

An Anthropology of Exploitation Techniques in the London Real Estate and Labor Market

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the life-mode of Hungarian migrants in their destination country, England, particularly London in the last decade, focusing on their housing conditions and working experiences. Relying on her participant observations and interviews, the author formulates a picture through the eyes of Hungarian migrant laborers regarding how both the real estate and labor market exploits them (micro level). She explains the motives of the main economic actors (entrepreneurs, real estate and employment agencies, employers) leading to exploitations (meso level) in addition to discussing how all of these fit into the wider socio-economic context (macro level).

KEYWORDS

Hungarian migrants, housing and working conditions, real estate and labor market, exploitation

THE AIM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Following EU accessions in 2004/2007, significant labor migration began from Central and Eastern European nations to Western European countries (RANGELOVA 2009; FAVELL 2018). Nationals of countries with GDPs similar to Hungary have almost swarmed out of the region, but Hungarians retained their traditionally closed, immobile state for a long time, until – due to the high unemployment rate – Hungary became part of the system of global migration flows after 2010 (MELEGH – SÁROSI 2015), beginning with a slow growth of foreign employment,

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followed by a dynamic strengthening from 2012 on (BLASKÓ – FAZEKAS eds. 2016; KOLOSI – TÓTH eds. 2016; KSH 2014). In addition to Germany and Austria, the United Kingdom has emerged as a new destination, with London in particular.

Research on this process has revealed its magnitude (GÖDRI 2018; BLASKÓ – GÖDRI 2014, 2016; KAPITÁNY – ROHR 2014; BLASKÓ et al. 2014; MOREH 2014), the reasons for migrants' decision to move (KOVÁTS 2014) and their dissatisfaction with their homeland (SISKÁNÉ et al. 2017; MOLNÁR – KAPITÁNY 2006; SÁGI 2006; STUTZER – FREY 2006), its impact on certain professions in the domestic labor market (BOROS – PÁL 2016; VARGA 2016; BODNÁR – SZABÓ 2014), its distinctive demographic characteristics through the presentation of various migrant profiles (BLASKÓ et al. 2014; HÁRS – SIMON 2016; BLASKÓ – FAZEKAS eds. 2016; FAZEKAS – VARGA eds. 2015; KOLOSI – TÓTH eds. 2016; LAKATOS 2015) as well as the patterns of success among Hungarians living abroad (KOVÁTS – PAPP 2016; SISKÁNÉ et al. 2017).¹

The way people live in host countries is unknown, however, so my study focuses on the lifestyle, housing and working conditions of Hungarian migrants. At the micro level, these individual human experiences go beyond themselves and lead to a description and analysis of exploitation in the London real estate and labor markets, the operation and interests of entrepreneurs, real estate and employment agencies, employers who are active at the meso level; thus providing an understanding of the system at the macro level at which they bring this about.

The theoretical framework for my research is provided by historical/structuralist writings that see the structural divisions of the world economy as a result of global historical processes that lead to unequal development between countries, with the world divided into underdeveloped/peripheral regions and major capitalist centers/cores. International migration means mobility in this geographically divided labor market, which is triggered by the demands of modern industrial economies.

I base my analysis primarily on the dual or segmented labor market theory formulated by Piore (1969, 1979a, b), according to which the labor market is structurally divided into two distinct segments while, in parallel, the wage level also bifurcates. Two segments, a so-called primary (capital-intensive) and a secondary (labor-intensive) segment come into being. The primary segment is characterized by high income, good working conditions, stable employment, advancement opportunities, equity and properly applied labor law; the secondary segment is characterized by low wages and benefits, poor working conditions, high turnover, limited career opportunities along with strict and arbitrary labor supervision. Here, due to low prestige, there is a persistent labor shortage that is offset by migrant labor. Because of its temporary nature, low wages and lack of job opportunities in the issuing regions, migrant labor is less sensitive to low social esteem in second-tier jobs and far more flexible and ready to adapt to the needs of the labor market than marginalized domestic groups.

The topicality of Piore's theory is given by the fact that in the fifty years since he first proposed it, segmentation has not only not dissolved but deepened. The secondary branch has broken down into further segments, creating a competitive situation within the category of economic migrants as well. One of the aims of this study is to explore the quality of these artificially created segments and the huge differences in rank that result from them, pointing out their role in the exploitation

¹I have to note that my interviewees mainly come from the precariat. Migration of medical doctors is a different case (regarding life mode in London), as well as that of elderly care givers who are part of a circular migration (TURAI 2018; VÁRADI 2018).



of migrant workers, wherein economic powerholders consciously intensify uncertainty and use the resulting engine of despair to increase performance at unrealistic levels.

A further goal of my study is to unravel the causes of huge fluctuations in both housing and employment, especially the fact that the rate of change is rarely coupled with a qualitative advance. In this context, the aim is to highlight the coercive mechanisms that determine the chances of migrants improving their lot, how these mechanisms prevail in the labor and real estate markets, and how they emerge at the micro, meso and macro levels.

DATA COLLECTING METHODS

My data is derived from two years of fieldwork (2014–2016), during which I built an extensive network of contacts from several areas. Besides a conscious commitment – as a participant myself – I also experienced the constraints arising from living a migrant existence:

1. Through an employment agency, I applied for a different job every night for a month, in addition to my regular morning shift. On the one hand, this became key in mapping and understanding the operating mechanism of employment agencies, and on the other hand, as the Hungarian migrant workforce was represented in large numbers everywhere, engaging in conversation and discussion with them facilitated the emergence and later crystallization of possible topics for further investigation.
2. I changed residence eight times in two years, all of which were HMOs (houses in multiple occupation); this not only provided an opportunity to connect with a large number of people, but even went beyond understanding the workings of HMO operators who act as intermediaries to the migrants. To understand how the system in which these Hungarian entrepreneurs could find their niche, we must understand the London real estate market/housing conditions.
3. I changed my full-time job four times, which represents the lower level of the usual fluctuation, and this provided more opportunity to establish further contacts with Hungarians.
4. I attempted to interact with “total” strangers and invite them for interviews, even after just a short conversation, especially since the already mentioned contacts brought interviewees almost exclusively from the hospitality and hotel industry.

One of the basic pillars of my research was wide-ranging data collection. I conducted 30 in-depth interviews in a span of two years, evenly distributed by gender (15 women/15 men), with participants aged from 20 to 59 years. The composition of the group of interviewees shows an extremely heterogeneous picture. My informants have different educational and financial circumstances, family backgrounds, geographical and social origins, worldviews, religious affiliations and political orientations. At the same time, they are linked by their national affiliation and the decision they have all made to try making a living outside their home country, taking on the role of migrant and dealing with the situations that arise from it.

When interviewing, I combined two types of techniques. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I tried to gain an insight into the everyday world of the interviewees – how they viewed the world, what experiences they had had, what problems they faced, i.e., what social realities their ideas and interpretations threw light upon. This information was complemented by basic data collected about my interviewees’ social status, income, level of education, ethnic



background, and age. I combined this with collecting life histories depicting the basic stages of my interviewees' lives, their moral and cultural system, their patterns of behavior, and the decisions they have made. On the one hand, I did this in order to see the process of personality formation (since many subjects may be in the same emotional/existential situation, yet not all of them will respond with a risk-taking strategy) and on the other hand to be able to identify a series of key events that are part of the decision-making process which leads to leaving one's country temporarily or permanently.

As another pillar of the research, I studied the everyday life of the community following the method of participant observation. Because I was part of this milieu myself – looking at this world both through the lens of the researcher and as one of the research subjects – the richness of the information I gained as a participant added significant nuance to what was possible to learn through 30 simultaneously conducted in-depth interviews. As an active member of the community, I was not only able to learn to see things from the subjects' perspective (how they see and how they are seen by their environment), but also to personally experience the physical/mental burdens of their work and their living conditions. Moreover, I was able to rely on my own lived experience of how the London labor market functions, to understand its mechanisms, its internal system of norms and the multitude of conflicts it generated. Collected in different ways, these types of data complemented, gave depth to, and nuanced one another, allowing for a systematic mutual correction of results relative to each other, balancing between emic and etic modes of interpretation.

LIVING AND HOUSING CONDITIONS/THE REAL ESTATE MARKET

The living conditions and quality of life of Hungarians living in London are significantly limited and determined by living in HMOs operated by Hungarian entrepreneurs. This is the pivotal point where the *raison d'être* of immigration is challenged; the original intention of migration is to raise living standards, but even if this goal is achieved, the migrant will be forced to experience a decline in quality of life at the same time. In other words, the migrant's standard of living is improved when, after paying his/her regular expenses (rent, transport, food), he/she is able to spend her remaining income on things that he/she was not able to afford before (clothing, restaurants, entertainment, travel) and/or can build up some savings. In contrast, his/her quality of life deteriorates by being condemned to a collegiate, non-adult existence. He/she constantly needs to broaden and even redefine his/her comfort zone, as shared bathroom and kitchen use are accompanied by bleak surroundings, including mold, rodents and drafty windows, while living with total strangers and a complete lack of privacy.

Ultimately, these circumstances always trigger the desire for a change of residence several times a year, although the change rarely brings the desired level of improvement, the new residence being just as bad, if not worse, than the previous one. "There's a chance I'll go home, in terms of, if I get a little tired of it, because it is tiring. In the past year – and I know a person who has moved at least twice as many times – I've moved four or five times in the last one year, every two months." (20-year-old female) Despite all this, Hungarians still rent rooms from Hungarians, and their fidelity persists even though they experience constant problems, not only with the quality of the given residences, but also with the quality of the landlords.



MICRO LEVEL

The HMOs in question are mostly made up of Victorian townhouses built 100–150 years ago, in which renovations seem infrequently if ever to have been done, despite the time that has elapsed. The buildings are characterized by outdated and malfunctioning water and heating systems exasperated by antiquated doors and windows, the combined effect of which is permanent cold, which means that the walls can never dry out, making moisture and associated mold permanent companions in these houses. “It’s awful. So, there are circumstances here that are very difficult to get used to. So, it takes time to get used to it. No matter that I did not live in a palace at home, but these are terrible conditions – the wind blows through the window, the doors and windows are not good. Everything is moldy, from bathrooms to bedrooms, everything.” (22-year-old female)

On top of this, neither have the walls been painted nor the carpeting changed within living memory, the furniture is in deplorable condition and the basement lacks a proper foundation, which is why rodents appear just as easily and permanently as the mold. “There are also rats. The last time I saw a young rat parade around was three days ago. I’ve also seen a deceased rat at the rubbish bin next door. Blood flowed from every orifice; it was clearly from consuming rat poison. (42-year-old male) “One night we woke up to something scratching. I had no idea what it was. I didn’t turn on the light, I just looked with the phone, around cupboards. I see two eyes light up. My wife hates rodents. I tell her to get on the bed. I say mouse. She says it can’t be true. But it is. We couldn’t imagine where it had come from. It came from below the ground. The house doesn’t have a proper foundation, so the mice can come up from below. I said it right there. I told my wife right then that if need be I’d go home tomorrow. For me, it’s not worth the money to have a stinky sewer mouse climb into my clothes.” (32-year-old male)

To make things worse, the Hungarian entrepreneurs maximize their profits by handling the floor plans flexibly, creating valuable square meters and box rooms, taking the space away from other rooms. This not only increases overcrowding, but also reduces the number of bathrooms/toilets per capita, further reducing the comfort level. “There are five rooms, a kitchen, okay, a bathroom, and a toilet inside. So, there are ten people to a bathroom with the toilet inside.” (53-year-old man)

Hungarian entrepreneurs lure customers with false images, but by the time tenants are confronted with reality their escape routes have already been blocked: they have given up their jobs in Hungary, covered the costs of travel and the need for spending money – typically from credit – paid the deposit and signed the lease. “My roommate met me at Victoria Station and brought me to the lodging that night. I almost had a heart attack and I immediately wanted to go home.” (29-year-old woman) Instead of getting upset about the conditions of the lodging, the migrant is obliged to concentrate on the next strategic move – finding a job, without which he/she would be obliged to return home with significant financial loss.

Besides the hopelessly depressing condition of the building, one usually has to reckon with the human factor as well: the roommates themselves. Although singles in their 30s who have degrees predominate, it should be remembered that a broad range of diverse people are present, ranging in age from people in their early 20s to 60-year-olds, hailing from a variety of geographical backgrounds from rural to urban, with educational accomplishments from low-level to postgraduate levels, and these differences are also manifested in personality and behaviors as well as in communication styles. The tensions stemming from diversity and



overcrowding – a main point of contention being the use of common areas and keeping them clean – often culminate in conflicts.

“- What are the roommates like?

- Horrible. This sharing everything, nobody takes out the rubbish, they leave the dirty dishes in the sink. They slam the doors; they get up at 5 a.m. – for weeks the alarm went off at 5 a.m. There was a girl who was such a fashionista. In the morning, she locked herself into the bathroom for an hour to do her makeup. The other thing was people’s attitudes, that they wanted to party, even though others would have wanted to go to work by 5 or 6 a.m. There was no basic respect for one another.” (29-year-old man)

Cooperation as a community fails despite the fact that Hungarians – just as in their own country – live in a closed system. Integration [into the host society] is not their goal, and they prefer to live and work with other Hungarians. The constant residential mobility, however, is not because of the quality of the lodgings or the housemates; much rather it is owing to the Hungarian entrepreneurs who manage the houses.

MESO LEVEL

Similar to the mainstream of the migration industry, the main profile of Hungarian entrepreneurs is the operation of HMOs into which tenants are recruited from among migrants of the same nationality. At the same time, setting off the largescale human machine of mobility, they also offer several related services (training in restaurant service, language courses, job placement etc.), although their usefulness is strongly debated and is negligible from the point of view of their total profit. Their *raison d’être* is primarily to shepherd people towards the entrepreneurs’ main profile (renting rooms), which is facilitated by the migrants’ lack of communicational ability and/or fear of the unknown, which motivates them to reach for some measure of security by availing themselves of these.

“- How did you come? Did you have acquaintances, or ...?

- No. I studied at a school. They have contacts here, in London. And he is a landlord, he rents out houses and I came through him.

- And how long did the school last?

- It was a three-month course, not long.

- They teach restaurant service?

- Yes.

- How much did it cost?

- This course was about 120–130 000 HUF.” (22-year-old woman).

The workings of the Hungarian management [firms] are the direct opposite of the business norms of management firms in England, most strikingly with regard to methods of payment. While in the case of an English agency the monthly rent has to be transferred to a bank account



(which, after deducting their own management fees, they transfer to the account of the landlord), the Hungarian agencies accept only cash, and strictly on a weekly basis.

“- Regarding the legality of these things...?”

- I think we should not go there. I think everyone knows it.

- We know, but how about those at home?

- A very simple question. I think this says it all. How is it you can only hand your money over in cash, or do you put it out there in an envelope? And how is it that with an English agency you transfer the money to an account? How? It's simple. You pay taxes. You don't pay taxes from cash. It's that simple.” (32-year-old man)

An English agency responds to complaints made by the tenants regarding the house, ranging from the appearance of rodents through a problem with the washing machine to the breakdown of the heating system and – depending on the urgency of the matter – takes action within a short time: calls for pest control, installs a new washing machine, has the heating repaired. On the contrary, Hungarian management ignores these complaints even if they affect basic human needs and, at the same time, does not think that these shortcomings should affect the amount of the rent. If someone wants to challenge the management, they can easily find themselves in the middle of a demonstration of absolute power, a mode of operation that is characteristic of such illegal/grey economies, meaning they will be evicted.

“- Our heating broke down – no heat or proper hot water for a month and a half. We tried to be patient for a month, and then the arguments began, lasting for a good two weeks, and in the end I said ok, if you're not fixing it then why should I be paying the full amount that you demand from me? It's in the lease that I get hot water, that I have heat, and so on. We were cold, we had no hot water, what else do you want? I won't pay you 80 pounds per person per week for this. I'll buy myself an electric heater, no problem. I'll solve it, but after all this I won't be paying 80, and I'll even be boiling water and putting it in the bathtub, that won't be a problem either, but I will not pay the 80 pounds. Upon this, they gave a spinelessly backdated notice that we should move out with immediate effect. So much for Hungarian derring-do. Hungarians normally give two weeks' notice.

- They backdated the notice and you had to immediately leave the room?

- This is what it amounted to.

- What would have happened if you had not left?

- He would have evicted me.

- Then come the strongmen and they throw you out?

- Yeah. That was a very nasty story.” (32-year-old man)

The fact that Hungarian management have been able to operate like this for a long time indicates the vulnerability of the tenants, which stems in part from the movement of money that is invisible to the authorities (thus legal protections are lost) and in part from the helplessness of migrants (due to their unfamiliarity with the system – and thus with the available safety net) as



well as from their limited communication skills (the victim cannot even explain what harm he/she has endured).

Another example of vulnerability: in the case of twin rooms, not only are people made to share a room without being given the opportunity to introduce themselves/get to know each other, but tenants do not even have the right to decide what gender roommate they will share a space with. “They put a boy next to me. To live together with a boy is not a good thing for a woman. With a total stranger.” (22-year-old woman)

This leads us to the macro processes and the fact that the nature of the real estate market is such that people not only cannot afford to rent a flat, but they cannot even cover the cost of a room on their own, thus giving up the last bastion of their comfort zone and private sphere.

MACRO LEVEL

London real estate prices are among the highest in the world, leading to a crisis at the local level: not even the English can afford them, and for young people the dream of owning their own flat has become unreachable, which practically condemns them to perpetual renting. As the incomes of locals are several times that of an immigrant, it follows that even renting a flat is beyond the possibilities of migrants, even if Hungarian migrant workers live in neighborhoods that are far away from the center (where most workplaces are concentrated) and are therefore considered to be “bad/undesirable,” and thus cheap. Even in such a neighborhood, the entire income of a migrant is insufficient to cover the rental price of a studio flat.

“- How much is the rent of your flat?

- 900 a month, plus utilities, the council.

- So, how much is it altogether?

- It varies, I don't know, it's like 1,100 or 1,150, the utilities are variable.

- So, one of your incomes goes for this.

- Yes.” (35-year-old woman)

Most immigrants make between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds per month (if they have a full-time job, but many struggle with not having enough hours at their workplace.) It transpires from the above examples that one has to be part of a couple to be able to rent a flat (nobody is capable of doing it alone), which means that they practically sacrifice one of their incomes. This is a rather unique case. None of my other interviewees, even the ones who work in white-collar jobs, has opted to do this (even though they too are a couple), and not merely because of the housing costs. “The first day we went to look at three flats. They were all studio flats, 30–40 square meters. I'll say that we were surprised by the price because it was more than what we expected. To move in, we would have had to pay roughly three thousand pounds on average, and with this I get the key, pay the deposit and one month's utilities in advance. It would have been something like that. I'm not bragging, but it was not primarily because of the money that we did not accept in the first place, but rather because of what we saw when we went and looked at what we would get for it – the mold, the musty smell, the rust, the disgusting set up. We ran away.” (32-year-old man)



In other words, a quality living space is not guaranteed, even in the case of renting one's own flat, which requires a substantial initial outlay. What is behind the soaring real estate and rental prices in London? Several factors are responsible for the situation, primarily the fact that the population explosion is not matched by investments in construction: the number of flats being built is one fifth of the rate of population increase. Such a degree of imbalance in supply and demand has led to a power imbalance, due to which an elite layer of flat owners can dictate the conditions, which is to say the sale and rental prices.

The current situation promises profit rates that have attracted foreign, speculative capital, which gradually became a self-generating process. The more foreign investors bought real estate, the more the prices rose to increasingly unrealistic heights, which of course incited them to buy even more. The result is that the dream of having one's own flat has become unreachable for those living on wages,² forcing them to become perpetual renters,³ thereby further fueling the speculators' desire to invest.⁴

In this endless spiral, those at the bottom of the funnel continually renounce their dreams at a double pace. On the one hand, they can save less and less because of the constant rise in rental costs while, conversely, they would have to set aside more and more money to keep up with rising prices. As crabwise they side-step farther and farther away from their goals, the elite at the top makes increasing profit while simultaneously investing more and more.

The intensity of the housing crisis eventually meant that for many people renting the tiniest flat became an unattainable goal, and the appearance of HMOs presented an answer to this problem. The state did not intervene in the process since HMOs provided an alternative solution to the burning problem of the housing shortage caused by overpopulation. At the same time, with their proliferation and with the triumph of human greed, local municipal authorities came across so many overcrowded houses that presented a fire hazard and a threat to life that they were obliged to prepare mandatory regulations for their operation.⁵

As immigration grew at an ever-increasing pace, not even the proliferation of HMOs could fill the void created by the housing shortage. However, elite flat owners did not necessarily wish to assume all the headaches and pitfalls of running an HMO and were still thinking in terms of traditional rental to a single family. However, a multitude of entrepreneurs lined up who would have gladly taken on all of the problems, and especially the profits of the rental market, but lacked either buildings or the necessary capital with which to purchase them. They have convinced the owners that in a guaranteed rental scheme⁶ they would pay the fixed monthly

²Mirror: Housing crisis: It would take a cleaner 102 YEARS to save for a house in London. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/amp3d/housing-crisis-would-take-cleaner-5646112> (accessed June 9, 2018) MailOnline: Average worker would need a MASSIVE payrise of 266% to buy a home in London as prices spiral out of reach. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/property/article-3459842/Average-London-worker-needs-266-pay-riseto-buy-home.html> (accessed June 9, 2018).

³The Guardian: For Generation Rent, this housing crisis is far from over. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/15/generation-rent-housing-crisis-buy-to-let-first-time-buyers> (accessed June 9, 2018).

⁴The Guardian: Why building more homes will not solve Britain's housing crisis. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/27/building-homes-britain-housing-crisis> (accessed June 9, 2018).

⁵Gov.uk: Private renting. Houses in multiple occupation. <https://www.gov.uk/private-renting/houses-in-multiple-occupation> (accessed June 9, 2018).

⁶The Property Landlord: The pitfalls of Guaranteed Rental Schemes. <http://www.thepropertylandlord.co.uk/pitfalls-guaranteed-rental-schemes.html> (accessed June 10, 2018).



amount the owner would get when renting to a family, and thus could count on a secure passive income. In return, the owner would yield management of the given house, which would then be rented room by room as separate units to strangers, generating far greater profit than possible through traditional rental schemes.⁷

This answers not only the question of how Hungarian entrepreneurs have been able to engage in such behavior, turning the situation of the London real estate market to their advantage and shaping it into an exploitation strategy, but also why Hungarian migrants are almost deterministically forced into this system. On the one hand, their earnings do not cover the rental of a separate flat, and yet they do not have the initial costs of renting a flat (one month's rental fee + one and a half months' deposit) at their disposal. In contrast, Hungarian entrepreneurs demand only one week's rent and two weeks' security deposit, which solves the problem for the migrants (who mostly cover the initial expenses of migration from loans). This explains the initial use of this kind of housing, although leaving the system is only possible with a stable job and income. The next section will show that this is the privilege of only few people.

WORKING CONDITIONS/LABOR MARKET

The performance the London labor market demands from its workers puts elite athletes to shame, and this is coupled with ill treatment and unreliable income, forcing migrants to change their workplace constantly. "I was there for about a year. Roughly 80 workmates came and went, most of them, like in the Vietnam war. I think it was there that most of the people fell – during the first two weeks." (20-year-old woman)

In addition, underemployment is sky-rocketing. Highly qualified workers abroad fill the same jobs as migrants with secondary education or even without a high school diploma, and these people work in low-level jobs for years after emigrating (see also BANDY 2013).

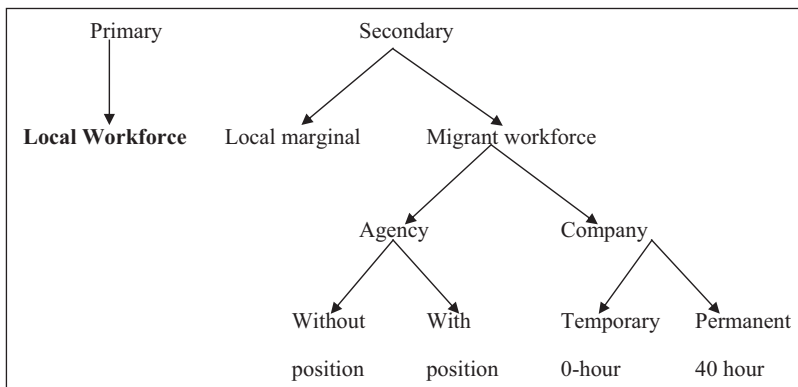


Fig. 1. The migrant workforce on the labor market. London, UK, 2016. (Figure by Noémi Szőke)

⁷The Guardian: Rent to rent, the latest property get-rich-quick scheme. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2013/jun/29/rent-to-rent-property> (accessed June 10, 2018).



“- The Hungarians you have met, what positions were they working in?

- Ninety percent worked as either maids or waiters. Really, this is it. I'm telling it as it is, not much else.” (31-year-old woman)

Furthermore, jobs on the *secondary labor market* can be divided into sub-categories (Fig. 1). In other words, migrants can find themselves in four types of employment: temporary workers employed by an agency; workers employed by an agency, but on the *rota* of the company; temporary workers in contract with the company (zero hour contract); permanent workers employed by a company (40-h contract).

The quality of the different stages and the enormous differences in rank stemming from them are such that the worker works all along in the same low category job, with no prospects for advancement. At most, the road to economic security is paved towards a full job in the legal and economic sense. Meanwhile, however, workers are hired on contracts – also placing them into a hierarchy – which legally strips them of rights, and this is not only true of contracts made with employment agencies but also of atypical contracts made directly with the employer, which play an equal part in generating competition between economic migrants and in their exploitation.

MICRO LEVEL

The low-level sector is destructive in three ways. It forces workers to perform at a physically unrealistic level, mentally burdens them with ill-treatment and financially jeopardizes their existence. Thus, it physically, mentally and economically undermines already defenseless masses of people whose vulnerability is manipulatively taken advantage of in a bid to maximize profit. “Work, work, work, like galley slaves on those big ships they rowed, worked and did not live at all. This how it is now, this is not life. What we are doing is survival. We are survivors.” (31-year-old man)

“- How demanding is the work physically?

- I lost 15 kilos during the first two months.” (33-year-old woman)

Their capacity stretched to the limit, workers are made to perform the task of at least two people, and when it seems someone has reached their physical limit, the supervisors – similarly to coaches preparing athletes for the Olympics – try to get him/her to work faster by screaming at them. “All phases of work are organized in such a way that the machines that are there, they have a certain speed. Well, it's that they try to increase it to eternity so that no one can keep up with the pace. They try to balance this by shouting - the little bosses are screaming at you. You hear them constantly going “put, put, put, put it out; push, push, push, push, push” and of course “quick, quick, quick.” (42-year-old man) “I've never seen anyone like my boss. He was raving to such a point that I literally began to be afraid of him. Nothing was good enough for him. They drove out one's soul there.” (31-year-old woman)

Only vulnerable people are willing to work under such circumstances, but even then – because of the injustices and the treatment they receive – fluctuation is enormous. The constant fluctuation, however, has led to modification in the system of requirements for the



workforce, i.e. the lowering and later disappearance of the requirement of linguistic competence for entry level workers.

“- When I first got here to the hotel, the first day the assistant manager of housekeeping came to us and asked a few questions in English, and those who couldn’t answer him, he sent them home immediately, so, way back, 3 years ago, there was a standard, and he sent those away with whom it was impossible to communicate. But now, even people who cannot speak come.

- Why do they have to retain those who do not speak English?

- Because someone who speaks English will come here, get 1–2 months’ experience and will quit in favor of a better place, where they can make better use of it, if they already speak English.” (33-year-old woman)

As turnover increases, the decrease in quality further enhances the employer’s power due to the vulnerability of the employees, which is why performance demands can be further increased, coupled with ill-treatment and possibly discrimination. This is not only destructive because without communication skills the worker will not be able to escape the situation, but also because he/she won’t be able to defend himself/herself against the injustices he/she suffers, condemned to accept the situation; and the suppressed anger, bitterness and outrage will then consume his/her from within.

“- How did he treat you?

- I was his punching bag. He took out his frustration on me. You see he took advantage of the fact that I didn’t speak English, that I couldn’t talk back, that I was trapped in this situation, that he could take out his frustration on me.” (25-year-old man)

Being thus trapped is further exacerbated by the worker having to face the fact that their original idea of setting out for London without speaking English because they would quickly pick it up there turns out to have been naive. They don’t realize that English citizens have completely left the low-level sector and thus there will be no language community in which to acquire the language skills. “One of my Lithuanian colleagues said that he had come to London with his poor English to study the language, and he came to understand that the worst English is spoken in the capital of England. People’s command of English is very poor, if we look at the areas where a foreigner can get a job more easily, in these entry level jobs, where anyone who comes from abroad can get a job. They know very, very little English. Poor. Foreigners are fleeing home. They don’t have the language skills, just a lot of willpower, and then they’ll take whatever they can.” (35-year-old man)

Lacking communication skills, such workers are destined to labor in jobs alongside other migrants with similar language skills, and so there is nobody to acquire the language skills from. “Our main problem here is that in order to get a better job we would have to speak better English. I thought that I would come here and be speaking perfect English in half a year. Compared to that, I haven’t learned anything. I simply cannot learn, because I am so tired when I get home that I do not sit down to study English. I’m so tired by then that I can’t. If that’s what it depends on, I’ll never be able to speak it because I simply don’t have the energy. Unfortunately, to get ahead it would be necessary to learn. So I am in this Catch-22 situation because I will have a better job if I can study, but I can only study if I have a better job and I am not this tired.” (53-year-old man)



Thus the trap is sprung. Such jobs require such physical expenditure that there simply remains no energy for any kind of intellectual pursuit, and employers exert no pressure in this direction either. Moreover, when the braver ones go to a job interview, they quickly come to realize that being unable to understand the questions or answer them does not in fact hinder them from getting the job. In addition, their work was not negatively affected by the fact that they could not communicate with customers, even in jobs where they had to deliver frontline service.

In the end, this is coupled with the discovery that in certain jobs there is such ethnic concentration that the given Hungarian migrant will be working together with so many Hungarians that he/she will not even have to make an effort to get into conversations with other foreigners who do not speak English either.

“- Please, tell me about your first job/workplace.

- A cleaning job. I was very surprised when I first started, and there was perhaps a very simple question – where did I live, or what was I doing there (?) – and I was surprised, and I was 18. My God, was I afraid! I was totally afraid, and then a guy next to me started telling me [in Hungarian] that this is what the woman asked, saying ‘don’t worry, it will be easier like this, won’t it?’ And everyone started laughing, and I realized that everyone around me was Hungarian.” (20-year-old woman).

“- In this hotel, where we are now, do you know how many Hungarians work here?

- Heaps. We were counting just yesterday with my husband. He says there are many Hungarians. I am like, you’re kidding me. He told me to think about it – ‘you are always speaking with Hungarians. You can’t even count them. The night shift is almost all Hungarian, with one or two exceptions.’ My husband does the night shift, too, and he says it’s unbelievable. I think there are like 3-4 blacks – the rest are all Hungarians.” (30-year-old woman)

MESO LEVEL

Since migration is enormously expensive, the would-be workers – irrespective of their level of education and language ability – feel pressure to find a position as soon as possible, which forces them to make use of an employment agency, gaining the latter a key position in placing the migrants on the labor market. This creates an inverted triangle; the two top endpoints are the two main economic actors – the agency and the employer – the would-be employee being at the bottom. This already defines everyone’s position, and everyone has different interests, but while the would-be worker at the bottom is in a subservient and antagonistic position vis-à-vis the powerholders above them, the two top economic actors, although they too are opposed to each other, are equals in terms of power, and thus, through cooperation, can also reap mutual benefits. But what are the motivations of the actors?

In positions in which the employer needs a large labor force and, customarily, there is a quick turnover, the company – providing relief for its own personnel department – uses agency-based manpower that allows complete freedom and unlimited labor power with completely flexible



conditions. Meanwhile, the agency is looking for the greatest possible profit from the number of hours worked by each of its outsourced workers. Their fruitful cooperation goes off track at two points, and both have fateful consequences for the worker. The employer realizes that – because of the added cost of the agency – such flexible workers are in fact more expensive than the company's own employees and therefore attempts to demand as much work from them and in as short a unit of time as possible. At the same time, the agency wishes to ensure its competitiveness i.e. to have the largest possible workforce available to fulfil the (fluctuating) demand for any number of workers. Due to this dual pressure, the number of hours allocable to an individual decreases. On the one hand, the interest of the employer is to employ the temporary (agency) worker for as short a period as possible. On the other hand, the agency hires an increasingly large number of people, and thus the available lower number of hours is divided among a higher number of people.

In other words, the two main actors at the top not only want to have an entire army of people queuing up for underpaid, physically demanding, low-level jobs riddled with discrimination; they also wish to shape things in such a way that the migrant labor force accept total economic insecurity: without the necessary number of hours – coupled with an already weak position – economic vulnerability is guaranteed.

To achieve this, job applicants are systematically manipulated, thereby ensuring permanent insecurity. The power demonstration begins at the agency, when the worker is shown that the privilege of distributing work is in the hands of the agency and that submission (self-abasement) is the first step in determining who the decision-makers award a job.

They demand availability from the candidate, just as from an Olympic athlete who waits at the starting line for the starter pistol to be fired. The signal is delayed for a long time, however: the “competitor” waits, sits, stands, is present, almost lives at the agency, to show the decision-makers how unshakeable his/her desire for a job is. Meanwhile the employees of the agency look through his/her and do not even address his/her. There is no glimmer of hope, and thus the worker comes to realize with increasing dismay not only the ebbing of time and financial resources, but also that the continuous recruitment that they are witness to further endangers their chances of finding employment. “I applied for this job and with that began what Hungarians here call ‘agency-ing,’ because you start with an agency, and for the first few days you wait there to get a job. You have to play a role, be present at all times, sit down inside, wait to get a job, and when they’ve already seen someone 3–4 times, sooner or later they’ll give them a job. You really have to show that you’re ready and waiting for the job.” (42-year-old man) When the applicant is nearing her/his breaking point, the agency sees it fit to pass them to the next stage and place them with an employer.

Then, his/her calvary begins again because it turns out that the number of those reporting for work outstrips the needs of the employer. Waiting, the demonstration of availability, the psychological warfare for the opportunity to work start all over and, at this point, economic vulnerability is such that getting the wished-for hours of work truly becomes an existential question. For this very reason, the degree of subservience becomes a non-issue. The survival instinct overwrites self-respect. Here, life itself is at stake, and if the doors of the employer open through perseverance then that is what one must do to the limit.

“- What happened on the second and third day was that I went there, but they didn’t take me in. The agency workers arrive at 6:30–6:45, then their own workers and the long-standing agency-workers who belong to the permanent team already swarm in at 7, taking their places. It’s there that they have to fill the missing numbers. The supervisor comes



out. I didn't yet know what a supervisor was. I call them slave drivers. This is the best job description. That fits since, if I am right, it means *felügyelő* [overseer]. He comes and calculates how many people are standing in the corridor. Then he goes in, and he counts there too. You can see that he is mentally crunching the numbers. He comes out again and very circumspectly chooses a few people. He hurries away with them, and the rest wait outside – to be taken inside to work. The moment he takes you inside, that's when the clock starts ticking. It doesn't matter if you went there at 6:45, 7, or 6:30. If he takes you inside at quarter past or at 7:30, that's when your shift begins. It even happened that he took me in to work at 9:30.

- How many of you are there?

- How many . . . it varies. There are times when they drum up a lot of people, up to 16–20 people. Those who do not have work are waiting, hanging around. There are times when the boss comes out and says that he cannot give work to any more people and then it's 'have a nice day.' So, he says goodbye nicely and wishes you a restful time. Resting is great, when you arrive at your workplace at 6:30 a.m. and then they do not employ you, but you can go home.

- This selection process, was it always like this?

- For the most part, yes.

- How do you feel about it? What kind of experience is it?

- I've become indifferent. At first, I found it very humiliating.” (42-year-old man)

It is at this point that the employer feels that the endurance tests have placed the would-be worker in such a psychological state of mind that the starter pistol can be fired: the worker will be able to work, produce results and accept treatment that will be way beyond his/her earlier limits.

The agency–worker relationship continues to be problematic at several levels later on as well. First of all, workers are expected to appear at the agency on the day the *rota is drawn up* for the week – when the companies submit their requests to the agency – to visually demonstrate their desire for working hours and their state of readiness. The “reward” is often disappointing. The workers do not get enough hours to ensure their survival, although they may get a “consolation prize” when, on their free day, they receive a phone call from the agency inviting them to immediately take on a job that has just come up. Since they are in financial straits, the workers cannot refuse these invitations, nor do they dare to, as the agency is likely to retaliate and take the refusal into consideration when establishing the following week's schedule. “At the agency too, they treat you like a dog, literally. Because if the boss lady calls you and tells you that you should get up and go, then you must go, or the next time you won't get work. So, I don't think it's fair, but there is nothing we can do, because we need the work, and she's the one who gives the work. Unfortunately.” (22-year-old woman)

In addition, the bookkeeping is just as “flexible” as the conduct expected of the workers, and the balance – in this case too – works out to be in favor of the agency: non-payment of working-hours, sick-leave and other time off and benefits is quite common. Legal representation and advocacy – the social safety network – are very limited. Migrants neither have the knowledge and the guts, nor the language ability to defend themselves, which is why taking advantage of vulnerable people could become such a common practice. “We've had a lot of stress because of



the agency. This is a Romanian agency. They cheated me with the money all the time, always, always, so that I had to go all the time, make demands, had to write them a threatening letter that they should pay. They cheat, they cheat all the time. I was very annoyed that I got a piece rate. I'm paid by the number of rooms I clean. So, if they cheat me of an hour, that means that I've cleaned two rooms for free. And it annoyed me enormously when they didn't pay me. They didn't pay for entire days. They didn't pay the holiday." (33-year-old woman)

The number of working hours is completely flexible on the side of the employer as well, and he is in no way constrained by what time he had called the workers on a given day because he can decrease the number of hours by half or double it at a whim. Thus, workers are forced into a completely absurd system with no possibility for planning. They do not even have the right to know whether they will work a short or an interminably long shift, or whether they will have too few or too many hours on a given week. Even so, in the midst of total uncertainty, one thing is certain: the allocation of work is such that the worker should work at peak periods when the work-load requires the most, with the smallest possible number of workers, in the shortest possible time, thus completely squeezing the worker dry, even during a short shift.

Since the worker has no permanent workplace, he/she has to get acquainted with new companies, bosses and colleagues, fit into new systems and get his/her bearings in a new place while at the same time pushing efficiency beyond the maximum. All the while, the company's own employees order him/her around, take advantage of him/her and discriminate against him/her. They don't do it so much on an ethnic basis (while they too are migrants). It is much more due to the status difference between the agency workers and temporary workers, which creates a hierarchy between those who have been hired directly by the employer and those who are there through the agency, even though they both perform the same job. "The most difficult task of an agency worker is to accept that she is an agency worker. She may have work the following week, or she may not. She is the one who is sent somewhere when there aren't enough workers there, and she's the one who's sent away when there are too many." (29-year-old woman)

The bosses' line of thought follows a similar track. They cannot show any respect for these people for this very reason. Because of their status, they think that anyone who is willing to work under such conditions can only be stupid, and this basic idea is coupled with fitting treatment. "More or less, all bosses consider the worker coming from the agency to be an undereducated, boorish nobody. For this reason, you cannot expect the same treatment as you are used to. As an agency person, you can find yourself in funny situations. For example, they decide with a coin toss which one of two agency people they will take, so your personality is completely irrelevant." (29-year-old woman)

Thus, taking a job through an agency always brings with it a doubtful, insecure, unstable lifestyle, coupled with the impossibility of planning ahead, which make migrants weak and vulnerable in both an economic and a psychological sense. "For me, agency life is like modern day slavery. They hire people so that the food is delivered to the tables, or to make the lives of the hotel workers easier when they hold a bigger event, but beyond doing this job, these workers don't enjoy any rights. It follows from this that hotel workers are considered contractual employees as opposed to from the agency, who are temporary people." (29-year-old woman)

In this subordinate position, the (agency) worker is completely at the mercy of the agency/ employer, while due to their status as a migrant and their lack of linguistic communication skills means they already start from a defenseless position. The two economic protagonists at the top



make use of and take advantage of this vulnerable state, using the engine of desperation to increase productivity and maximize profit.

In this low-level sector, therefore, the migrant existence – even in the same job description – is divided into a fourfold hierarchy. Each step of this artificial ranking takes one closer to the desired 40-h work contract representing financial security (see Fig. 1).

At the lowest level, the worker has a contract with the agency, which does not, practically speaking, oblige either party to provide or perform actual work. The applicant only registers, to be placed by the agency or not; and the applicant likewise may or may not accept the work being offered. This theoretical balance is upset because the applicant would like to work and to work enough hours that would, on the one hand, cover living expenses, and on the other – in an ideal case in keeping with the original goal of economic migration – make it possible to save money.

At the second level, the worker is already in a better position. Even though he/she still has only a contract with the agency, one of the companies where he/she has been placed has assigned a quasi-permanent position among frequently changing temporary workers. In other words, the worker appears on the roster as if they were an employee of the given company. Of course, the legal relationship between the parties is not altered. The worker continues to be paid by the agency, but at least the element of having to rely on the agency's whims for work hours is eliminated.

At the third stage, the company employs the worker with a zero-hour contract, which provides more rights and strengthens the worker's position. However, in terms of the most important question, that of economic survival, the worker's position is still insecure as he/she does not have a fixed number of hours. In other words, employers – just as agencies – are able to determine work schedules at their whim, even when the worker has signed a contract. “With a zero-hour contract, it's not guaranteed how many hours I can work in a week. According to them, if they give me 10 h, then I should work 10 h, and if I get 40, then I should work 40. That's the problem with this. There isn't a guaranteed number of hours necessary for survival. They give what they want to give.” (36-year-old man)

It is only at the fourth stage that the worker obtains legal and economic security, when the company hires him/her for a 40-h work week on contract. When people reach the top of this four-step arc, they feel successful. However absurd it may sound, it is a serious accomplishment when someone manages to traverse these stages, in spite of the fact that they are still working at the same job in the low-level sector. They are filled with pride and contentment, placing themselves above other migrants, and indeed, they are seen by the newly arrived as successful because they have achieved a distant, longed-for status in comparison to the initial humiliating position they were in. In this artificially created, grotesque world, neither the pride of those who have “made it” nor the admiration of the newcomers seem bizarre – at least in this world.

MACRO LEVEL

London is a global economic and financial center with a sprawling bank and stock exchange sector, along with a trade and service industry which, in addition to its local and migrant inhabitants, is kept alive by 27 million tourists yearly. This key position has led to income and employment polarization and a skewing of the social structure, creating enormous growth at either end of the spectrum. At the top, there is a highly qualified segment with access to significant resources that, compared to its size, owns an unrealistically large portion of the income



of the city in contrast to the much more numerous, low-income segment, members of which are primarily constrained to serve the former (SASSEN 1991).

The growing upper class acquires increasingly more income which, however, leads to an increasing level of demand, calling for an increased number of service providers at the bottom. As capital seeks continuous growth, it wishes to cover its growing demand for labor at a lower and lower cost, which pushes it in the direction of relying on migrant laborers. Capital aims to lower costs even further, and this goal is achieved via worsening conditions and increasing the intensity of work. The local marginal workforce refuses to accept these conditions, and thus the lower sector is almost completely filled with foreign workers.

The migrant workforce is not only cheaper but is also significantly more flexible in adapting to the business demands of the employer. Not only are migrants willing to do overtime for minimal wages but they are less sensitive to the fact that they are working in the secondary, labor intensive, segment of the dual job market, which – beyond low social status – is characterized by poor working conditions and the arbitrary supervision of labor. Rather than trying to improve their status in the target country, migrants strive to raise their status in their home country, precisely through working abroad, which is explained by the differences in income level between the sending and receiving countries (PIORE 1969, 1979a, 1979b).

Thereby the worker has an impact not only on his/her own life but also on their entire country of origin since the remittances sent home play a significant part in the living conditions of more economically underdeveloped regions.

SUMMARY

In its functioning (source of exploitation) and its patterns, the London real estate market shows shocking similarities to those of the labor market. Thus, beyond exploring the conditions prevailing in HMOs (overcrowded, run-down, pest-ridden) and the mode of operation of the Hungarian entrepreneurs managing them, this study also sheds light upon how the practice could come into being and become a profitmaking strategy as well as why it is practically inevitable that Hungarian migrants end up in such housing.

The answer is primarily to be sought in the huge imbalance of supply and demand: due to the drastic increase in population size, which is not followed by construction, and the influx of foreign speculative capital into London. Both contribute to the rise in real estate and rental prices, where a narrow layer of real estate owners can dictate conditions at will on a market with enormous demand.

The practice of operating HMOs itself is legal since it presents a solution to the housing shortage that arises from not keeping up with the population increase and free-floating prices, but it is precisely because of the risk of accidents due to overcrowding in such houses that it is heavily regulated by the law. This practice has become a common investment strategy across the UK, all the more so as (compared to buying a property) renting such houses requires a minimal investment yielding a maximum return. Such landlords simply need to convince the owners to rent the house to them, after which they then subdivide the house into rooms and rent to individuals. In the guaranteed rental scheme, the owner gets from the landlord the sum that he would get for the house were he to rent it to a family while benefitting from a passive form of income, and the landlord takes on the burden of running an HMO in exchange for a handsome profit.



Not only can Hungarian migrants not afford to rent an independent apartment initially, but they have difficulty doing so later. In addition to rent in excess of their salary, the necessary one- or two-month deposit also exceeds the capital available to them, so Hungarian entrepreneurs can even be called useful parasites in terms of their low room rates (compared to renting a flat) and just a two-week deposit, which means they offer a solution to the limited income conditions of migrants.

The source of the problem is not so much the concept, but rather the substandard housing conditions and management techniques that fit the quality. After paying the costs of migration – which they accomplish from loans and/or the sale of their valuables – migrants do not have the capital with which they could survive in London in the long-run, and therefore they are under pressure to start working immediately. In addition to this urgency, they are also driven to rely on an employment agency to find a position because of their insufficient language skills and lack of work experience in London, which thus make agencies the primary points of transit to the London job market.

Since a contract with an agency is no guarantee of being given access to a job opportunity, the right to distribute jobs, which is to say the balance of power, completely favors employment agencies forcing workers into a one-sided obligation that puts them in a position of economic – and psychological – vulnerability.

Taking advantage of this situation, and led by economic interests, agencies and employers start playing a manipulative chess-game aimed at making the destabilization of the migrant permanent, thereby transforming the desperation of people who are economically and psychologically vulnerable into the motor of physical exploitation. The economic motivations of the powerholders are clear: the agency produces substantial profit with every worker it places, and for this reason its self-interest dictates that it build a reserve workforce as large as possible to fulfil the fluctuating demand of employers, while the latter thus have unlimited access to the workforce with absolutely flexible conditions, even though the workers thus acquired cost more than the company's own employees, and so it is in its interest to employ them and getting the most out of them for the shortest possible period of time.

The perpetuation of uncertainty and the demonstration of power – holding the privilege of being able to dispose over who gets the job – begins at the agency, and access to jobs is primarily contingent on subservience and a demonstration of readiness by the worker. When the applicant has reached his/her breaking point, the agency sees it fit to pass the individual to the next stage and place them with an employer, where the calvary begins again.

At this point, the worker or would-be worker is in such a state of economic vulnerability, in which reaching the desired number of hours is truly a matter of life and death, that the survival instinct overwrites dignity, and thus at the sound of the “starter pistol” the person who has been conditioned in the course of many “tests” will be able to work and produce results in such a way as to accept treatment that will far outstrip his or her earlier limits. This kind of psychological warfare is continuous: the demonstration of readiness, constantly being assigned to a new workplace and thereby kept in motion and insecurity, the fight for working hours, for survival, ill-treatment, discrimination, and the need to tolerate the vulnerability stemming from their status, combined with the amount of physical effort required, eventually will physically exhaust, mentally dismantle and existentially ruin workers.



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