Labour-process-related Racism in Transnational European Production: Fragmenting Work meets Xenophobic Culturalisation among Workers

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses labour-process-related racism and xenophobia among workers. It uses empirical findings from different projects to argue that, to a large extent, actual racism and xenophobia refer to experiences of objectification/reification, namely by harsh social competition in contemporary fragmented and transnationalised production. Racism and xenophobia are discussed as specific forms of subjectification which reproduce and stabilise these competitive social relations among workers, within and beyond countries. Racism thus is part of a "restrictive agency" developed by workers – that is, their orientation towards the subordination under objectifying, seemingly non-changeable structures. As a consequence, the article concludes, the repressive structures have to be questioned, and for this purpose the intense debate on racism and right-wing populism among workers is one-sided; there must be more attention paid to progressive labour-process-related, universalistic orientations that exist, despite already long-lasting neo-liberalism.

KEY WORDS

racism; Labour Process Theory; transnational production networks; fragmentation; Europeanisation; Critical Psychology

Structural Racism and Capitalist Labour Process

With the new electoral strength of far-right political parties in Europe there is an intense debate about racism, xenophobia and nationalism among workers. Contributions focus, for example, on milieu studies and the question of why traditionally left-voting communities change to the (far) right (Eribon, 2009; Van der Linden, 2018), on the importance of the contemporary European and global neo-liberal ruling project and its effects on workers (Flecker, 2007; Dörre, 2019), and the illumination of the often highly contradictory positioning of trade unions (Jefferys and Ouali, 2007; Marino, Roosblad and Pennix, 2017). Not least, there are numerous studies which show how "race" powerfully shapes workplace relations (Wrench, Rea and Ouali, 1999; Sahraoui, 2015; Orupabo and Nadim, 2019), with a particular a focus on the occupational hierarchy (Lever and Milbourne, 2017), on everyday practices of xenophobic othering (Bernardotti, Dhaliwal and Perocco, 2007; Mulinari, 2015), local trade union positioning (Cillo and Perocco, 2015) and new, emancipatory relationships that may evolve. Quite a few studies discuss how "integration" in the workplace could be improved, underlining for example the importance of a non-racist corporatist culture and effective diversity management (Ashe and Nazroo, 2017).

My own emphasis, however, is on what I call the labour-process-related view of workers'

racism and xenophobia. Strictly speaking – and unlike many workplace studies – my basic concern is not about "migrants", "blacks" or other "minorities" (and their integration). Rather, it is about the contemporary social form of transnationalised European production and how it is racialised, including by workers. The social constitution of "minorities", both old and new ones, is an important topic, of course. However, the thesis of this article is that, if we share the fundamental theoretical approach that racism is structurally inherent to capitalism (Miles, 1982, 1989; Virdee, 2019), we have to go beyond the major–minor-question and instead put more emphasis on the question of how racism among workers is related to capitalist exploitation. This is where the labour process in its capitalist dimension comes in – that is, the far-reaching submission, suppression, objectification and reification of workers.

At this point of reflection, scholars who bring class and race together typically argue that race is one of the basic categories[1] that fosters and frames the division of workers (particularly when it comes to job competition), enabling their exploitation and oppression. In fact, racism is widely theorised as a material and symbolic benefit for "white" workers – that is, an institutionalised and subjectively constituted identity that functions as a resource of supremacy in the hierarchical division of labour and society (Roediger, 1991; DuBois, 1999; Weiß, 2010; Fuchs, 2018; Virdee, 2019). Although I follow this fundamental argument, I do think that we have to enlarge it. The final ratio of the capital–labour relation in work and production is not workers' division; it is all workers' uneven objectification – that is, their reduction to labour power in order to generate competitively sustainable profit. So, the question that arises is, how is the dividing racialised "othering" among workers linked to their subsumed position in the labour process? How can we bring together the (self-)constitution of racialised supremacy with the (self-)subsumption under the demands of an exhausting profit-logic of capitalist production and reproduction?

The thesis I want to discuss here is that there is racism among workers; this refers to their own objectification in the labour processes and to the way in which they actively frame this objectification. More precisely, I argue that many workers consider their currently widespread experiences of objectification by harsh social competition in fragmented, transnationalised production as a given and unchangeable, and that this is linked to racist orientations. Theoretically, this can be shown with reference to debates on structural racism (Miles, 1982; Hall, 1986) and to Critical Psychology,[2] mainly related to its category of restrictive agency (see below). So, I argue that for a better understanding of workers' racism we have to look at their restrictive agency – that is, an agency that is not detached from "structural" settings and restrictions but that is a result of their subjective reflection and interpretation (Holzkamp, 1987).

To avoid misunderstandings: I do not say that workers' racism *only* comes from exploitation in the labour process, and I am far from arguing that we can deduce racism from workers' objectification in capitalist production. However, I think it is important to push back diverse dualisms and externalisations that actually dominate the public when it comes to racism, such as considering it as a reaction to the arrival of migrants and refugees or seeing it basically as a problem of some misguided, irrational social groups and their voting attitudes. Not least, we must be reminded of the fact that contemporary Europeanisation to a large extent rests upon the xenophobic naturalisation of the socio-spatial unevenness and deep social frictions it produces.

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1 I want to concentrate on racism and xenophobia, and I leave aside other repressive logics such as genderism, being fully aware that they are interlinked.

2 German Critical Psychology is a historical-materialist approach to psychology; it was developed by Klaus Holzkamp and Ute Osterkamp, and it deals in particular with problems of racism (Holzkamp, 1983; Osterkamp, 1988; Räthzel, 1997; Schraube and Osterkamp, 2013).

This could be seen with regard to the construction of the concepts of "lazy Greeks" and "brave Germans" during and following the 2008 crisis (Hadjimichalis, 2018). So, the labour-process-related perspective on racism that I want to discuss here argues empirically and theoretically for an understanding of racism that is not the opposite side of an otherwise liberal and democratic economy and society but that is, on the contrary, inscribed in capitalism's (and hence labour-process-related) normality.

I develop my arguments in three basic steps, each discussed in its own section below, followed by a preliminary conclusion.

The first analytical step is based on the assumption that there is no such thing as capitalist production in general and that capitalist logics exist only in socially, temporally and spatially different socio-economic forms (Aglietta, 1976; see also Jessop, 2012: 94). Hence, a labour-process-related analysis of workers' racism has to specify the forms of workers' objectification and submission in order to discuss how they are, at a certain historical and geographical moment, linked to racism. For decades now, this topic has been the agenda of Labour Process Theory (Braverman, 1974; Thompson and Smith, 2009). So, in the first section I take findings from analyses based on Labour Process Theory and from research on global and European production networks in order to discuss the current socio-economic form of labour and production processes within Europe. I argue that a European regime of fragmented and flexible production has developed which rests upon the double logic of the transnationalisation of labour processes via their fragmentation and fundamental instability. Here, workers' subsumption under the logic of transnationalised, competitive fragmentation as a direct and indirect mode of control is fundamental.

In the next section I present some empirical material from various projects and studies about transnational and European production networks. I typically conducted long narrative interviews with workers, rank-and-file shop stewards and trade unionists, each including biographical dimensions about their jobs and their life-courses (Hürtgen, 2008, 2019a; Lüthje et al., 2013). Racism, xenophobia and progressive universalism came up in these interviews without those subjects being asked about specifically. In this article, I use some typical sequences to illustrate contemporary labour-process-related racism. I consciously chose no illustration that displays racism along the majority–minority line, even though I came across this during the research. Rather, I want to put the emphasis on racialised framings among "white European working populations". I think this material demonstrates best that racism is not bound to this or that social "minority" but to an extremely flexible socio-ideological construction that frames capitalist social relations (Miles, 1993). So, because the term "racism" is in itself highly ambiguous, and because it is, today, less based on biology than on "culture", and also because in the presented material only "white" workers and no mentions of "race" in the classic sense appear, I will use the term xenophobic culturalisation of social relations in the analysis.

In the third step I analyse the presented interview sequences with a theoretical reflection on contemporary capitalism and racism. I refer first to debates on racism as a structural phenomenon (Miles, 1982; Hall, 1986), and second to Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 1983; Räthzel, 2002) I discuss the idea that racism and xenophobia both refer to and reproduce competitive transnational fragmentation. Racism is interlinked with a restrictive agency – that is, the active and well-grounded self-submission under seemingly unchangeable competitive logics, modes of control and working requirements.

However, and this is the focus of the conclusion, from a historical-materialist perspective the perception of exploitive and objectifying capitalist structures as unchangeable and necessitating unquestionable subsumption is not an individual attitude or choice. Rather, it reflects structures and power relations in which the subject acts. Hence, workers' racism is not a problem of workers

but of contemporary neo-liberal European capitalism. Nevertheless, these repressive structures are not fixed. In order to avoid stereotyping workers as *being* racist, research *a priori* also has to question workers' progressive, universalistic orientations (Holloway, 2002; Baily et al., 2016).

Transnational European Production, Fragmenting Work and Multi-scalar Competition

In this section I discuss the proposal that a specific socio-economic form of labour and production processes has developed in Europe, and that its effect is a transnationalised, competitive fragmentation of workers. In critical scholarship, Europeanisation is described as neo-liberal integration – that is, the creation of a common market with restrictive criteria in financial and fiscal policy, privatisation of social services and harsh austerity measures (Van Apeldoorn, Drahokoupil and Horn, 2009; Hadjimichalis, 2018). With regard to labour, contemporary European integration can be analysed as competitive Europeanisation (Hürtgen, 2019b), a mode that destandardises and deregulates social protection and allows permanent flexible recombination of socio-politically uneven workforces, both within and beyond nation states (Brenner, 2001; Hürtgen, 2019b). Competitive Europeanisation is driven by and fosters a European regime of flexible and fragmented transnationalised production that shows particular features of labour's subsumption. It is important to consider these features in a labour-process-related debate on racism and xenophobia among workers.

The European regime of flexible and transnational production is basically marked by two interrelated processes (Schoenberger, 1988). The first is the flexible and multi-scalar segmentation and permanent recombination of the labour and production processes. Since the end of the post-war growth period, the dominant organisational mode has been the splitting of the entire production process into internal and external segments,[3] thus facilitating its recombination in a more flexible manner. Secondly, this organisational segmentation and restructuring coincided with firms' permanent spatial reorganisation – that is, the dynamic relocation of both internal and external segments to other locations, regions and countries (and back again). The result has been the development of highly unstable and complex European and worldwide production networks (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). They are structured as flexible and segmented (decentralised) transnational configurations but with a highly centralised governance that, from the beginning, was based on new digital coordination capacities (Altmann and Deiß, 1998). In Europe, the policy for a so-called Common Market directly targeted the enhancement of firms' transnationalisation, based on this fragmentation, and their capacity for permanent socio-spatial restructuring (Van Apeldoorn, 2002).

In the 1970s such transnational fragmentation started with the relocation of simple mass production (so-called "low-end") into the Global and European South. This was (and often still is) characterised by considerably lower social standards and often weak or repressed union activity (Fröbel, Heinrichs and Kreye, 1977). Textile and electronic industries and Taylorist work on assembly lines are typical of this process. This cost-cutting relocation of specific functions of production, however, was and is a multi-scalar process. It includes not only other countries and continents but also the inner peripheries within nation–states (Massey, 1984). From the beginning,

[3] Internal segments belong to the firm – for example, operating relatively budget-autonomous production sites (run as cost centres), customer-specific production lines, working groups, service centres or even individual workforce units. External segmentation refers to the outsourcing process – that is, the transfer of service and production functions onto flexible suppliers.

the socio-spatial division of labour that came out of this process was racialised and gendered. The use of socio-spatial differences among workforce categories constructed as different "ethnicities" or "races" is crucial in the whole process, be it locally with migrants or transnationally with people (typically women) from the South doing the low-end-work. In fact, highly suppressive and uneven working regimes as a result of production's transnationalisation are widely framed along a xenophobic culturalisation/civilisation logic, not least by what David Roediger and Elisabeth Esch (2012) call "race management".[4]

I want to draw attention to a slightly different perspective. My emphasis in the following is not on the existing racialised segregation between high-end and low-end workers but on the instability of labour-process configurations across Europe, and how this constitutes a specific mode of workers' control and subsumption. To be clear: the idea of a steady and stable socio-spatial separation between high- and low-end work turned out to be an illusion (Hürtgen, 2019a, 2019b). Instead, we find something very different in many branches and production networks. On the one hand, the socio-political conditions of work and workers' reproduction continue to be socio-spatially divided across Europe, and these conditions experience ongoing fragmentation and deregulation (Marchington et al., 2005; Arrowsmith and Pulignano, 2013). On the other hand, there is a remarkable standardisation of technological and organisational norms of production such as procedures and control mechanisms (Lipietz, 1997; Contractor et al., 2010; Krzywdzinski, 2017). In particular, a technological and organisational modernisation ("upgrading") of many formerly low-end production sites or "extended workbenches" took place in order to gain transnational flexibility and quality. However, this did not lead to what is known as social upgrading – that is, a considerable improvement of working conditions.[5]

Further digitalisation is not only important for technological modernisation. Above all, it allows a new mode of control as digitalised governance and algorithm management permit the flexible and competitive comparison of internal and external, near and remote segments of production via comprehensive digital reporting across organisations and space. This multidimensional competitive comparing is crucial for labour, as it enormously intensifies locational uncertainty and socio-spatial competition. In fact, numerous features of the labour and production processes are constantly reported and compared – not only costs, efficiency and quality but also workers' flexible disposition or their absenteeism rates (Lüthje et al., 2013). With the far-reaching standardisation of the norms of production and the ongoing fragmentation of working conditions, socio-spatial competition directly targets social costs (Lipietz, 1997; Yeung and Coe, 2015). In some areas, such as the automotive industry or the sphere of digitalised platform work, benchmarking is common; this is the practice of competing for given targets or tendering for pre-defined tasks and orders, with "the best" getting the contract (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2015). "Whipsawing" – that is, management's offensive comparison of social standards and working conditions so as to threaten relocation – is widespread (Sisson, 2013; Greer and Hauptmeier, 2015).[6]

As a result, the contemporary European regime of fragmented and transnationalised production intensifies and generalises locational uncertainty, both for the better-situated and for

[4] For empirical examples in contemporary transnational European production see Meardi (2000), Lüthje et al. (2013), and Meszmann and Fedyuk (2019).

[5] There may be social improvements for some, typically certain white-collar workers or specialists, but in most cases there is no general social improvement, and social downgrading also exists (Lüthje et al., 2013; Bair and Werner, 2015).

[6] As I discuss elsewhere (Hürtgen, 2019b), this of course has important consequences for further fragmentation and precarisation of work.

those who not long ago had been regarded as being on the periphery. Permanent restructuring, featured in the control modus of competitive comparing, constitutes systematic instability when it comes to labour processes and workforces. In particular, relocation or the threat of it is not limited any longer to so-called "high-wage countries" but is experienced throughout Europe.[7]

Multi-scalar Competition and Xenophobic Culturalisation

In this section I illustrate how the logics of permanent uncertainty and competitive fragmentation in European production, as described above, can be framed and reproduced in a racialised manner by workers. After this, I come back to a theoretical reflection on racism and labour processes.

I start with a quotation that comes from a former project on transnational production networks in the electronics industry. We interviewed a female member of the works council from West Hungary, from a production site near the Austrian border, the traditionally more developed and industrialised part of the country. This production site was opened by a transnational corporation at the beginning of the 1990s and had some thousands of employees. In the space of a few years the site experienced what was described in the last section: comprehensive organisational and technological modernisation towards "Western" standards, where the flexibilisation and precarisation of work were the rule (via agency work or short-term contracts and generally very low wages). Among the staff there was discontent because of these bad working conditions; our interviewee defended the need to keep labour costs low because this would attract investment, which Hungary needs for economic development. However, at a specific moment some years after the millennium, the situation came to a head. On the one side, there were crises in the market (including the rise of China as a new player in that market); on the other side, there was the opening of a new production site in the East of the country, near the Ukrainian border, with lower wages than in the West of the country (the idea being that this should function as a direct "answer" to China's low wages). At the time of our interview the relocation of a big production line was predicted (and did eventually take place), which would cost more than 500 jobs. In this situation, the interviewee underlined a couple of times that she knew the new East Hungarian production site because she had visited it, and that it would be dangerous to relocate production there. To explain this, she described the colleagues from Eastern Hungary in the following words:

> Some of them came with a shepherd's crook. They destroyed the vending machine; they did not flush the toilets; this was the first time they had worked in a factory! There are examples where some of them destroyed the circuit boards after two days and then left (quoted in Lüthje et al., 2013: 215).

It may be worth noting that in earlier oral presentations of this material the question arose of whether the Hungarian shop steward was correct in her description of people in the East and from the countryside as being not really adapted to the Western working culture.[8] However, during the project we were able to visit the Eastern production site in question and to talk to people there. We found that this was a falsification of ideas about a non-civilised menace to modern production.

The next example comes from another former research project which investigated shop

[7] Transnational flexible segmentation and restructuring permanently reset "the basis on which different labour processes are linked and compete with each other" (Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015: 90).

[8] This shows us that structural racism is not a question of knowledge or a distinction between "ordinary" people and science; it is a societal construction (see next section).

stewards as members of European Works Councils (EWC). The male interviewee worked in a transnational automotive company in an East German region. The manufacturer had different locations in Germany and Europe, and the East German production site was built up some years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. From the beginning, this location was conceptualised as a German pioneer in experimenting with new platform techniques and much more flexibilised and intense work organisation, while at the same time paying low, in the beginning very low, wages. However, this manufacturer had not only already been in economic crisis for quite some time; it was also a promoter of the benchmarking process mentioned above. Each year all production sites "applied" for an additional part of production and output, and quality and costs were regularly and openly compared across Europe.

The interviewee was a shop steward, a member of the IG Metall union and a member of the European Works Council. The East German site was regularly in the top position during the competitive comparison, and the interviewee was proud of that. This was particularly so since he was confronted, as he said, with prejudice and stereotypes from West German colleagues who often claimed that East Germans would not be really good workers. During the interview he described at length the efforts the workers made to meet the targets. He repeatedly said that he was proud of his staff's willingness to be flexible, their correctness and discipline, and generally their readiness to respond to the requirements of the work. They "do a very good job", he said, despite the fact that wages were still much lower than in the West of Germany. There was some discontent among the workers, and he also described a little rebellion with spontaneous meetings and open letters against an extra shift on a Saturday. However, when he managed to explain to them that the job must be done, he described his workers as "the best".

As my topic during the research was basically about European Works Councils and how they dealt with transnational competition, I asked the interviewee what could be done, generally and also in the specific EWC, about permanent comparing and the social uncertainty that goes along with it.

He agreed completely with me that the pressure was enormous. The capital–labour contradiction, he said, was even worse than he, coming from the former German Democratic Republic, thought. However, he repeatedly underlined that these "mechanisms of power are fixed". With regard to the European Works Council he added, "One can only act within them, via recognizing them and trying to pull some strings behind" (originally quoted in Hürtgen, 2008: 167).

He nevertheless underlined the fact that in the EWC he had good contacts with all of the members. When they met, they went for a beer and talked about their lives and families. However, he repeatedly described some EWC members, particularly the British colleagues, as "typical proletarians". I asked him what exactly he meant by that:

> Question: You often distinguish yourself from the idea of representing 'proletarians'. Could you explain this a bit more?'
>
> Answer: This isn't meant pejoratively … but I saw the British plants myself. Illiterates, unskilled, actually they are completely a breed apart with a much simpler working environment. So it is clear that they are different there. It is much more difficult to achieve discipline, order and cleanliness, or the identification with their work. This is just different there. … We hope, in quotation marks, that if the enterprise continues to have economic difficulties that, in the end, this is what affects it, if it should come to what is necessary in the future to close some of our plants, that first they think about doing that in Great Britain, because the workforce there simply does not have the level of education, training and identification like in the German production sites. They are for sure completely a breed apart (*Das ist mit Sicherheit ein ganz anderer Menschenschlag*).

There are more examples like this across Europe, but these two quotations are among the most pointed and explicit. (For more, see Hürtgen, 2008, 2019a.)

Theorising Labour-process-related Racism among Workers

Constructing and excluding the dangerous Other

How can we analyse these two examples from a labour-process-related perspective? I first develop some arguments in the frame of the conception of racism as a structural category before I enlarge this approach with German Critical Psychology.

Conceptions of racism as a structural category consider racism and xenophobia as specific dimensions in the reproduction of capitalist-hierarchical social relations (Miles, 1982; Wallerstein, 1991; Hall, 1996; Bonilla-Silver, 1997). In this perspective it is not the stranger, the black or the migrant who stands at the origin of racism and xenophobia. Racism and xenophobia are not the consequence of the arrival of "different" people into "our" normality. Rather, the logic is vice-versa: the social construction of different people is part of the institutionalised and daily reproduction of a hierarchically structured, often violent and destructive capitalist societal normality. Thus, constructions with long historical traces – such as anti-Semitism or anti-Ziganism – stand next to or are combined with an enormous and highly flexible variation in forms of racism across time and space (Miles, 1986, 1989).

The two examples, described above, with their "racism among white workers", so to speak, demonstrate perfectly the flexibility of racialised constructions. In both countries – Hungary and (East) Germany – anti-Semitism, anti-Ziganism and also anti-Slavism are regarded as heavyweight traditions (Kurth and Salzborn, 2009; Szombati, 2018). In addition, severe racism against people of colour is widely reported. However, the interviewees refer to none of these groups. While the Hungarian shop steward's quotation could still be analysed in the logic of an East–West divide of the country, or a division between city and countryside, the East German shop steward, with his descriptions of the English workers and colleagues, uncouples his racist constructions completely from typical lines. This is not to say that "classic" lines are not important any more, but the capriciousness reported here makes especially clear what the structural racism approach states (Cohen, 1988; Miles, 1993): that racism, must not be deduced from a longstanding and complicated past to which people are attached, but that it is a constantly renewed form that reproduces contemporary capitalist modernity and its violent and destructive logics – in this case: workers' objectification via severe socio-spatial competition.

It was Stuart Hall (1989, 1997) who underlined that racism is an ideological form conceived to transform repressive capitalist social relations into frames of belonging and non-belonging. Hereby, (non-)belongings are constructed through the stereotyping of different social groups with physical, mental or social attributes which – in the eyes of racist logic and with reference to "given" characteristics – justify, and even demand their elimination or subordination. This is the more so because the constructed other represents a hidden but deeply dangerous nature that would, if not restricted, destroy "social normality" (Hall, 1989, 1997; Balibar, 1991). The naturalisation of the social, however, is today strongly based on cultural racism (Hall, 1989, 1998) or the culturalisation of the social. In fact, the idea of a determined culture often replaced the biological racism of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.[9]

[9] "What we see here is that biological or genetic naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human

When we look at the interviews, we do not find a biological approach; rather the whole construction is based on cultural racism or, as I prefer to put it to avoid associations with race in the colonial black–white dimension, xenophobic culturalisation. In both quotations, the colleagues from the other production site are described as being situated far below the speaker's own cultural and social capacity. The function of this depiction is, however, equal to biological naturalisation: to construct a deep and non-crossable line of non-belonging. They are described as fundamentally different from the company as the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1984), and its stated working standards of discipline, "qualification" and watchfulness, and in this they are dangerous for the company (in destroying circuit boards etc.). Overall, the competitive relationship with the other production sites is transformed into a non-relationship, into a necessary cutting-off. The social danger that is indeed a feature of transnational competitive comparing is projected onto a seemingly dangerous, racialised Other who, consequently, must be excluded.

What is important to see at this point is that both interviewees have good connections with the other production site. They regularly visit it, and the second interviewee describes at length his good relationships with all the colleagues at the European Works Council, including the "proletarian" British one. This description shows that the (imagined) expulsion is no simple attitude on personal terms. Racism, or xenophobic culturalisation, is not about the dislike of strangers, and it does not target the Others as personal characters (which can be described as being very encouraging). Rather, the racist construction frames and hence reproduces a societal and in this case socio-economic structure. It is not the personal relationship with colleagues that needs to be cut but the competitive socio-economic link to them. Consequently, the cultural divide is designed to be one of the working culture. In this dimension, with regard to their work, the others are pushed out and described as "shepherds" or "illiterates" respectively.

Naturalising repression and transforming submission into an autonomous agency

This leads to the next step of the analysis: what about the fact that we see here racism of the subalterns, workers' racism? About one thing there is no doubt: that their racism, as xenophobic culturalisation, enables the construction of an imagined supremacy that fundamentally hinders potential solidarity among the transnationally divided workers and that instead legitimises and fosters further fragmentation. There is, as many studies have shown, a division among the workers that enables and facilitates their exploitation under harsh working conditions (Roediger, 1991). When it comes to the question of why workers orientate towards racist divisions instead of solidarity, basically two explanations are given. First, workers enjoy their privileges as a white or supreme workforce category that blinds them to fully understanding that, in the long run, solidaristic orientations are more effective (Cohen, 1988; Virdee, 2019). However, these dimensions are not fully satisfying. As described above, the idea of a stable, well-situated and privileged position of white workers is misleading. Instead, we see (and also find in the interviews) systematic fragmentation and the degradation of working conditions cutting through all regions, countries and workforce categories. The second explanation for racism refers to the classic feature of workers' limited consciousness which, I think, is fundamentally problematic and would merit its own debate. At this point I can say that my own experiences as a researcher in the field and also as a trade union educator have sustained my basic scepticism of the idea that workers have a narrower horizon in their reflection than scientists. (For a theoretical perspective for this see Gramsci, 1971:

behaviour and social affinities. … [C]ulture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin" (Balibar, 1991: 22; see also Räthzel, 2002).

347–351; with regard to racism see Osterkamp, 1988; Holzkamp, 1994.)

So, from a labour-process-related perspective on racism I propose integrating something different into the analysis: the concept of restrictive agency, coming from German Critical Psychology. This concept reveals the fact that there is a link between the workers' racist orientation on the one hand and how their own subaltern position in capitalist labour and production processes is framed on the other.

The two categories of "restrictive" and "generalising" agency are crucial in Critical Psychology (Holzkamp, 1987). They describe the subjectively developed form of conducting oneself in relation to repressive societal structures which fundamentally limit subjects' autonomy in the control of their own lives. On the one theoretical pole, the orientation goes toward the collective intervention in and change of these repressive structures. The other theoretical pole, that of restrictive agency, looks for the best way of coping with them – that is, looking for particular forms of behaviour or strategies within the repressive logics and structures. It is important to note that the two categories do not provide a moral distinction. They do not target the pure desire or lack of it for solidarity and collective change, as from the standpoint of the subject there can be good reasons for both orientations (Holzkamp, 1992). Rather, the categories theorise the way in which subjects perceive repressive structures, and even more importantly, how they consider their own subjective capacity to change them collectively – or not.

Racism relates to the way in which someone's own submission is acted out as an agency and transformed in an act of autonomy (Osterkamp, 1988; Räthzel, 1997). The identification and stigmatisation of racialised others allow the conversion of one's own subjective submission under repressive norms and procedures into a positive, valuable activity and contribution to the imagined society. Thus, the stereotyping is precisely designed as the dangerous breaking with the accepted and henceforth positively framed repressive norms and requirements of repressive structures. Classic images of this norm-breaking include laziness (a classic anti-Slavic stereotype), thievery (often stated about Romanies) and promiscuity (classically stated for blacks). With regard to labour processes, it can include lack of discipline, cautiousness, knowledge and identification with their work.

Particularly the second interviewee demonstrated orientations of restrictive agency *par excellence*. He is fully aware of the capital–labour relation and his own subaltern position in it, so there is no limited understanding or lack of consciousness in the classic sense. However, what he states is that the "the mechanisms of power are fixed"; they are not able to change. In the interview he explains a couple of times that any reflection on eventual solidarity among the European workforces is a waste of time. Instead he describes something which he calls "trying to pull strings behind". This means to promote his own production site on the European scale, basically during the meetings of the European Works Council with management and during "small talk" afterwards, hoping that this would, eventually, bring an advantage in the positioning of his own location in the transnational network (Hürtgen, 2008). So, restrictive agency is very clearly demonstrated to be a particularised agency that looks for possibilities to cope within the existing logics and structures. This orientation does not come from bad will or because the interviewee would not wish something good for all European workers, but it is the direct consequence of his fundamental judgement that the socio-economic structures, namely transnational competition, are not able to change. To believe something else, he states, would be a complete illusion. The price, however, is acceptance of and subordination under the repressive socio-economic logics: permanent competitive optimisation, flexibilisation and intensification of work.

Even more, it is precisely this acceptance and subordination that the interviewee turns into a positive agency. He at length and repeatedly describes how he is proud of what he calls the

qualifications of the East German staff, their discipline, motivation and identification with the work (despite relatively low wages), their orderliness and cleanliness, their flexibility and readiness for the extra effort needed to meet their targets.[10] All this is waged work from a management perspective. It is a perspective of the best usage of labour that the interviewee takes as his own. The subordination to restrictive logics and demands is transformed into an autonomous act, and the autonomous subordination takes waged labour as the best possible fulfilment of targets and requirements (Hürtgen, 2008).

The racialised Others are crucial in this picture. First, as the norm-breakers they represent a target for aggression and rebellion by means of the translation of their own subordination into the logic of (non-)belonging described above (Hall, 1989). Second, they function as enablers for the transformation of self-submission into autonomous agency. The racist and xenophobic degradation of the Others is in a way necessary in order to portray one's own, highly different capacities, qualifications, intelligence and so on as something special and valuable. The racialised dark and dangerous side is needed to display one's own bright side – that is, one's own cultural characteristics and their importance for the economy and society. In fact, when talking about the European Works Council and its significance in the transnational competition of the company, it was not I who asked the second interviewee whether he saw specific characteristics in British workers; it was he who told the story that way.

Conclusion and the Question of Labour-process-related Universalism

In this article I have discussed labour-process-related racism with particular emphasis on competitive social relations in contemporary European production. I analysed its fragmentation, transnationalisation and permanent socio-spatial restructuring, and I highlighted its specific mode of governance, control and transnational competitive comparing. The aim was to theorise and illustrate a labour–process-related view of workers' racism – a view that reintegrates dimensions of workers' subordination and exploitation and brings together the self-constitution of racialised supremacy with the self-subsumption under repressive capitalist logics of and in production. Racism divides workers via the construction and imagined elimination of a racialised Other. I argued that, in addition we have to look at a specific workers' restrictive agency that rejects reflections on collective, solidaristic intervention as illusionary and instead actively draws restrictive capitalist logics as non-questionable requirements. The racialised culturalisation/naturalisation of the Other is interrelated with a sort of naturalisation of the existing repressive structures, norms and power relations. The subjective conversion of this subordination into an autonomous agency, in this case the correct and flexible fulfilment of working orders and given targets, is related to racism, first as a mode of "rebellious subordination" (Räthzel, 1997) that projects their own suffering and aggression onto racialised Others, and secondly as a mode to portray their own duty to obey as something particularly valuable, meriting recognition and esteem. So, in all, there is a racialised reproduction of the fragmented and transnationalised labour and production processes by workers, enabling them to follow uncooperative and reckless orientations.

What does this analysis mean for further reflection on racism among workers, but also for emancipatory and anti-racist interventions? Two things are important here. First, the distinction between restrictive (particularised) and cooperative (generalising) agency is a theoretical, not an

[10] There are other examples in the interview, concerning his biography, that confirm this interpretation. For example, he describes the way that he, unlike others of the region, was willing to work for very little pay but this is why he now has a job, unlike others.

empirical one. In reality, there exist poles in the orientations, but no clear-cut entities (Holzkamp, 1987). Moreover, the orientations are not fixed. Instead there is overlap and fluidity, meaning that, from the standpoint of the subject, the perception of their own capacity for collective intervention can change over time and it is not necessarily the same in all areas of social life.[11] Second, as was said before, the development of this or that agency is not a moral question, nor is it an arbitrary process of an isolated subject who makes rational choices. Rather, subjects in their everyday practice permanently interpret, reflect and appropriate the societal structures in which they act. This means that a particularistic orientation does not imply a lack of thought, knowledge or education but is the outcome of a reasoned perception and estimation of the societal structures, social developments and political power relations and what they mean for the subjects' own resources of acting (Holzkamp, 1987, 1992).

In other words, contemporary racism among workers, from a labour-process-related view, is fundamentally linked to contemporary exploitative and repressive capitalist structures, particularly to an anti-social, neo-liberal path of development. In fact, Stuart Hall (1986), Robert Miles (1993) and many others have shown that the current racialisation of society and economy in Europe is the very backbone of the ongoing socio-economic transformation which is based on an increasingly direct authoritarian model of governance, and that this fundamentally undermines formerly existing social and democratic rights (Bruff, 2014; Clua-Losada and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017; Hadjimichalis 2018). Thus, this racialisation is part of a comprehensive depoliticisation and naturalisation of the ruling socio-economic logics and their devastations via xenophobic and socio-Darwinist frames produced by the powerful actors of society, including many trade unions and scientists (Hentges et al., 2003; Harvey, 2005: 83ff; Burnham, 2014).

However, the rationale for linking racism among workers to contemporary capitalist structures is not only to have better (historical-materialist) theoretical explanations for it. Rather, if we seriously want to reject any projection of racism on "the white working class" as an imagined addressee (Bray, 2017), we have to be more aware about the other side of workers' daily struggles, in the workplace and beyond, as the existing labour-process-related universalism. In fact, there are permanently in the workplaces not only individual orientations but also individual and collective practices which transcend repressive particularisation and withstand naturalisation, and which, while doing so, generalise workers' requests and concerns. It would be for another article to discuss further the different forms they can take and how they are interrelated to a rejection of waged labour as mere fulfilment (see for this Hürtgen, 2008, 2017). What is important at this point is that universalistic orientations are not "clear and clean", not expurgated from any repressive, even racist framings. Rather, progressive and repressive logics overlap in practice and in everyday life (Gramsci, 1971). With an idea of racism as a societal structure, however, the scientific task would not be to blame workers for their contradictory consciousness but to integrate their emancipatory thinking and acting, as an important resource to push back neo-liberalism. This is the more so as universal orientations are not eternally fixed and stable. On the contrary, studies indicate that labour-process-related universalism is under strong pressure, precisely from the neo-liberal normalisation and naturalisation of ruling socio-economic logics (Detje et al., 2011; Hürtgen and Voswinkel, 2014).

[11] The second interviewee, for example, in another part of the interview, departs from his principle orientation towards restrictive adaption when it comes to the question of a further lowering of workers' wages at his production site, an issue he regards as deeply unjust with reference to West Germany (Hürtgen, 2008).

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