to calculations, Vienna achieves a so-called "self-sufficiency ratio" of 250%, which means it covers the annual cucumber consumption of its 1.9 million inhabitants by a factor of 2.5. For the whole of Austria, it is said that every 2 of 3 Austrian cucumbers are produced in the greenhouse complex. This peak value provides Vienna with the sobriquet "The Capital of Cucumbers" [Gurkenhauptstadt Österreichs], praised as a successful regional food supply model.

This scale of production mainly falls on the shoulders of non-domestic workers. The emergence of the first greenhouses in the 1970s likewise increased local demand for labor power, and Eastern Europeans quickly filled the new jobs in the industrialized and year-round production rhythms of the greenhouses. Mediated by bilateral agreements and the Austrian quota system [Kontingentregelung], people from Serbia, Poland, or Turkey found their way to the greenhouses. From the 1990s on, they were first accompanied and then replaced by Romanian workers, who themselves sought a livelihood abroad during the massive privatization of the Romanian economy. Today, Romanians constitute the main workforce in the greenhouses. At the time when the Austrian labor market fully opened in 2014, about 1500 agricultural workers were employed in Vienna, of whom 90% were Romanians (LK 2014).

Currently, Romanian greenhouse workers face highly illicit and precarious conditions. In my research, I documented widespread practices of steep underpayment, substandard accommodation, and insufficient access to social benefits. For instance, although the legal minimum wage is 7,35€ per hour, the average wage lies between 4,50 – 6,50€. A former worker remembers that he earned 2,25€ in a greenhouse in 2020. Regular work schedules encompass 66–70 hours per week, yet most people are given 20-hour contracts. Also, paid sick leave is practically nonexistent. In sum, migrant labor exploitation forms an integral part of current Austrian vegetable production.

In many ways, the Austrian case encapsulates much of what is known about the globally restructured agri-food system (Corrado et al. 2017). In the second half of the 20th century, structural transformation and the liberalization of food markets proceeded in tandem and led to a fundamental re-organization of agricultural production relations. Growing economic competition, largely due to the shift of market power to multinational companies, either pushed growers out of business or forced them to upscale their production through intensification. However, intensification was not only a matter of technical upgrading – at its heart, it involved the recruitment of cheap labor, oftentimes provided by migrants, as a coping strategy within the restructured agri-food industry (Rogaly 2008). A new social relation was thus becoming integral to agricultural production: migrant labor. Paired with oftentimes weak legal regulations, agriculture became a "high-risk sector", prone to exploitative practices that include extreme practices such as human trafficking (Palumbo 2016). Economy, policy, law, and mobility practices are intertwined in ways that enable the highly unequal production arrangements behind the distribution of fresh produce to consumer tables, in Austria as elsewhere.

The nexus of migration and agriculture and the precarity of migrant workers therein has been well examined by now (King et al. 2021). Yet, I encountered several aspects during my fieldwork that remain relatively sidelined in the current scholarship. In particular, the Viennese

greenhouse complex is less reliant on a) policies that restrict the physical and/or employment mobility of migrant workers and b) the involvement of third-party actors in the recruitment and management of labor. In contrast to the infamous caparalato system in Italy or the UK gangmaster structure, labor recruitment and management in the Viennese greenhouse solely take place within interpersonal grower-worker relations. Here, growers fully rely on the networks of their Romanian workers, who are themselves endowed with the fourth freedom of European free movement and thus unrestricted labor market access across Europe. From my first research days of working alongside, living next to, and talking to Romanian workers, I was wondering: why is it that, despite the stark exploitative and illicit conditions, people return again and again to the greenhouse, even though most of my interlocutors mentioned a wealth of employment opportunities elsewhere? How does this relate to the current maintenance of accumulation in the Viennese vegetable industry? Or, as many commentators with whom I shared my research furiously replied: How is it possible that this place continues to exist?

I came to discuss this topic with Nelu, whom I consider an interlocutor, ex-coworker, and friend. Nelu, who is in his late forties, was born in Banat in western Romania and turned from construction to greenhouse work two years ago due to a medical condition. The decades of working on construction sites in thirteen different countries provided him with a certain kind of serenity, paired with a unique sense of irony that at times would turn into cynicism. During one of the evenings that I spent in his dormitory, I showed him photographs of my research.



Photograph 1 A sign next to the road in rural Western Romania. It says: “Daddy! I love you so much and I wait that you return home healthy... from Spain, Germany, Italy, UK, France...” (May 2022)

The photograph was taken in western Romania during a research trip. In almost every encounter with greenhouse workers, it evokes intense reactions. Many workers would be reminded of their own migration experience, and link this back to the steep economic distress in rural areas that drives the current migratory condition of Romania. This experience was put into numbers by a World Bank report, ranking Romania second in the rate of emigration, right after Syria (WB 2018). And indeed, the photograph altered Nelus’ usually relaxed attitude, as he was clearly moved when I showed him the picture. This initiated sharing of our personal experiences – he as a father himself, and me as the son of migrating parents – we arrived at discussing how Romanian westward migration is linked to the greenhouse. Nelu framed it as such:

And you see how many Romanians are coming to the greenhouse. Europe is full of Romanians, full [plin]. If one leaves the greenhouse, there are five new ones who come after him. If you want one Euro more, there are three others who do the job for one Euro less. We are creating our problems because we are not united. [...] Martin [the greenhouse owner] will always find someone because we are the ones who are willing to participate. And it is not only us. We bring our friends and neighbors to the greenhouse. Then, we bring our children to the greenhouse, they also seek work abroad. What happens afterward? They will in turn bring their children, and their children [His voice turns a bit ironic]. At some point, everyone in Romania will have been in the greenhouse. Then, they will find other ones'. Maybe from China, maybe from India — who knows? The Maldives. Maybe there are even islands that we haven't discovered yet. Or Mars [laughs]. There are always people willing to work in the greenhouse. It is the infinite system [sistemul infinit]. It runs until it doesn't run anymore.

Nelu's embedded analysis of his surroundings defies social research that renders workers as unaware "micro" actors in the "macro" structures of capitalism. While this passage does not answer why people return to the greenhouse, it provides the broader context within which this takes place: researchers of the Romanian migration phenomenon note the high degree of self-organization (Potot 2008, Hórvath & Anghel 2009), in which the mediation of employment opportunities often takes place among relations of kin and kith. This is what Nelu refers to, and it is manifested in the daily workings of the greenhouse: Fathers are working alongside daughters, aunts alongside cousins, and neighbors next to neighbors. While a large part of the literature on Romanian migration frames this form of mobility through the lens of "social capital" internal to migration networks, the question of how this potentially serves as a source of value extraction remains unanswered (Sperneac-Wolfer 2023). These insights might also

enrich the current scholarship on migrant agrifood workers in Europe. While it is well-evidenced how vegetable production runs on the illegalization and irregularization of migrants, I hold that the question of how agricultural accumulation is maintained not despite but through the absence of restrictive migration regimes deserves more analytical attention than it currently attracts.

In the following study, I thus trace how Romanian mobility practices intersect with the efforts of Viennese growers to maintain their greenhouse businesses in an increasingly volatile fresh food market. Rather than singling out the motives, aspirations, and practices of Romanian workers as my sole locus of analysis, I am interested in the interstices between the mobility of workers and the economic strategies of growers, structured by configurations of institutional power of law and policy. Looking at these interplays from the greenhouse, I am guided by the question of how accumulation in the greenhouse complex is maintained and stabilized on multiple scales in the current period that rests on the labor power of Romanian workers.

Conceptually, I take Nelu's emic notion of the *sistemul infinit* as an organizing term to analyze the processes of maintaining agricultural accumulation in the Viennese greenhouse complex, and the integral, yet variegated role of migrant labor over time. The *sistemul infinit* denotes both the entrenchment and contingency of local greenhouse production. It addresses the structural and generative logic that dictates the value extraction of both labor power and the sphere of social reproduction.

To this end, I center my research on the greenhouse as an empirical entry point to study broader processes of how accumulation is maintained in the current Austrian fresh food sector. While greenhouses constitute the main livelihood of growers who are dependent on migrant labor power, they are likewise significant spaces in the labor trajectories of mobile workers, who labor in the greenhouse sometimes for some days, a season, or some years up to twenty years. Yet I do not reduce my analysis to the confines of the workplace. Rather, I take the greenhouse

as an empirical entry point to trace how accumulation and related labor exploitation are stabilized on multiple scales and through institutional power.

This twofold consideration of practice and institutional governance is reflected in my research design. As Bao Xiang recently developed multiscale ethnography (2013, 2022) I analyze and organize my material using a multiscale lens. Therein, Xiang suggests the "twofold scalar positioning" of sites as "a pivot for organizing ethnographic data" (2013: 258). According to this lens, we can see sites as situated on both emergent (that is, practice-based and actor-centered) and taxonomical (nested layers of bureaucratic order, that encompass the regional, national, and global) (ibid.: 257ff). This lens is useful in expanding the unit of analysis from a confined focus on migrations towards their role within broader geometries of power (Caglar 2022). Likewise, this reflects in the structure of my MA thesis.

The second chapter reviews scholarship on the current agri-food system and Romanian migration. This serves to demonstrate how both literatures rarely address the particulars of the Austrian case. I end by proposing a lens rooted in social reproduction theory (SRT) that can grasp these specificities and examine the hidden undercurrents of food production.

In the third chapter, I discuss my research design for multiscale ethnography, drawing on the conceptualization of Bao Xiang (2013). In particular, I highlight its benefits in merging topics of labor, social reproduction, and institutional governance within one conceptual lens.

The fourth chapter sets the empirical stage by providing an introductory history of the restructuring processes of Austrian agriculture in the wake of EU accession. Herein, we find the four structural moments of modern agriculture - Structuring Moments of Fixed Capital, Agricultural Intensification, Precarized Mobile Labor, and Retailer Dominance - surfacing in a context-specific articulation, shaped by the geographical and institutional specificities of Austrian agriculture. The fourth and fifth chapters are analytically divided according to the

twofold scalar positioning as a pivot for organizing multiscalar ethnography (Xiang 2013, 2022).

In the fourth chapter, I look at greenhouses as an *emergent scale*. Based on this practice-based understanding of scale-making, I examine how the scale of the workplace is tied to everyday practices and livelihoods of growers and workers alike. I analyzed the intersecting practices of *direct recruitment* and *self-organized mobility* as constitutive of the current maintenance of greenhouses businesses. Inasmuch as value is extracted not only from the labor power but the very relations of workers, I argued that this ought to be understood as a *twofold exploitation*. Here, the social reproductive sphere of workers serves is appropriated by growers as the central recruitment mechanism, thus converting relations into financial value.

But exploitation does not unfold in an institutional void. To fully account for how the institutional sphere is structuring interactions at the workplace, the fifth chapter traces the *taxonomical scales* within which the greenhouse is encased. I focus on labor law and analyze two attempts that reveal the current scaled arrangement of diminishing labor protection. The analysis suggests that a) workplace-based exploitation is stabilized through the specific distributions of resources and responsibilities on different scales and b) is driven by a specific class project of domestic producers in a volatile European food sector. This current scaled arrangement minimizes labor inspections and produces the status of workers as protected yet neglected.

I end by discussing the significance of these findings in the context of what Nelu termed *sistemul infinit*, looking at the persistence and cracks of capitalist accumulation and the role of research therein.

2. Literature Review: Connecting Fresh Food Circuits and Romanian Labor Trajectories

This literature review serves three purposes. First, I draw on the more political-economic literature that is instructive in understanding the four structuring relations that characterize contemporary global agriculture, what I describe as *Fixed Capital*, *Agricultural Intensification*, *Precarized Mobile Labor*, and *Retailer Dominance*. I point out that existing studies on agrifood production address the third relation mainly by looking at processes of illegalization and restrictive regulation of mobility. These processes produce precarious agrifood workforces either as a) refugee-based (widespread in large parts of Mediterranean agriculture) or b) circular migration programs (as common in Northern European countries). Yet, despite their very different status as European citizens and thus unrestricted in their mobility, the third type of c) Eastern European and more specifically Romanian workers calls for more analytical attention than it currently attracts.

Second, I review the literature on Romanian migration to inquire how questions of increasing European labor market access and subsequent new forms of value extraction are examined therein. Here, I note that the majority of studies on Romanian migration are informed by a “social capital” perspective. This artificially renders value internal to migrant networks themselves and largely ignores the other side of the wage relation. Merging these two observations, I hold that the Austrian case – the sustained presence of Romanian workers in Viennese greenhouses within conditions of deregulated mobility – is located in somewhat of a limbo between the literatures and cannot be fully explained by either of them.

Third, I sketch out a multiscale framework that is capable of grasping both the enacted dynamics of mobility and recruitment, as well as their institutional governance within scaled arrangements.

2.1. Agriculture in the Global Economy: Structuring Moments of Fixed Capital, Agricultural Intensification, Precarized Mobile Labor, and Retailer Dominance

Fields cannot move, and neither can greenhouses. While this might be considered a rather obvious matter of fact, it nonetheless serves as a crucial vantage point to situate Viennese greenhouses in the uneven global economy. Contrary to the transformations in the neoliberal conjuncture from the 1970s onwards – in which capital moved into the global South, giving shape to what is known as the “international division of labor” (see Castles 2017) – agricultural producers were by definition limited in their ability to exploit geographically more favorable locations in terms of access to cheap labor and resources. Examples of mobile agricultural capital can be found in practices of outsourcing and contract farming, observable in Northern Morocco and Northern Mexico (Zloliniski 2018). Yet, the majority of growers in Europe remained bound to locality. In this sense, fields and greenhouses constitute forms of local fixed capital. This type of capital is oftentimes deeply embedded within domestic and traditional relations of ownership and political participation, as well as being valorized in its proclaimed “regionality”. This results in a strong political representation of growers’ interests on regional and national levels. As scholars frequently observe, agriculture is often historically exempted from regulative state legislation, a phenomenon termed “agricultural exceptionalism” (see Skogstadt 1998).

A second deviation from well-known processes of uneven development concerns the mode of production. While other sectors witnessed massive processes of de-industrialization, agriculture shows a reversed trajectory – in the course of globalized production, most agricultural businesses remain competitive by applying classic industrial logics (Rogaly 2008). Through the deployment of technology and labor, the enhancement of yields within increasingly year-long production aims to cater to global markets and consumer demand (Zloliniski 2022). This process of agricultural intensification is best illustrated in the example of how greenhouses function.

By definition, the greenhouse is designed to bend space and time. Its value lies precisely as functioning as a closed environment that differs from its spatial surrounding, thus affording artificially optimum conditions for plant growth. Relatedly, greenhouses substantially speed up the ripening period of plants, and with adequate technology like UV radiation, greenhouses can run all year long. Dating back to colonial times, the ability of the greenhouse to manipulate its heat/humidity/light ratio enabled colonial powers to transport exotic fruits from colonies to imperial centers and subsequently grow them under otherwise untenable climatic conditions. After greenhouses gained popularity in aristocratic circles in the 18th and 19th centuries, agricultural producers in the Netherlands discovered their manifold benefits for industrial agriculture (Nemali 2022, Ibáñez Martín 2023). Taken together, greenhouses can accelerate fresh food production by overcoming the major limitations of free-land agriculture in hitherto unmatched ways. This is poignantly summarized by Zlolski in his concluding remarks on greenhouse workplace regimes in Northern Mexico: “This system represents a further step of the capitalist dream to emulate manufacturing production to its fullest possible extent under controlled spatial-social environments. The result is the 21st-century version on steroids of what Carey McWilliams (...) called “factories in the field,” predicated on space–time work arrangements to intensify the labor process and enhance productivity” (2022, 210).

A third implication addresses labor. As indicated in the introduction, the link between agricultural intensification and migrant labor recruitment is clearly evinced in the literature (Rogaly, 2008). As fixed capital, greenhouses are not only dependent on cheap labor – since the 20th century increasingly provided by non-domestic populations (Martin, 2021; Laschewski et al., 2023) – but on their local availability. Thus, channeling foreign labor into local employment becomes an inherently political question, mobilizing the state as a central mediator of foreign labor. It thus comes as no surprise that the agricultural sector was among the first sectors in which bilateral temporary migration programs were established, dating back to before the well-

known Bracero program in the US (see Chan, 1986). This historicity finds a resemblance in Austria: a large part of the canon of migration studies refers to the so-called Raab-Olah agreement of 1961 as the founding moment of the so-called Gastarbeiter era of the 1960s and 1970s. However, recent historical work indicates another trajectory – in fact, the first circular migration program was established in 1920 between Czechoslovakia and Austria to cover the labor demand of Austrian producers (Richter, 2018). Related, non-domestic workers were bracketed out of many of the regulating policies of this time for domestic workers (ibid. 289f). This foregrounds the simultaneity of mobile labor and its precarization as a hallmark of modern agriculture, understood by some scholars as emblematic of racial capitalism (Rogaly, 2021).

Fourthly and finally, it was widely noted how these dynamics are fundamentally shaped by, and streamlined towards, the growing corporate power (McMichael, 2015). In the course of liberalizing food markets of the 1980s and 1990s in Europe, market power was shifted to multinational retailer chains (Rogaly, 2008). The restructured agrifood system not only creates highly adverse price conditions for producers but also dictates a year-round demand for cheap vegetables, thus further accelerating the intensification and migrantification of the workforce.

Taken together, these four dynamics of Fixed Capital, Agricultural Intensification, Precarized Mobile Labor, and Retailer Dominance can be seen as the structuring moments of contemporary global agriculture. They can be seen as generative of production arrangements, articulating themselves in time- and place-specific ways, shaped by institutional and interactional specificities on multiple scales.

Regarding the role of migrant labor therein, the Austrian case departs from some of the well-researched dynamics in the literature. Commonly, modern agrifood production sites are documented as: rural and often highly isolated production enclaves; being part of large-scale agrifood enterprises; tied to export-oriented global commodity chains; and characterized by highly restrictive migration regimes that govern the occupational and physical mobility of

migrant food workers. Yet, Viennese greenhouses differ in nearly all these ways. They are: located in a European capital; owned by small-scale and traditional grower families; part of a fresh food industry that aims to cover national consumption rather than global export; and sustained by Romanian greenhouse workers, who are endowed with the European fourth freedom of movement and full access to European labor markets.

The last point is interesting in its own right. Whereas a large part of the literature documents processes of illegalization and irregularization – comprising the synergistic effects of restrictive migration regimes, denial of citizenship, and repressive labor inspections, among other factors - as preponderant in creating a precarized workforce, less attention is paid to how value is extracted out of labor that is not restricted in mobility. This is surprising given the quantitative ratio of how in middle and northern European countries, the share of European citizens in the agricultural workforce is considerably higher than in Mediterranean agriculture (see Palumbo, 2023, 2). Studies suggest that among this group of European citizens, Romanian workers constitute a large part thereof (Schmidt, 2021; Cosma et al., 2021).

This dynamic is reflected in my observations in greenhouses, in which 90% of workers are of Romanian origin (see LK, 2014). As indicated in the introduction, this urges the question of how intensified vegetable production is maintained on a large scale by drawing on a labor pool that is *not* irregularized. In conditions of unrestricted movement and labor market access for Romanian workers, many factors that push migrant workers into exploitative labor conditions are ceasing. How could we conceptualize the possible new forms of profitability that these unrestricted labor arrangements allow for? I will now turn to the literature of migration studies and Romanian migration, pointing out that the question of how value is extracted from mobility practices is relatively unexamined by now.

2.2. Scholarship on Romanian Migration

The post-1990 scope of Romanian migration is exceptional: in only three decades, around 20% of the active Romanian labor force became involved in temporary or durable migration patterns (Sandu et al., 2006; WB, 2018), with numbers being tendentially underestimated due to difficult-to-measure conditions in which labor mobility takes place (Kiss, 2013 in Rubiolo, 2018, 77). This migratory condition of Romania is enacted in highly diverse and complex ways: apart from formalized and privatized mobility arrangements (see Horváth & Angel, 2009, 392ff; Voivozeanu, 2019), studies frequently highlighted the high degree of *self-organization* as a characteristic of Romanian migration: that is, intermediating job placements through direct relations within vast and rapidly emerging networks across Western European space (Hartman, 2008; Potot, 2008; Șerban & Voicu, 2010).

Commonly, labor intermediation is mainly discussed in migration studies along two lines of either commercial *migration industries* or horizontal *migration networks* (see Jones & Shah, 2020, 5ff for a review). Regarding the former, the characteristics of self-organization as potentially involving every migrant in the practice of non-commercial intermediation contrasts with the figure of the mediator, who usually appears in migration industry scholarship as the Simmelian *tertius gaudens*, or “the third who benefits” (see Bessy & Chauvin, 2018, 93ff). Oftentimes forming crucial nodes in migration industries (Gammeltoft Hansen & Nyberg Sorensen, 2012), the literature documents a vast array of commercial intermediaries, including “agents”, “brokers”, “coyotes”, “smugglers”, and others, performing complex roles in the infrastructures that facilitate, commodify, and thereby profit from human mobility (Xiang & Lindquist, 2013, see Jones & Shah, 2020).

Yet, the type of labor intermediation in the Romanian context is seldomly informed by a commercial purpose that would characterize these migration patterns as *industries* and some actors as *tertius gaudens* (Potot, 2008, 3ff). In the absence thereof, horizontal modalities of

labor intermediation are commonly examined through the lens of the *migration network*. This extensive literature approaches migration by tracing the creation of migratory chains through the spread of interpersonal networks and their cumulative causation (Massey et al., 1998). Hereby, the framing of interpersonal relations as “social capital” features centrally, as social networks are seen as manifestations thereof (see Sandu et al., 2006, 71f; Șerban & Voicu, 2010, 103f). While this perspective is reviewed elsewhere in more depth (Sha, 2021), I am particularly interested in how it is applied to understand Romanian migration dynamics.

Here, studies have documented the high degrees of self-organization of Romanian migration across European space (Horváth & Anghel, 2009). Oftentimes, individual forerunners inhabit crucial roles in creating migration corridors which are then utilized by kin and kith, rendering migration a self-perpetuating and highly dynamic phenomenon (Șerban & Voicu, 2010). In addition to the distinct functions of certain individuals in the course of emerging migration networks, it is observed that virtually every migrant fulfills a “sponsor function” in the course of migration. This includes job distribution, among other things (see *ibid.* 117ff). Similarly, in a study of the development of migratory chains in two localities in Romania, Potot highlights the highly networked nature of transnational job intermediation across distant relations, through which, eventually, Romanian migrants ‘have played a role, without waiting for international agreements, in the construction of a large transnational space across Europe’ (Potot 2008: 1). The self-intermediation of employment opportunities within migration networks are, in this view, a ‘social form that is adapted well to the globalization of the European economy’ (*ibid.*, 2).

As I attempt to show below, this strand of the literature on Romanian migration provides only a partial understanding of the implications of self-organized mobility, especially when inserted into highly segmented Western European economies that became structurally dependent on migrant labor (Castles, 1986). As evidenced by Judith Schmidt in the case of German

agriculture, the trajectories of Romanian mobile workers cannot be separated from the “calculation patterns” (*Kalkulationsmuster*) of German farm owners in the competitive globalized European agricultural market (2020, 2021). Potot’s conclusion can thus be analytically inverted: a globalizing Europe was well adapted to make thorough use of the rapidly expanding Romanian migration phenomenon. It is in this light that framing the value of transnational networks as “social capital” which pertains exclusively to migrants (which is then convertible into economic resilience for instance, by being able to mediate labor niches across Europe, see Potot, 2008, 4ff) is problematic: it implies to analytically bracket out the manifold actors on *the other side of the wage relation* who might benefit from the self-organization of migrants while not being part of the network – for instance companies and/or private employers. In doing so, this view renders “social capital” as a form of value internal to migration networks (Portes, 1998; Das, 2004), rather than incorporated within broader capitalist valorization processes (see Rubiolo, 2018, 72f).

Merging the two sections of my review, it becomes apparent that the sustained presence of Romanian workers in Viennese greenhouses is located in somewhat of a limbo between literatures. On the one hand, the literature on agrifood production explains the persistence of labor exploitation by referring to processes of illegalization and mobility restriction. Here, agricultural labor supply can be differentiated into either drawing on a) the refugeeization of the workforce or b) circular migration programs, both employing EU third-country nationals. The third modality, namely c) European citizens, remains relatively unexamined, despite the very different institutional conditions regarding mobility and labor market access. On the other hand, this stands vis-à-vis strands of the literature on Romanian migration that only partly focuses on how the self-organization or mobility among Romanian workers becomes profitable for employers, especially in the sphere of recruitment.

Turning back to the four structuring moments of current agricultural accumulation (Fixed Capital, Agricultural Intensification, Precarized Mobile Labor, and Retailer Dominance), this has implications regarding the third one. Since the latest labor market openings to Romanians and Bulgarians in 2014, the conditions to employ a precarized workforce have changed significantly: a large part of agricultural workers is not bound to the labor niche of agriculture anymore. Yet, as the pandemic shows, labor conditions remain as exploitative and abusive as before. This necessitates further analytical attention to the continuance of precarized labor *not despite but through* the deregulation of the mobility of migrant workers. What sustains agricultural accumulation in the absence of state policies that restrict physical movement and labor market access? How does the practice of direct recruitment among Romanian greenhouse workers become lucrative, and why do they “channel themselves” into exploitative arrangements, despite employment possibilities elsewhere?

2.3. Connecting Relations, Labor, and Accumulation: A Social Reproduction Lens

In a recent publication, Shah and Lerche (2020) insist that a systemic understanding of the exploitation of agricultural workers necessitates accounting for what they call “the invisible economies of care”, namely the wide-spanning sets of intimate relations within and across “spatiotemporally divided households that sustains workers” in which “productive and reproductive activities are analytically and empirically intertwined” (ibid., 721ff). Together, they form an “invisible economy because it is never considered in worker remuneration” (ibid., 722) that undergirds the possibility of sustained accumulation through food production.

Their argument builds on a larger thinking tradition of social reproduction theory (SRT hereafter) and its developments in the sphere of migration (see Burawoy, 1976 for a forerunner in this regard). Inasmuch as Shah and Lerche insist that “insights from this classic literature are rarely drawn on today” (ibid., 721), it is worth considering this scholarship as a suitable epistemic tool for seeing how – in the absence of state actors and the subsequent relocation of

recruitment practices into direct-grower worker relations – the sphere of Romanian workers’ relations becomes a central object of capitalist value extraction.

The underlying premise of an SRT lens is to account for the social reproductive sphere in capitalist production as its “hidden abode”, concisely summarized by Nancy Fraser (2014). Her critical reading of Marx aims to go beyond the conceptualization of capitalism as an ever-expanding accumulative project that eventually results in the *total* commodification of life. Rather than saturating all spheres of social life, the conversion into value always necessitates a non-commodified sphere, including nonmarketized forms of interhuman care, and institutional social security (ibid., 145f). Following this thought, she locates the “hidden abode” of capitalism in the reproductive sphere as “an indispensable background condition for the possibility of capitalist production”. In this reading, the exploitation of labor power cannot be understood separately from the appropriation of relational work (ibid., 150).

In its most articulated versions, SRT informs studies of global circuits of paid reproductive labor under the term of *care circulation*, including carers, cleaners, nurses, and brides (see Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2000). Related, studies have also looked at transnational social mobility strategies at the intersection between reproductive *and* productive strategies (Kilkey et al., 2018, 3ff). By cutting through spheres of paid and unpaid labor, this approach echoes Fraser’s concern of the “functional imbrication” of re/productive relations as ever-shifting configurations of un/paid labor that enable accumulative projects (2014).

When inserted into decidedly agricultural dynamics, SRT productively addresses the tension that arises between societal reproduction (the need for cheap food for sustaining domestic populations) and social reproduction (the household level of care and child-rearing, in which migrant workers can be inserted) (see Weis, 2021). This lens was mobilized to understand the role of migrant workforces in the shifting dynamics of accumulation in Europe.

For instance, Urzi's work documents the social reproductive experiences of Romanian and Tunisian workers in greenhouses in Sicily (Urzi & Williams, 2017, see also Kilkey & Urzi, 2017). This comparative approach enables them to show how the social reproductive experiences of workers are deeply embedded in the shifting economic conditions of the Italian food sector. Furthermore, social reproductive experiences partly overlap but also differ for both groups, the latter evolving mainly around legal socio-legal status and variegated access to social welfare systems (Kilkey & Urzi, 2017, 8ff). In both cases, it becomes clear how the cheapness of labor is mainly achieved by transnational livelihood strategies of keeping intimate relations across distance, rather than merging them, thus enabling local food provisioning (ibid, 15ff).

Strauss's work picks and indeed scales up the drivers behind cheap food by examining the historical roots and contemporary rise of unfree labor in UK agriculture, epitomized in the *gangmaster* recruitment system (2012). Against the backdrop of rising retailer dominance from the 1980s onwards, she links the re-emergence of gangmaster structures as recruitment mechanisms to the structural demands of cheap food. The subsequent governmental response to regulate the revival of unfree labor remains limited, mainly due to the selective implementation of worker's rights and shifting political constellations of power (ibid. 11). Her article-length examination of labor recruitment structures masterfully shows the imbricated nature of social reproduction within historical class relations and the role of state power and scaled regulation. In doing so, Strauss' work shifts the unit of analysis of SRT from the experiential to the regulative sphere.

Finally, a recent article reconciles both experiential and regulative spheres in the context of the *caporalato* labor recruitment system in Italy (Perrota & Raeymakers, 2022). Their argument holds that "caporalato has represented a central infrastructure of labour mediation, which simultaneously complements neoliberal state policies while embedding the cost of labour reproduction into migrant networks" (ibid., 2). By combining historical with longitudinal

ethnographic research, they reveal the emergence of a global production enclave through the interplay of persistent informal labour brokerage practices and active state abandonment. Thus, they arrive at similar conclusions as Strauss by observing that “agricultural firms rely *increasingly* on such broker networks to guarantee their need for a flexible and disposable labour force” in the growing globalized and retailer-dominated food market (ibid., 18). Migration labor infrastructures thus form “the hidden undercurrents of extractive capitalist frontiers” that are part of accumulative circuits through contingent arrangements of law, mobile labor and capital.

As this cursory review shows, when mobilized in agricultural settings, SRT serves as a vital empirical and analytical pivot in mediating global production and its local articulations. This is evidenced by findings that document the variety of labor recruitment systems and their repercussions on both productive and reproductive activities. While these studies do not specifically examine questions of free mobility and its implications for agricultural production sites, they nonetheless show the analytical purchase of SRT as a tool to understand the creative continuities of localized capital accumulation in a globalized food market. In interweaving local histories of class, and migrant labor, SRT can situate labor recruitment within scaled transformations of a globalized agriculture and the role of the state therein.

I draw my inspiration from this perspective to reconsider labor intermediation as a practice that sits between both spheres of production *and* social reproduction: on the one hand, it functions as a transnational practice that sustains workers’ households over time and space. On the other hand, labor intermediation can become a modality of labor recruitment for employers, with potential economic benefits. This view addresses the relevance of migrant labor for both sides of the wage relation. Furthermore, it opens ways to consider the underlying sets of relations that mobile workers are embedded in – here understood as the *relationality* of mobile workers – as the potential object of value extraction to trace the broader “machinations of capitalist growth”,

in agriculture and beyond (Shah & Lerche, 2020, 720ff). Taken together, I agree with – and indeed hope to contribute to – Bakker and Silvey’s summary of how “social reproduction lends a unique perspective to understandings of the transformation in the global political economy precisely because of its simultaneous focus on caring and provisioning in the everyday and its relationship to policies and decisions made at the national and international levels” (2008, 5).

3. Research Design: Recruitment & Governance through a Multiscalar Lens

Having sketched out some of the theoretical insights, blindspots, and fruitful venues that arise when examining contemporary agriculture, it leads to the question of how to translate conceptual concerns into a suitable research design. If SRT as a productive lens addresses the interplay between the experiential level and its institutional governance, it likewise necessitates a methodological approach that addresses both spheres.

Here, recent work in transnationalism studies developed the concept of multiscalar analysis into an optic that clarifies the relations between mobility and structure, described by Çağlar and Glick Schiller as “the sociospatial spheres of practice that are constituted in relationship to each other and within various hierarchies of networks of power” (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018, 8, see also Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2021, 8ff). This was further reworked by Biao Xiang into *multiscalar ethnography* (2013, 2022). Here, he methodologically refines the multiscalar optic into an applicable method that organizes the oftentimes multi-sited nature of ethnographic research.

To this end, multi-scalar ethnography “is first of all concerned with how social phenomena, such as transnational migration, are constituted through actions at different scales” (Xiang, 2013, 284). The proposed framework is based on a distinction between “taxonomical” and “emergent” scales. The former denotes “the building blocks of ‘the nested hierarchy of bounded

spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national, and global' (Delaney and Leitner, in *ibid.*, 284) and corresponds to the bureaucratic organization of nation-states. The latter addresses the open-ended nature of human practices, constituting "the scope of coordination and mobilization that arises from collective actions, which in turn generates new capacity for the actors" (*ibid.*: 285). Crucially, when solidified through informal networks and other spheres of practice, emerging scales can become more effective as more taxonomical/institutional scales (*ibid.*: 288).

Taking the interplay of emergent and taxonomical scales as a vantage point, Xiang's key proposition is to focus on what he terms *the double scalar positioning of sites*: as every social site is located at the intersection of emergent and taxonomical scales, attending to this double positioning serves "as a pivot for organizing ethnographic data [and enables to dissect] the multi-scalar constitution of a particular phenomenon" (*ibid.*: 285).

In my case, I find Xiang's proposition of double scalar positioning useful in situating the role of Romanian mobility practices within larger processes of sustaining accumulation in a restructured Austrian fresh food sector. When inserted into a multiscalar schema, we see how greenhouses can be indeed "double positioned" on an emergent scale (as a result of continuing livelihood strategies of both growers *and* workers) as well as taxonomical scales (as governed by broader scaled arrangements, ranging from regional labor laws, national migration regimes to European restructured markets). The practice-and activity-centered notion of the "emergent scale" can be fruitfully read together with the daily re/productive activities of labor, but also related activities such as recruitment, relational work, and leisure activities. Greenhouses are not only material givens but have to be sustained through practice. Yet, the very possibilities of practice unfolding daily are mediated by broader processes, which are captured in the taxonomical scales of local, regional, national, and global power.

This *double scalar positioning* of greenhouses translates the SRT lens into an applicable research design and serves as the main analytics in this thesis. In the same vein, it is reflected in the organization of the following analytical chapters. After beginning with a chapter that a) describes the historical emergence of greenhouses in Vienna in a re-structuring Austrian food market since the 1980s, the two subsequent chapters look at b) the maintenance of the greenhouse as an emergent scale by describing interaction, mobility practices such as labor intermediation in grower-worker relations; to then c) trace how this form of exploitability is constituted and enabled by actions and practices of taxonomical scales, mainly by a perspective is sensitive to scale and its political power (Nonini & Susser 2020).

4. Historical Opportunities: Migrant Labor and the Restructuring of the Austrian Fresh Food Sector

Historically, the greenhouse complex spanned over two thousand hectares in the Eastern part of Lower Austria. From the mid-19th century onwards, its fertile soil was cultivated by over three thousand peasant families, conducting mostly free-range horticulture. After the 1960s, the area was subject to agricultural restructuring processes, in which the globalizing vegetable market either pushed growers into business closure or led to the upscaling of production through economies of scale (see Schmidt 2021: 139ff for similar dynamics in Germany). Former small-scale, multi-crop, and free-range farming was gradually replaced by greenhouse-based single-crop intensification. This was further accelerated by Austrian EU accession on January 1st, 1995, and only within a few decades, the landscape became fully defined by plastic and glass greenhouses (see Mejchar 2008). Crucially, greenhouse-based production increased the demand for cheap and flexible labor power, met through migrant labor: from the 1970s onwards, a variety of bilateral programs between Austria and former Yugoslavia and subsequent national labor market quota (Kontingentregelung) regulated local labor demand. From the 1990s onwards, the share of workers from Romania grew up to the point that they became the almost

exclusive local workforce. Nowadays, the greenhouse complex encompasses a hundred hectares, and ninety businesses employ between two and thirty Romanian workers depending on the business size. The area serves as an agricultural powerhouse in the Austrian fresh food sector: yearly, every two of three Austrian cucumbers are produced in this place, followed by slightly fewer numbers for eggplants and tomatoes (LK Wien 2017). In sum, it accounts for around 40% of Austrian fruit vegetable production, and the local cooperative stated a profit of nearly 100 million Euros for 2020 (LGV 2020).

4.1. The Replacement of Domestic Hands

Conforming with the structuring relations as described in the theoretical chapter, we see the interplay between intensification, retailer dominance, and the central of employing a migrant workforce (Rogaly 2008; Zloliniski 2022). According to many retired farmers, the construction of the first greenhouses in the early 1970s accelerated the need for an extra-familial workforce. As a retired gardener remembered:

It happened kind of automatically. At first, we maintained the ethos of keeping the work in the family, especially my parents. But soon after building the first greenhouses, we realized that we needed additional hands in there. This is when we had to become actual employers (...) But the first labor migrants, if you will, were Sudetendeutsche. They resided in a nearby refugee camp and worked for a meal or one Schilling at the time. These were really poor guys, but fortunately, the camps were abandoned soon. (...) Then, in the 1970s, this whole foreign worker [Fremdarbeiter] debate began. I remember that we [the local gardener cooperative] were always jealous of the Germans and their large Gastarbeiter schemes. Every year, we used to complain about our government: Look, again! The Germans got so many workers and we were only granted so few. But then, the labor contingents sufficiently increased, mainly consisting of Yugoslavians.

This quote illustrates how increased labor demand in intensified production was first covered by domestic marginalized groups, whose structural vulnerability rendered them exploitable for low-wage, labor-intensive employment. Afterward, bilateral recruitment schemes allowed for the large-scale employment of various non-domestic workforces, consisting of Poles, and groups from the countries of former Yugoslavia. Following the demise of the Ceausescu regime, the massive exodus of Romania through westwards-oriented migration flows increased in the late 1990s (Sandu et al. 2006) up to the point that nowadays, Romanians are the fastest-growing migrant population in Austria (Statista 2022). This exponential growth was preceded by developments in the greenhouse complex, another grower remembers:

Suddenly, they [Romanians] were everywhere. I mean, it was common that from time to time, someone would knock at the door and ask for work. But in the early 2000s, it really exploded. Every hour, I had someone knocking at my door. 'Hast du Arbeit hast du Arbeit' was the only German sentence they knew. And after you employ one, you can be sure that he brings his family, neighbors, and whatnot. But they were solid workers, so I started employing them. Since then, we mainly have Romanians here. One of my long-term workers always invites me to his home in Romania. And in return, I always joke: if I visit every village along the way where I know former workers, I would have to stop in every village in Romania.

Especially the last sentence illustrates the occurrence of a deep connectivity between Romanian households and Austrian greenhouses. As part of their westward migration journeys, Romanian workers self-organized employment by literally knocking at the doors of the greenhouses of Austrian growers, with these initial encounters leading to the emergence and subsequent solidification of workplace relations between growers and workers. Crucially, the grower highlights how Romanian workers utilized these emergent workplace relations to intermediate work in the greenhouses to their kin and peers.

4.2. The Restructuring of the Market: Austrian EU-Accession

The increasing presence of Romanian workers in the 1990s not only marked a new period of labor recruitment in the greenhouse complex but was paralleled by significant transformations of agricultural production in the course of Austrian EU accession. In interviews, Austrian growers usually refer to the socio-economic consequences of EU accession in highly critical ways: pre-1995, a system was in place that aligned harvest times with the regulation of border imports - local cooperatives were in close contact with governmental representatives, who would inhibit the import of particular vegetables as soon as they would be available for harvesting in Austria. This remarkable level of institutionalized agrarian protection dissolved during EU accession. After a brief transitory period, Austrian greenhouse growers would find themselves in the European Single Market (ESM) and its relentless competition with greenhouse-producing companies from Spain or the Netherlands, resulting in drastic price drops for vegetables. Parallel, the once diversified Austrian fresh food market became dominated by powerful corporative actors up to the point that nowadays, 83% of the market share is distributed among three multinational companies, constituting one of the highest market concentrations in the European food sector (Jaklin 2013).

This restructuring of the Austrian fresh food sector manifested itself in a set of economic challenges for growers: for instance, while the pre-1995 price of a cucumber was set in advance and the payment would follow immediately, it now takes four to six weeks, and the eventual price fluctuates based on the calculated offerings of the supplied retailer and negotiations with agricultural cooperatives. Such practices contribute to a high degree of perceived economic uncertainty among growers, articulated again and again in interviews.

While the scalar reshuffling in the course of EU accession led to significant and oftentimes detrimental changes from the perspective of small-scale greenhouse growers, new European modalities of mobility policy turned out to be quite advantageous. Whereas former labor

recruitment proceeded through state-regulated guestworker programs, Romanian workers were recruited in increasingly informalized ways until 2003, when visa restrictions were lifted and Romanians in the agricultural sector were granted a de facto guaranteed work permission through the *Saisonier-Regelung*. Eventually, the Austrian labor market was fully opened to Romanians and Bulgarians on January 1st, 2014. Asked about the differences in recruitment patterns in the course of Austrian EU accession, a grower remembered:

With Romanians, it became way easier in terms of paperwork. But still, before 2003, it would take weeks for the ministry to confirm that my worker is allowed to work. And the application procedure was totally dumb (deppert): it required that he already resides in my business while applying for the job. Imagine, this worker sleeps near the greenhouse and is desperate to start working because he needs the money. But our beloved government forbids it. And it's a greenhouse, so my cucumbers grow immensely fast and would rot if no one picked them. You can imagine that we did not wait until the ministry confirms it. In 2003, all of this became obsolete as the visa regulations were eased. It is easier for everyone now. I don't have to mess with state officials and the workers are happy that they can bring the people they want.

This quote illustrates the withering of state involvement parallel to the increase of informalized labor recruitment in the greenhouses as a suitable means to upkeep production. Confronted with dense state bureaucracy, growers became to prefer Romanian labor to previous forms of contracted migrant labor due to its local availability and convenience. Seemingly paradoxical, Romanian workers already formed most of the local labor force even though visa restrictions were erased as late as 2003. Yet, this can be explained by what is commonly observed in the literature as early characteristics of self-organized migration in Romanian networks, including overstaying visa stays abroad, illegal border-crossing, and other practices (Horváth & Anghel

2009). As the first arriving, often illegalized workers began to intermediate employment opportunities in the greenhouse to their kin and kith, Romanian workers soon covered most of the local labor demand, often with lower salaries than their Eastern European counterparts. Thus, the eventual ease of visa restrictions in 2003 was only relevant in dislodging the last obstacles of recruiting not only workers but also their acquaintances, close and distant.

4.3. The Relevance of Romanian Workers in Viennese Greenhouses

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent how growers could navigate the ambivalent effects of EU accession through the utilization of the expansive Romanian migration: forced to adapt to the new uncertainties caused by economic liberalization, growers profited from the simultaneity of large-scale self-organized mobility practices of Romanians and its regularized recruitment, as enshrined in the European principle of free movement.

In conclusion, this brief empirical recount of shifting recruitment practices in the greenhouse complex confirms widely evidenced insights about the four structuring relations of modern agriculture. Often termed the “californization of agriculture”, we see how growers cope with the challenges of a retailer-driven restructuring by investing in agricultural intensification, part of which is employing a migrant workforce (Rogaly 2008, Zloliniski 2022). After recruiting workers from other parts of Europe, Romania became the main source of greenhouse labor from the late 1990s onwards. I would additionally insist that a close reading of this process further reveals that in Austrian greenhouses, not only Romanian workers themselves became indispensable for maintaining profitability, *but also their relations*. As the growers’ remark that “they bring their family, neighbors, and whatnot” illustrates, self-organized mobility among Romanian workers became a self-perpetuating mechanism that met local labor demand in a flexible and reliable manner unmatched by pre-accession labor regimes. Labor intermediation thus plays an integral role for *both* groups along the wage relation: while it allowed Romanian households to sustain a living outside the drastic domestic liberalization of the 1990s and 2000s,

it created recruitment channels for Austrian growers that made Romanian rural labor directly available. In this context, “Știu eu pe cineva” (I know someone) remains a common phrase from Romanian workers when bosses inquire how to fill up the freed vacancies. I will now turn to an ethnographic examination of labor intermediation and its systemic role for greenhouse businesses in terms of flexibility and profitability.

5. Social Reproduction and/as Labor Power: The Twofold Exploitation of Romanian Workers

On a hot Sunday afternoon at the end of July, a procedure repeated itself which I observed many times during fieldwork. Several workers and I gathered in front of our dormitory, containing several containers next to the greenhouses. As we chat and recharge from the straining work week, I sit next to Aurel and his wife Silvia, both employed for six years in this business and fourteen years in another business in the greenhouse complex. Next to them sit Silvias' cousin and a nephew, as well as two friends of the cousin. The two friends are a couple in their early 20s and arrived earlier this year through Silvia's cousin. All six of them grew up in the same rural region in Western Romania and form the core personnel in the greenhouse for this year. In addition to us, one worker is employed in the high season between May and September.

This afternoon, we wait for the new worker to arrive to substitute for the former worker Marius, who arrived only two weeks ago through the distant acquaintances of Aurel but abruptly quit work three days ago. Before Marius left, he complained to me that ‘I work a lot and still I don't make money. Look at us, we are sweating for nothing’ (Uită-te la noi, transpirând aici pentru nimic). Having asked why he does not claim more than his starting wage of 4,80€ per hour, he waved aside and replied: ‘It's not worth the effort of making trouble. I rather move on’ and left to a friend in Belgium, who offered him a job at a construction site. The sudden departure of Marius three days ago left a susceptible gap in our working force in the greenhouse, as it

occurred amid the high season. The daily cultivation of cucumbers by seven workers on two hectares of greenhouses demanded 66-76 hours of work per week. Having been approached by the greenhouse owner Harald for new workers, Aurel thought a bit and responded by saying: “Știu eu pe cineva”. In the evening, he reached out to acquaintances on the phone and a friend from Romania mentioned that his cousin named Silviu is currently in Germany and is searching for new employment.

This Sunday afternoon, Silviu arrived on a bus from a private microbus enterprise and was escorted by three companions with whom he worked in German agriculture the weeks before and who are planning to depart further to Italy. As they stood in front of our dormitories, Aurel gave Silviu a brief introduction:

‘I say this to everyone new here: as you can see by yourself, the money isn’t much. But if you live and work properly, you can make money [se câștigă bani] as much as elsewhere. The only condition is that you cooperate and listen to me. I am not the boss here, Harald is. But I am here for a long time and know the things [Știu lucrurile]. If this is all fine for you, we would be happy if you stay. What do you say?’

Silviu replied that he plans to stay, but he has some monetary issues since the first salary was not paid yet. Aurel continued to say: ‘Well, that’s no problem. Salary is paid every Friday in cash. Tomorrow after work, I can drive you to the supermarket and I can thrust out the money for the groceries by Friday. Then you return it, and from then you can start living here on your own.’ The following day, it turned out that not much introduction to the labor rhythms was needed –Silviu was already used to greenhouse-based work, leaving when he was seventeen years old to greenhouses in Sicily with his father. The remaining little differences in the work procedure were explained in detail by Aurel, taking his time with the new colleague while working. In the remaining three hours after work, before we went to sleep, Aurel and I did the

groceries in a nearby supermarket with Silviu. After a week of work, Silviu left the greenhouse by noting that he prefers to follow his companions to Italy, as they seemed to have found a more lucrative employment opportunity. Soon after, another worker filled the gap who was again arriving through the networks of Aurel. Leaving his container in a mess, Silvia (Aurel's wife) and I cleaned the place before the new worker arrived.

5.1. Differential Functions: Established and Transient Greenhouse Workers

This short ethnographic vignette is illustrative of the broader labor dynamics observable in Viennese greenhouses. The combination of laborious workdays and unfavorable work conditions results in a high degree of turnover among workers. Over time, this *created a dual pattern of the workforce*: On the one hand, workers transition through the greenhouse complex as interim steps in their mobile labor trajectories, working in the greenhouse for several days up to one season. For the sake of illustration, the mentioned container was inhabited by five different people during four months of my stay. In the following, I refer to these workers as *transient workers*. On the other hand, they are accompanied by more long-time workers who are employed in the respective business on a more long-term basis. Employment duration within this second group ranges from three to even thirty years in single cases of workers who arrived in the early 1990s. I refer to this group as *established workers*. Within the latter group, specific individual workers, mostly male and in their thirties to fifties, occupy a higher position in the work hierarchy by taking on more complex work duties, such as assigning tasks, coordinating different work teams, and monitoring orders. Effectively exercising the role of 'foremen' in the industrialized production in the greenhouse, they are usually not financially disbursed as such – with 5,20€, Aurel receives 40 cents more than his newly arrived counterpart Silviu, despite being in the company for six years longer.

By participating in the workday for four months, I came to recognize the relevance of established workers and the manifold forms of non-renumerated labor they perform. These

range from providing transient workers with necessities after arrival, doing the groceries and organizing appointments of official institutions, cleaning the abandoned flats after workers left, to the needed teach-in of new workers to the daily labor tasks, as illustrated in the arrival of Silviu. These labors conducted by established workers are neither recognized nor recompensed by growers, yet they are essential to meet the daily demands of greenhouse work. This becomes most striking in the field of labor recruitment. As Aurel's brother-in-law told me once while dropping by for dinner in our dormitory kitchen:

He [Aurel] did much here, I can tell. To all his friends and relatives who were in need of money, he said: come to the greenhouse, come to the greenhouse [Hai la sera, hai la sera]. He helped where he could, I also did the same in my firm. And with everyone who came, we showed them the work. How to wind the cucumbers around the ropes, how to care for the plants, how to select the ripe ones, everything. And I never wanted some extra money for it, for me, that would not be ok. I know things so I show them to new workers, that's normal. But many people leave the greenhouse again, going to Germany, Spain, Italy, or elsewhere because the work here is tough, and the money is very low.

This latter point was energetically taken up by Aurel, sitting next to him:

You know, this is precisely the point. I get everyone a job here who needed it. Life abroad [viață în străinătate] is not easy. I experienced it myself and I try my best to help. But Harald always complains that no one I would bring to the greenhouse is reliable, because people always leave again. And I always reply that you must give these people more money. 4,80€, what is this? People are not dumb – they know what wages they can earn abroad. Thus, many leave again, it's logical.

This conversation illustrates the central, yet difficult position of established workers as quasi-informal greenhouse intermediaries. Aurel and his brother-in-law stressed the importance of ‘helping people out’, utilizing their established position in Austrian greenhouses to intermediate opportunities to earn money for kin and kith who mostly try to either compensate insufficient wages in Romania or were unsatisfied with their former employment in other Western European countries. However, due to the low wages, many relatives and peers merely utilize this opportunity temporarily to then find more preferable work conditions elsewhere. This creates the transience of the group I refer to as transient workers. Furthermore, labor intermediation is enacted as a gendered and generational practice, as most established workers are older and male, and younger workers can recommend friends to them who then decide whom to suggest to the grower. Also, almost every worker I met once brought her children to the greenhouse. During my research, I worked alongside five teenagers who just finished school in Romania and earned money next to their parents for one season to finance their further education.

5.2. The Double Function of Job Intermediation

Taken together, job intermediation performs a complex function that is situated between both spheres of ensuring the reproduction of workers’ households and maintaining production for greenhouses owners. Regarding the former, it is a central mechanism to ensure continuing financial transactions back home by drawing on their extensive transnational relations to find ad hoc employment when necessary. The remarks of transient workers would oftentimes echo “I want to see how to make money there too” (see Voivozeanu 2020) to then move on due to the adversity of labor conditions. Established workers facilitate movements by providing job opportunities to kin and kith, and manifold forms of support in the course of arrival. Rather than acting as commercial *tertius gaudens*, the established workers form “internal” nodes within both the workplace *and* the vast transnational migration networks that span the European economy and tie together Austrian greenhouses with Spanish farms, German construction sites,

and Italian caregiving sectors through the occupational mobility of transient workers. For both established and transient workers, earnings mostly aim to cover costs in the fields of house construction/renovation, elderly care, and child education in Romania. Labor intermediation is thus central in ensuring the reproduction of workers and their domestic households and is embedded in the self-organization of occupational mobility in the European economy.

Parallel, it performs an integral function for the other side of the wage relation, in this case, Austrian growers. The wide-spanning set of relations that workers are embedded in – constituting the relationality of workers – serves as a remarkable source of value extraction, as it is precisely this relationality of workers that growers tap into when they continuously approach established workers about potential new transient ones. By drawing on the self-organized mobility of workers, growers access an available and ad hoc workforce that, cynically speaking, matches well with the flexible demands and rhythms of greenhouse production (Schmidt 2021). Its systemic relevance cannot be underestimated, because it functions as a profitable way of evading other costly forms of recruitment through labor agencies or other intermediaries.

The ambiguity of labor intermediation thus lies in its simultaneous valorization as both a supportive practice that is enacted within intimate and distant interpersonal relations to cope with economic challenges in a transnationalized Europe (Rubilio 2018: 73ff) and thereby maintaining a local, highly exploitative accumulation regime by ensuring the much-needed flux of cheapened migrant labor power to Austrian greenhouses. In light of former state-bureaucratic forms of recruitment, it becomes clear how intermediated labor recruitment is not only convenient but essential in extracting value and thereby increasing the economic resilience and profitability of greenhouse businesses. Emerging parallel to the restructuring of the Austrian fresh food sector, intermediated labor recruitment became a central mechanism in coping with the short-time retailer-driven demands for cheap vegetables.

5.3. The Twofold Exploitation of Romanian Greenhouses Workers

In this light, I suggest that the extraction of value out of workers' relations becomes a systemic feature of the current accumulation practices in Austrian greenhouses. Workers are valorized and subsequently exploited not in regards to their labor power, but also in their embeddedness in interpersonal relations of kin and kith. Following this thought further, I suggest that this constitutes workers in the form of a "twofold exploitation": growers capitalize not only on the labor power but also on the relationality of Romanian workers to meet the economic pressures in the liberalized European agricultural markets. This type of accumulation taps not only into the productive but the reproductive capacities of workers. Put differently, it is not only the capacity to work but also the capacity to "sa sti cineva", to know someone, that became a central aspect in the Kalkulationsmuster of Austrian growers (Schmidt 2021).

Finally, this argument is further deepened by considering the domestic context of Romanian workers. Accompanying Aurel and his family on a one-week homestay in Western Romania, I asked his younger son (who also worked in the greenhouse complex for four years) about his upbringing. While we drove through neighboring villages, he recounted:

You know, the area here is rural and only a few people had a car. What we did was to check every weekend who would have a car available. Thus, I came to know everyone in the region from my generation.' I replied by asking: 'And when you are in need of work today, you basically ask these people from back then?' 'Yes sure, we are still very much connected. I mean, our whole region left abroad, but now we have Facebook groups. And anyway, we would meet at Christmas at home, and most of us try to come back more often as Germany and Austria are quite nearby. Look, you saw the village we've just passed? They all work in greenhouses near Nürnberg, Germany. Others are more widespread. I have my family now in Vienna,

but theoretically, I could have a job elsewhere by tomorrow – Norway, Italy, France, Ireland, Germany, you name it. But I became used (m-am obișnuit) to Vienna.

As illustrated, interpersonal networks are grown out of the specificities of shared living in rural Romania, which forms the relational basis of the subsequent self-organization of mobility. In the course of westward migration, intimate and more distant relations are mobilized to find employment abroad while maintaining social ties at home. Oftentimes, the ability to be engaged in simultaneous settings of domestic life and foreign labor mobility has ambiguous effects, as it can outweigh the benefits of a higher wage. Having asked a befriended worker why he left a profitable job in a Dutch greenhouse, he replied:

You know, it is 2000km from the Netherlands to my village in Romania. During the year in the Dutch greenhouse, I haven't seen my wife once because she works as a caregiver in Italy, and it was not possible to schedule our home visits so that we can see each other. Now, I earn less than half of the money as before, however, I could take a bus and arrive in my village in eight hours anytime.

As this statement further demonstrates, the ability to maintain intimate relations over distance plays a powerful role in accepting otherwise exploitative working conditions. These statements resonate with what I observed as a frequent practice among established workers to leave for Romania for weekends to meet and cultivate the relational duties that they are involved in caring for elders, participating in weddings, house maintenance, communal traditional festivities, and taking care of administrative issues.

It is in this light that exploitation in Austrian greenhouses is further enabled by a certain and unintended “socio-spatial” advantage: As it takes only half a day to reach most villages in Western Romania, greenhouse employment affords possibilities to meet relational duties in ways that are not possible in geographically more distant destinations, such as Spain or Italy.

This informs the reasoning of especially established workers of, at one point, getting accustomed to otherwise adverse and exploitative working conditions and re-organize their relations in ways that provide some form of reliability and stability. This adds a further strand to my examination of how value extraction is not limited to the productive capacities but also encompasses the reproductive capacities of Romanian workers. Inasmuch as workers assign value to the possibility to meet relational duties over distance by being present in back-and-forth movements between Austrian greenhouses and Romanian villages, they remain in greenhouse employment and thus provide solidity to the smooth continuation of the greenhouse as a local labor regime.

Yet, accumulation does not happen in a confined bowl. The exploitation of labor power and appropriation of the relationality of workers in Austrian greenhouses unfolds in and is enabled by an institutionally mediated environment. State forces, labor authorities, and other actors inhabit key positions in shaping possible modes of accumulation. Therefore, the next chapter examines their role in the current Austrian fresh food sector.

6. Protected yet Neglected: State, Scale and Labor Rights in Austrian Agriculture

In line with my conceptual approach of the *double scalar positioning* of the greenhouse, this chapter shifts the analysis from the “emergent” (or the “sphere of practice” in Caglar and Glick Schiller terminology) to the “taxonomical scales” of local, regional and national scales, mirroring the encompassing bureaucracy of state order (Xiang 2013: 458). Having examined the “twofold exploitation” of Romanian workers at the scale of the workplace, I thus now analyze how this is co-produced and stabilized institutionally on multiple scales. Due to limitations in space, I mainly focus on labor law and its enforcement.

By doing so, this chapter draws on the second period of my research, in which I was employed at Arbeiterkammer Wien [henceforth AK] between March and June 2023. During this time, I conducted interviews with a wide range of actors, ranging from labor inspectorates, Organized Labor such as AK and the Austrian Labor Union, the Chamber of Agriculture [Landwirtschaftskammer, henceforth LK), activists, and so forth. Additionally, I analyzed a wide range of policy documents, ranging from parliamentary debates, plenary sessions of the European CAP negotiations, and national newsletters of the Chamber of Agriculture that inform about quota and legislation regarding migrant workers.

Based on this research, I examine the paradox legal status of farmworkers as *protected yet neglected*, capturing the *de jure* protection through a variety of labor laws vis-à-vis the *de facto* neglect of workers' rights at the workplace. I argue that this condition reflects a broader class struggle, which becomes visible when considering the transformations during EU accession in 1996. Quasi overnight, a highly protected national market became dominated by a few multinational retailer companies, resulting in rapidly decreasing prices for vegetables (see Wifo 1999). By keeping effective labor monitoring to a minimum, the Austrian grower class – including agricultural growers and their strong political representation in state institutions – ensures the availability of cheap labor and thus maintains a competitive edge in this restructured European market. Migrant farmworker rights are swept under the rug of a political project that aims to navigate the detrimental effects of EU accession on the Austrian agricultural sector. Consequently, this political project is a) characterized by the protection of domestic producers at the expense of migrant workers' rights and b) articulates itself in a certain scaled arrangement, within which institutional responsibility is distributed and maintained in ways that disempower effective labor regulation.

Scaled arrangements become especially visible when attempts are made to alter them (Susser & Nonini 2020: 4ff). In the following, I examine two recent attempts of re-scaling the

institutional authority to monitor labor law at the workplace, namely (1) debates on EU Social Conditionality and (2) the Rural Labor Law ([LAG henceforth]).

6.1. The European *Patron Saint* of Growers: Austrian Agricultural Politics and European Social Conditionality

“Early August, 16:45 - eight workers and I work in greenhouse nine, cultivating tomato plants (winding, leaf removal). Suddenly, the grower enters the greenhouse, accompanied by a person in a suit. First, I assumed a labor inspection, but the person merely measures the greenhouse size with an electronic gauge, while joking with the grower. After they leave, Adrian (a befriended worker) approaches me and comments in an energetic tone: “Look, this is what we talked about. We work here like slaves for 4,50€ but no one cares. It is late afternoon and people in suits come in and out without asking: How long have these workers been working today? When do they finish? Are they paid according to the law? They are not at all interested in Romanians in their workplaces. We are employees [angajați] but we are treated like servants [slugi]. Tell me, where is the Austrian state here?”

This ethnographic vignette was written in early August and stands representative of the many remarks from workers who lament the absence of state forces in Viennese greenhouses. At first sight, state forces stand out in the greenhouse first and foremost in their absence, as the vignette illustrates. The non-existence of any effective institutional effort to monitor the social protection of greenhouse workers is haunting and indeed problematized by workers and activists alike. It also mirrors the furious reactions of non-academic conversation partners. When hearing about the exploitative workplace conditions, a common reaction is to indigently ask “How is this possible in Austria”, a country that arguably constitutes a historical instantiation of strong organized labor. Inasmuch as this paradox of state absence became a tangible ethnographic condition to be explained, this necessitated turning the research method ethnography on its head. Rather than observing what appears visible in plain sight, I was thus confronted with the

task of ethnographically accounting for “the blanks” in the greenhouse – that is tracing the different forms of institutional *non*-presence that enable greenhouse accumulation in its current form.

Later in August, I found out that the person in the suit, who measured the size of the greenhouse with a gauge, was sent from the national authority *Agrarmarkt Austria (AMA)*, the main Austrian agency regarding food security, marketing, and European issues. Measuring the size of the greenhouse was necessary to calculate and then distribute a package of EU financial assistance directed to support energy-intensive horticulture (such as greenhouse-based production) during the recent energy inflation crisis. Consequently, the visiting bureaucrat was less interested in the growers’ compliance with workers’ rights but merely in the orderly calculation of payments.

But this could be easily otherwise. The separation of social and economic concerns in agricultural subsidy allocation has been attempted to be fundamentally changed at the European level. Here, the implementation of the so-called *social conditionality* in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was fiercely debated in the late 2010s and 2020s (see Laurent & Nguyen 2022). The proposal from the Portugal Ministry of Agriculture stipulated tying the disbursement of subsidies to the compliance of growers with European social and labor legislation. While social conditionality would be a suitable tool in tackling labor exploitation at the workplace (and was indeed finally implemented in 2022, further discussed below) the 2021 blocking of this initiative on a European scale was organized in large parts under the spearhead of the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture.

The central argument of the Austrian delegation holds that law enforcement should remain part of national institutions rather than European authorities, as “the Member States stress the fundamental role of labor inspectorates (...) in ensuring the proper application and enforcement of existing legislation”. Due to this function system already in place, “the already complex

system of conditionality should focus on *climate and environmental measures*" (Austrian Delegation 2021, emphasis added). Even more so, the Austrian minister boldly argued in the CAP context that it is "in the interest of fair competition that standards in the EU internal market are raised to the Austrian level" rather than vice versa. Widespread information campaigns through Farm Advisory Services are recommended as an alternative proposal to tackle social injustices in agricultural production. This approach is reflected in another case later that year, in which the newly established European Labor Authority (ELA) initiated the „#Rights4AllSeasons“ campaign against agricultural exploitation. Whereas other countries organized inspections of agricultural workplaces that resulted in a considerable number of lawsuits and fines, the Austrian agricultural ministry collaborated with the regionally organized *Chambers of Agricultural Laborers* (Landarbeiterkammer, henceforth LAK) to distribute information sheets in multiple languages at agricultural workplaces in several Austrian counties (BML 2021b).

A look at the European scale shows that *information campaigns* as a key strategy loom large over the Austrian state strategies regarding labor protection for farm workers. These information campaigns ought to be seen as not only inefficient but part of distinct political rationality due to two reasons.

First, information campaigns address the workplace and are predicated on the agentic capability of farmworkers to claim their rights. This reflects the scholarship on sending migration countries notes as the creation of "self-advocating subjects" (Parreñas 2021 in Basok et al. 2023: 8) who are then made responsible for acting on the violation of labor rights by themselves. This turns out to be problematic *in situ*. In my ethnographic research, I frequently encountered greenhouse workers who possess information flyers regarding recent legislation and collective bargaining agreements. When asked about these flyers, an interlocutor replied in a heated voice: "Well, I already know what my rights are and what institutions are responsible for me. But then

let me ask you: If my boss sees that I go there for a consultation in their regional office, do these people have a new job for me? I assume not. This is why it does not work in practice. People are scared to lose what they have. I work in an Austrian greenhouse for years, and I don't get it. Why, in this country, are we on our own to fight for our rights?". This quote resembles the remark from the Romanian worker in the beginning and further illustrates the limits of self-advocacy when considered against the strong power relations at the workplace. It shows that information campaigns are inherently ambiguous: When informing about rights, it seems that state institutions are actively promoting labor protection, while in fact, responsibility is shifted on farmworkers to "upscale" their struggle by reaching out to regional institutions on their own. Yet, the literature is abundant in insights into how the workplace constitutes a site of farmworkers' exposure to multiple forms of vulnerability (Holmes 2013).

Thus, information campaigns that responsabilize vulnerable groups are of little avail when considering the structural dependency that characterizes their position in the first place (see Siegmann et al. 2022). This can be framed as a scalar problem: information campaigns that target the scale of the workplace are inefficient means of ensuring social protection. Crucially, information campaigns replace other ways of ensuring social protection that are organized at broader scales, such as the implementation of social conditionality on a European scale.

Second, information campaigns draw attention to the main institution that should represent the interests of migrant farmworkers, the *LAKs*. Organized within the Austrian principle of social partnership, they constitute the social partners in the agricultural sector, together with the Chamber of Agriculture (LK), and Labor Unions (PRO-GE). The LAKs are the statutory representations of agricultural workers and provide legal representation of their interests. They are organized on the regional scale (in seven out of nine counties, except Wien and Burgenland), and every employee in agriculture and forestry is an automatic member of the LAK in the respective state.

As several interviews with several labor activists and union representatives indicate, the LAK often seems to act as a dubious representative of the interests of migrant workers. As one representative of the Arbeiterkammer Österreich remembers a bargaining meeting with several Sozialpartner: “I only realized afterward that the person actually represented the Chamber of Agricultural *Workers* and not the Chamber of Agriculture. In the meeting, he agreed with everything that the growers demanded, I really couldn’t see a difference”. This observation was echoed by many activists, which would highlight the affinity of the LAK to the interests of domestic workers, which results in a limited engagement towards addressing the root problems of workplace exploitation of agricultural workers.

This aspect necessitates a brief recourse to the political power constellation between different groups in Austrian agriculture. The LAKs are the recognized representatives of local agricultural workers and were formed in the late 1940s, mostly involving domestic labor. Thus, the LAKs are representatives of all sorts of organized labor in agriculture such as operating managers, employees in storage halls, and finally agricultural workers themselves. Yet, the interests of the latter group constitute only a minor part of the overall political work of the LAK, especially as domestic agricultural workers were gradually replaced by non-domestic populations. The yearly reports of the activities of regional LAKs evince this orientation towards domestic workers. Regarding migrant land- and seasonal workers, again, information campaigns are indicated as the main service, in addition to subsequent legal support. In this sense, migrant workers receive insufficient attention in terms of political representation that would advocate for policies that effectively ensure compliance with labor rights on the workplace scale.

What becomes apparent in this brief recourse is that albeit migrant agricultural workers formally possess a representative body according to the rules of Austrian social partnership, it fails to serve their interests: tracing the blockage of European social conditionality on its sub-

national scales shows the weakness of this social representation *in situ*. Inasmuch as the political activities go as far as information campaigns, the current orientation of LAKs hinders any determined protection of workers that addresses labor exploitation as a structural problem. Considered together with the similar strategy of the Austrian agricultural ministry, information campaigns ought to be understood in this context as a strategy that resonates with employer interests. Furthermore, information campaigns function as a substitute for developing strategies that target workplace inequalities in actual efficient ways. Any measures of further regulation are either blocked or if implemented, then in the “light” form of information campaigns on behalf of LAKs.

The role of LAKs on a regional level and the ministry on national and European levels can be understood as building blocks in the current scaled arrangement. In its current form, this scaled arrangement is centered around minimizing effective regulation of agricultural workplaces. The Austrian state occupies a distinct role in sustaining this arrangement. Framed by the Labor Union federal secretary as part of an overall state rationality of “consultation instead of punishment”, we clearly see the alignment of state policy with grower interests. It should come as little surprise that since 1945, the resort of agriculture was traditionally a stronghold of the Austrian conservative party, within which agricultural producers are considered one of the strongest political groups. This manifests itself in an Austrian state that acts as the “patron saint” of growers’ interests at the expense of attention to the widespread exploitation of laborers themselves.

A further event helps to illustrate the nature of this arrangement as centered around class interests. Against the backdrop of immense retailer dominance, the Austrian state created a so-called “Fairness-Büro” in 2021: it is responsible for “complaints concerning unfair business practices related to the sale of agricultural and food products” and serves as a point of contact for growers who experienced maltreatment by retailer chains. The “Fairness Büro” constitutes

a remarkable institution that acknowledges the volatility of current fresh food markets. Unfortunately, this attention is not extended to workers and their position in the most vulnerable segment within the class constellations in modern agriculture.

In this light, lax regulations in the legal sphere must be considered in relation to the economic condition in which agricultural production takes place. I suggest that the role of the Austrian state in the agricultural sector can be best understood as navigating the detrimental economic effects of European EU accession in a way that contributes to grower enterprises at the expense of workers' rights. Pre-accession agricultural policy was characterized by a highly interventionist strategy of regulating food prices through import stops (see Poschacher 2003). As agricultural policy became largely shifted to the EU level, it necessitated a shifting role of the state. Based on the strong political influence of growers, the Austrian state employed a policy of labor regulation that turned out to be extremely favorable for employer interests. By maintaining low rates of inspections, it aims to keep the social risks of exploitation for growers low. This eventually results in the regulatory neglect of farmworkers despite formally strong labor protection.

Yet, the Austrian institutional architecture does entail institutions that are endowed with the responsibility to monitor labor rights at the workplace. In fact, the Austrian delegation in the CAP agreements referred to the “fundamental role of labor inspectorates (...) in ensuring the proper application and enforcement of existing legislation”. The next section traces these references to regulative institutions and their role by considering a second major attempt to rescale law and its enforcement: the Land Labor Law 2021 (Landarbeitsgesetz, henceforth LAG).

6.2. Upscaling Law, Downscaling Regulation: the 2021 LAG and Labor Inspectorates

On July 1, 2021, the Austrian Rural Labor Act (*Landarbeitsgesetz, LAG*) came into force. Titled BGBl Nr. 78/2021, it replaced the former legislation of combining nine labor laws for each respective region in Austria into one federal framework. This implementation was preceded by a negotiation based on the aforementioned social partnership model, in which the interest groups from the employee and employer sides are equally involved in political bargaining processes. According to the Chamber of Agriculture, the implementation of the LAG was significant progress regarding “more efficiency and a reduction in bureaucracy” (quoted in ORF 2021). Likewise, the LAK hailed the new law as a “milestone in Austrian labor law” and a “departure into a new age” (LAK, 01/07/2021).

Indeed, the creation of the LAG can be considered a successful initiative of re-scaling formerly regional into national law. While this did not come with substantive improvements regarding the guidelines for labor conditions, it nonetheless simplified a formerly convoluted body of regional legal framework. But what attracted less public attention in this celebratory tone was the thwarted attempt of Labor Unions to parallel the re-scaling of *law* from regional to national scale with the re-scaling of its *executive authority*, namely Agriculture and Forestry Inspectorates. I will first introduce this institution and its limitations to then highlight the consequences of maintaining the organization of inspectorates on a regional scale.

Agriculture and Forestry Inspectorates are endowed with the monitoring of agricultural workplaces and from 2021 onwards, the inspectorates are responsible for enforcing the LAG in agricultural, horticultural, and forestry enterprises. That is, through regular controls, inspectors monitor workplaces to ensure the safety of agricultural and forestry workers in terms of workplace health, housing conditions and other postulated legal regulations. Yet, unlike every other labor inspectorate in Austria, agricultural and forestry inspectorates remain organized on a regional level. This results in the fact that inspectorates are oftentimes situated in regional

agricultural bureaus, and therefore to the Chamber of Agriculture. In practice, it leads to the arrangement that inspectors are directly employed in the institutions that represent growers' interests. Based on interviews with activists and representatives, the problematics of this current constellation of the regional organization of labor inspections can be seen as centered around issues of a) *limited effectiveness* and b) *disinvestment* by the state.

In an interview with the former Federal Secretary of the Labor Union PRO-GE, he contextualizes labor inspectorates in a broader conjuncture of Austrian politics: “It began with Schwarz-Blau I in 2000 [the government consisting of the conservative ÖVP and the right-wing FPÖ, in charge between 2000-2006], you could immediately see the difference. They merged the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Labor, because you know, there is no difference between capital interests and labor interests according to the ÖVP (laughs). And then they defined the new framework for inspections: consultation rather than punishing [Beraten statt Strafen]. This was the key strategy. It resulted in a massive cut in resources for labor inspections, as well as reduced penalties. And we criticize this until today, it is essentially a policy that favors the business owners and disempowers workers”. As inspectorates are advised to refrain from large fines, the breach of social standards became more lucrative for growers. This resonates with the assertion of an activist, who remembers her engagement with an inspector in Tyrol: “This inspector told me that he is well aware of the businesses who maltreat migrant seasonal workers. He would visit the business frequently and even decree fines, yet the grower preferred to pay the fines rather than change the housing conditions of workers. This seems to be more profitable for the grower”. Taken together, this results in the *limited effectiveness* of workplace inspections in enforcing the formal rights granted to farm workers.

The activist further retells how the government systemically withdrew financial resources from labor inspections. “Also, the same inspector told me how in the 2000s, four people were employed as inspectors for a region in which around 700 agricultural businesses are situated.

Within a few years, he became the sole inspector, due to resource cuts on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture”. This chronic underfunding and inertia of agricultural inspectorates are not specific to the Austrian context (see Bogoeski 2022 for Germany, and Siegmann et al. 2022: 235f for the Netherlands), yet it ought to be seen in relation to the specific political conjuncture that characterizes Austrian power structures until today. In this context, the accentuation of “the fundamental role of labor inspectorates” that was put forward by the Austrian delegation at the CAP agreements appears not only as cynical but strategic. After all, it was the agricultural ministry that significantly weakened the power to monitor workplaces by inspectorates.

Upscaling the agricultural and forestry labor inspectorates into a federal authority could improve its efficiency, or, as one activist once remarked, transform its current status as a “toothless tiger”. This upscaling could potentially solve issues of disinvestment because financial resources are not dependent on regional budgets anymore. But even more so, it would also do away with the current awkward position of inspectors as directly subordinated to regional agricultural councils. In sum, this could result in an institution that actively ensures the compliance of growers with labor rights.

This re-organizing of the inspectorates was precisely what the Labor Union attempted to realize in the negotiations around the LAG 2021. Inasmuch as the law was upscaled from regional to federal scale, so should its executive authority. A Labor Union representative remembered that “we tried to push for this re-organization of the labor inspectorates over months during the negotiations. But the Chamber of Agriculture opposed every proposal, and in the end, we had to finalize the law. Without the consent of all social partners, no modification is possible. This is the tricky thing with negotiations in the agricultural sector. When you have such strong political opposition, there is no way that you can re-design authorities in ways that might harm growers and their businesses. This is the holy cow of the conservative government: the domestic grower who already faces enough hardship in maintaining his business”.

6.3. Stabilizing Accumulation: The Scaled Arrangement of Labor Regulation

Taken together, both sections illuminate the broader question of how state forces are strikingly absent in the greenhouse. I trace two recent attempts of upscaling the institutional authorities that enforce labor law, namely by 1) introducing the mechanism of social conditionality that enshrines inspections on a European scale; and by 2) upscaling regional inspectorates into a federal authority as part of the new LAG. While both attempts aimed to counteract the widespread exploitation of farmworkers, both were impeded by a coalition of growers and their political representations that aim to conserve the current scaled arrangement.

This, I argue, results in the status of Austrian farmworkers as *protected yet neglected*. This regulatory neglect is actively produced through the interaction of law, state, and authorities that are situated on multiple scales. More precisely, this differentiation of institutional power can be traced back to the underlying class project, showing how scale is made politically useful in concrete ways to maintain economic power (Nonini & Susser 2020). In a restructured European food market, Austrian growers utilize their influential position in state institutions to conserve a scaled arrangement that currently serves their interests. While Austrian labor law constitutes a formally strong jurisdictional body for the protection of farmworkers, its enforcing authorities are systemically disempowered. Defined by the prerogative of the agricultural sector, the current scaled arrangement allows for keeping effective mechanisms of labor regulations to a minimum.

The current power relations in the institutional sphere directly correspond to the vulnerability that Romanian workers perceive in the greenhouse daily. By reproducing the exposedness of workers to workplace-based hierarchies, state power stabilizes processes of value extraction on which the Austrian fresh food sector currently runs.

To further illustrate this, I come back to the conceptualization of the greenhouse in its *twofold scalar positioning* as a “pivot for organizing ethnographic data” (Xiang 2013: 285). When inserted into “the nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national (...)” (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 93), the scale of the workplace appears as “institutionally encased” within a rich body of regulations, law, and institutional authority on broader scales. As for the remarks of workers that “the state is absent”, this proves to be true merely on an experiential level. Ethnographically speaking, the state is very much *present* precisely because its *absence* is an *actively fabricated condition*. This illustrates the analytical purchase of multiscale ethnography, addressing how smooth processes at one scale can be undergirded by contestations on another scale (Xiang 2013: 284). While a view on European and federal scales discloses the fierce debates, thwarted attempts, and sometimes small victories of tackling labor exploitation, these broader scalar contestations remain of little repercussion on the scale of the workplace. The extraction of value out of Romanian labor, as described in Chapter 4 remains relatively free of disturbances. Yet the institutional sphere cannot be bracketed out of an analysis of practices, as it forms the ubiquitous background against which accumulation takes place.

7. Conclusion: A Sistemul Infinit? On Persistence and Cracks in the Current Conjuncture

This thesis demonstrated that agricultural accumulation can be examined as a multiscale process. The contemporary production of fresh fruit vegetables draws on and is stabilized by specific constellations, encompassing historical processes, social reproduction, and regulatory governance. In three analytical chapters, I thus looked at current Austrian greenhouse production by dissecting these three spheres as multiscale processes that co-produce the current constituency of the Austrian fresh food sector.

Albeit very different from each other, both the sphere of practice and structure, of social reproduction and institutional regulation do share a common characteristic: they can be read together as vital strategies in maintaining the profitability of Austrian agriculture against the backdrop of a restructured fresh food market. The structural demands of globalized dynamics put severe pressure on Austrian domestic production. By looking at both spheres of practices and institutions, I could show how the maintenance of agricultural accumulation is driven by a distinct class project and achieved precisely by different strategies on different scales. In this turmoil, the post-1990s Romanian migration turned out to be of crucial importance for Austrian greenhouse owners. Inasmuch as Romanian self-organized mobility provided a recruitment strategy unmatched by former state-based arrangements, it facilitated the resilience of Austrian horticultural enterprises. Taken together, this analysis echoes feminist insights on how “processes of restructuring relating to the globalization of capitalism involve new patterns of governance, new relations of power and production, and new strategies of survival that operate unequally between women and men, between classes and between groups subject to racialization; these changes are not abstract but take place in, and co-construct, changing spaces of materialist production and reproduction” (Strauss 2012: 181).

In this vein, my findings speak back to what Nelu termed, and I adopted as the *sistemul infinit*: the expansive nature of capitalism in both appropriating reproductive and exploiting productive spheres of human activity in ever-shifting ways. My analysis aimed to situate this structural dynamic within specific practices of ordinary people, and concrete decisions made on different scales, that characterize the Austrian fresh food sector in its current form.

Yet, Nelu also highlighted the fragile nature of this process. Despite mobilizing an imaginary of spatiotemporal accumulation as a seemingly infinite system that expands even beyond planetary boundaries, Nelu added that it “runs until it doesn’t run anymore”, thereby drawing attention to its contingency. While my space was limited in accounting for the manifold

encounters of how all sorts of actors – lawyers, growers, inspectors, workers – did question the surroundings that they found themselves in, these moments stand emblematic of the fragility of modern agriculture. And indeed, the notion of reproduction allows for a non-deterministic reading of accumulative projects by considering the vast mundane efforts, structural tensions, and reproductive struggles it entails (Narotzky 2022). So just how infinite is this system really? In this spirit, I end this thesis with some concluding remarks that question the current arrangement along two lines of consideration– *persistence*, and *cracks*.

Empirically, I collected material that can be read as the harbinger of how the period of Romanian workers might also come to an end soon. As the opening of the Austrian labor market in 2014 maximized employment flexibility for growers, it simultaneously crumbled the labor niche of agriculture as the only available employment opportunity for Romanian workers. This results in a high degree of labor turnover among what I called transient workers. An interview with the agricultural cooperative revealed how growers are thus contemplating how to tap into labor pools of third-country nationals (TNCs), including Moldavia or Albania. In doing so, Austrian growers join European trends to revive circular migration programs, or what Castles observed early on as the resurrection of the guest worker (2006).

In this light, we might consider European free mobility as a specific and time-bound modality of organizing precarized labor in modern agriculture. Taking this thought further, the mobile labor power of EU citizens such as Romanian workers – domestically dispossessed yet unregulated in their mobility – not only coexists alongside but also forms the epistemic contrast foil when compared with TNC populations that are subject to repressive regimes of differential inclusion (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). This co-existence of non/restricted forms of mobile labor invites empirical and analytical attention to the “constant and unpredictable mutations in these arrangements” that underlie accumulative projects. Proposed by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013),

the concept of the *multiplication of labor* addresses these processes of variegated circulation of labor power as subject to intensification, international division-ing, and hierarchization.

While my thesis did not incorporate the emerging and vital field of border studies, this perspective allows for accounting for agricultural accumulation as regimes-in-the-making that are embedded within globe-spanning processes. The imbrications between racialized greenhouse work and European free mobility can be seen as an articulation of the multiplication of labor, a consideration that could productively resonate with this literature. For instance: inasmuch as the practice of extracting value out of the geographical confinement of TNC migrants at externalized EU border camps was termed “accumulation by immobilization” (Achnich 2022), does this entail processes within EU internal space that might be termed “accumulation by *mobilization*”? What forms of value creation, such as the twofold exploitation of Romanian workers, are enabled through the liberalization of EU labor markets, and how do these correspond to bordering practices at its fringes? These questions speak to the persistence of appropriating of non-/market relations as imbricated within migration regimes and modalities of power. What I envision is to further theorize European free mobility as both a modality of accumulation and flanked by other, more restrictive migration regimes in the overall project of the multiplication of labor.

Finally, the analytical endeavor of tracing these current developments does not suffice itself to documenting and theorizing the persistence of capitalism as an ever-expansive project of accumulation. Inasmuch as capitalism is an *unfinished* historical process, so does the possibility of change reside in every arrangement (Federici 2013). I thus join scholars that call for an engaged type of research that aims to ground knowledge production within encounters with marginalized groups themselves, as well as speaking to public concerns in given fields. After all, as Xiang stressed, it is “by investigating these intersections, multi-scalar ethnography seeks to detect cracks in the established systems, identify rising opportunities for changes, and thus

envisage possible paths of change and points of entry” (Xiang 2013: 258). Rather than separate from, this type of research consciously operates within and thereby contributes to uncovering the power relations in ethnographic settings. In my case, I utilized my positionality in the field as a researcher and activist to act as a collaborator for the interests of greenhouses workers. Parallel, the findings of this thesis contributed to a collaboration with the Labor Union to fund a German language class for workers, and further political interventions will (hopefully) follow. While these engaged forms of research did not find their articulated place within this thesis, they nonetheless undergirded the process of knowledge creation.

My conclusion in this regard is simple. The process of theorizing the persistence of unequal relations implies searching for, and, at best, detecting the spaces of possible political intervention. Even though the current system of food production is characterized by a hegemony that seems to be infinite, the underlying realities indicate instability, discontent, and indeed the existence of other possibilities. If anthropology as a discipline, to speak with David Graeber, is well suited to document how *things could be otherwise*, then I modestly hope that this thesis – whether by providing a base for political arguments or through further research – contributes to an imagining thereof.

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