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Working-class against their will: “Recognized” refugees in France and Bulgaria in the early twenty-first century

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Working-class against their will: “Recognized” refugees in France and Bulgaria in the early twenty-first century

Albena TCHOLAKOVA

There have been few studies of officially recognized refugees,¹ still less of recognized refugees who have “become working class”.² These refugees share conditions common to other immigrants, including the loss of class status (both social and professional), and being subject to the sexual division of labour (having employment and status assigned by gender). Moreover, historical circumstances have tended to create a convergence between the refugee, no longer simply defined as a political dissident, and the immigrant worker, [or economic migrant]³ who today can no longer be assumed to be a

¹ The term *recognized refugees* here means those persons having been accorded refugee status in keeping with the Geneva Convention of 28 July, 1951 or covered by what is called a *protection subsidiaire* in France, and *humanitarian protection* in Bulgaria.

² The few investigations concerning refugees who are blue collar workers/laborers conducted in France focus on refugees from South-East Asia between 1970-1980 or on Chilean refugees in France. See Billion 2001, Meslin 2011, Spire 2004. Statistics can be found in the French government’s *Longitudinal Study of the Integration of Foreigners Arriving in France* (ELIPA) studying the progress of integration from their initial arrival in France, those who signed the *Contrat d'accueil et d'intégration* [Reception and Integration Contract, which refugees are asked by the French government to sign, intended to facilitate their integration into French society] among whom are refugees and their families. See Régnaud & Domergue 2011. For a review of the literature, see Tcholakova 2012.

³ See Sayad 1991 and 1999. On the evolution of these categories and migration statistics see Wihtol de Wenden 2010, and on the gendered nature of migration processes and experiences Cossée *et al.* 2012.

single man doing manual work. Finally, the geographical and social roots of refugees constitute an unquestionable source of heterogeneity. At the same time, their experience in exile is marked by specific characteristics. These have to do on the one hand with "paths of suffering"⁴ beginning before their exile, and continuing in exile, in which the relationship to work (sometimes to blue-collar work) has a significant place. On the other hand, they depend on the contrast between these paths of suffering and the promises associated with the status finally obtained. In this article, my objective is to open the way to the study of the gendered dimension of refugees' changes of identity, based on existing literature and on my own research in France and in Bulgaria into refugees' search for employment, understood as a quest not only for work, but also for recognition⁵ and biographical coherence.⁶

The only published research on working-class refugees in France has been focused on refugees from South-East Asia.⁷ It shows that, contrary to pre-conceived notions according to which refugees are economic migrants taking part in "ethnic exchange", most of these refugees are people who have *become* working-class.⁸ It has focused particularly on the ethnically-centered perceptions of Cambodian refugees which explain the persistence of stereotypes of *docility* and *malleability*, of offering no resistance to the demands of bosses, and the depoliticization of the working-class condition. It has also examined prejudices with respect to gender on the part of employers, colleagues, and labor unions. The so-called fragility, docility, attention to detail and depoliticization of the Cambodian refugees are said to contrast with the common associations of "toughness", "strength, and the threatening nature of immigrant workers".⁹ Working-class refugees are here considered as the objects of stereotyping and essentializing classificatory systems that should be deconstructed.

⁴ On the concept of "trajectoire de souffrance" [path of suffering], see Riemann & Schütze 1991.

⁵ Honneth 2000.

⁶ Pollak 2000.

⁷ Billion 2001; Meslin 2011.

⁸ Billion 2001: 41.

⁹ Meslin 2011: 89.

The relationship to work of refugees who have become working-class is also worth examining. That is what we will do here, attempting to show that this relationship is part of a loss of social standing which may at times be strongly gender-specific.

The survey material

My research was conducted between 2004 and 2009 in two sites: Lyon and the surrounding area for France, and Sofia and its inner suburbs for Bulgaria. In these two locations, 143 interviews were carried out. There were 109 biographical interviews with refugees aged between 18 and 65, of whom 53 were in Bulgaria (38 men and 15 women) and 56 in France (36 women and 20 men) plus 34 in-depth interviews with socio-economic agents working either for a private social service or for the state, helping refugees to get work. In addition to these interviews, many observations were made *in situ*. There was occasional use of personal documents; administrative documents were collected and analyzed. Data connected to employment and immigration¹⁰ was also subjected to analysis. The refugees I met in France were originally from Eastern Europe (43), Sub-Saharan Africa (10), the Near and Middle East (2), and North Africa (1). The refugees in Bulgaria were originally from the Near and Middle East (27), both Sub-Saharan and East Africa (23), Eastern Europe (2), and North Africa (1). The over-representation of refugees from Eastern Europe as well as of women and families (in France), and of those from the Near and Middle East and Africa as well as of men (in Bulgaria) can be explained in two ways: on the one hand, as a result of putting together a qualitative sample and the general conditions surrounding the investigation; and on the other, by the migratory tendencies of the refugees, observable in both sites during the period of the study. Since we cannot here undertake an overall analysis of the contexts of immigration and asylum policies and of the labor market, nor of the socio-economic profile of refugees in the two countries (at the end of 2009 there were 196,364 refugees in France and 5,394 in Bulgaria)¹¹, suffice it to say that the long history of receiving refugees in France contrasts with how recently Bulgaria has begun doing

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of these questions, see Tcholakova 2012.

¹¹ UNHCR 2010.

this. Bulgaria is neither a traditional locus for immigration nor a former colonial power. Since the fall of the communist regime, the country has simultaneously been discovering both sides of the migratory process – both emigration and immigration. Overall there is more emigration than immigration. Moreover, Bulgaria, unlike France, continues to be thought of rather as a country of transit for immigrants and refugees than a final destination.

Refugees have varied professional backgrounds and levels of education, but in general, they experience loss of social class more intensely than economic migrants, because of the expectations of social and professional integration they associate with receiving refugee status. They are more likely to find themselves unemployed than other immigrants, and when they do find a job, it rarely meets their expectations and their hopes of retaining a degree of biographical and professional coherence. Women, more than men, not only find themselves unemployed, but when they do work, they are more likely than men to do so under short-term or part-time contracts. These empirical observations are confirmed by research undertaken by the OECD.¹² What are the socio-professional profiles of the refugees I met, and what place in this group is occupied by blue-collar workers? The answer is not simple, and the tables below only partially convey their profiles. This is because the research was not specifically focused on the [gender] problematic treated in this article. In fact, in order to create a statistical profile based on the biographical interviews, multiple work experiences were translated into socio-professional categories based on the most frequent (or important) professional situation. Some refugees were in working-class jobs in their home country. This tended to be the case for those interviewed in Bulgaria, and especially the newly arrived Somalian refugees who had been farm-workers, or the forty-year-old Chechen woman encountered in France who in both Chechnya and France worked in construction. Women refugees, like French, Bulgarian or immigrant women, rarely take manual jobs in their adoptive country, and when they do, it is work categorized as that of “unskilled workers in the small trades sector”.¹³

¹² OECD 2012.

¹³ http://www.insee.fr/fr/methodes/default.asp?page=nomenclatures/pcs2003/n3_68.htm

Table 1: France.

Comparison of Socio-professional Categories (SPC) in the home-country and in the adoptive land of refugees interviewed.

Professions	Farmers	Tradesmen or women, shopkeepers, and business managers	Executives, professions requiring a university education	Intermediate professions	White-collar/office workers	Blue-collar workers	Unemployed, including students and retired people.	Total home-country SPC
Farmers							1	1
Tradesmen or women shopkeepers, and business managers					2		3	5
Executives, professions requiring a university education					5		7	12
Intermediate professions					6		6	12
White-collar/office workers					7	1	10	18
Blue-collar workers						3		3
Unemployed, including students and retired people					1		4	5
Total SPC as refugees	0	0	0	0	21	4	31	56

Note: Of the 18 refugees who had been white-collar/office workers in their home country, seven had similar work in France, one was a manual worker, and 10 were unemployed.

Table 2: Bulgaria.

Comparison of Socio-professional Categories (SPC) in the home-country and in the adoptive land of refugees interviewed.

Professions	Farmers	Tradesmen or women, shopkeepers, and business managers	Executives, professions requiring a university education	Intermediate professions	White-collar/office workers	Blue-collar workers	Unemployed, including students and retired people.	Total home-country SPC
Farmers							1	1
Tradesmen or women, shopkeepers, and business managers		1					4	5
Executives, professions requiring a university education				1	1		2	4
Intermediate professions				1	6		2	9
White-collar/office workers					6		2	8
Blue-collar workers						9	1	10
Unemployed, including students and retired people		1			11	1	4	17
Total SPC as refugees	0	2	0	2	24	10	15	53

Note: Of the 8 refugees who had been white-collar/office workers in their home country, six found similar work in Bulgaria, two were unemployed.

There is a considerable concentration of refugees in a small number of categories: white-collar and blue-collar workers (especially in Bulgaria), and unemployed – whereas they were more broadly spread over the whole range of socio-professional categories in their home countries. For example, of the refugees in France, 12 had been in intermediate professions and 12 in executive posts or the higher intellectual professions in their home country. Today, none of them has remained in those categories: they are now either in white-collar jobs at lower levels or unemployed. The concentration varies however as between the adoptive countries. Refugees in Bulgaria are more likely to be in work: 34 are either in office jobs or manual work, as opposed to 25 in France.

These data fail to take into account however that for most refugees, the experience of exile is accompanied by the experience of blue-collar work. Among those for whom doing such work was neither the most usual or significant situation, whether in their homeland or in their adoptive land, there were many who had had to take manual jobs during their migration, and/or who did so at some point during their career in their adoptive country, either working in industry or in services. These tendencies are more pronounced for men than for women.

One of the specific traits of the refugee experience is loss of social status, the struggle to be recognized, and the reshaping of identity this implies. Nearly six out of ten refugees (64 out of 109) had university degrees. This is more true of those in France than in Bulgaria: (40 of the 56 interviewed in France, that is 8 out of 10), as opposed to a scant half in Bulgaria (24 of 53). In France, men were proportionately a little more likely than women to have university diplomas, while in Bulgaria, the situation was reversed. In many cases, among the refugees in our sample with university degrees, the experience of doing manual labor was presented as one of the most life-changing in their downward trajectory, and this was true even when they were no longer doing manual labor at the time of the interview.

Blue-collar work and gendered loss of status

For most of these refugees, blue-collar work represents a loss of status which contrasts with their expectations of work-related recognition, which were encouraged by obtaining formal refugee status. Refugees of both sexes, in France as well as in Bulgaria, wanted recognition of their qualifications and of the skills acquired in their pre-exile professional experience, and once again to be able to have access to work which reflected these. But their access to employment turned out to be difficult, and their opportunities were often limited to sectors of the labor market that were well below their expectations, and furthermore, strongly marked by notions of ethnicity and gender. Ethnic and gender stereotypes are at the heart of the experience of loss of status. Most of the people, both men and women, whom I met in France and in Bulgaria were working, or had worked, in strongly gender-marked jobs, and had been urged to do so as a result of the advice and training offered by agents of both state and private social services. Men found themselves on construction sites, in warehousing, automobile repair, meat-packing factories. Many female refugees had worked or were working in the "care" sector: with children, as care-workers for the disabled or elderly, as domestic help, and some had entered the service sector as contract cleaners. Echoing the paths of suffering during exile, this experience of loss of status is a specific source of suffering for refugees: it means a change in their perceived identity which also has an impact on their sense of masculinity or femininity.

Masculine silence, solitude, competition, and return to the body

In our interviews with male refugees, the "shame associated with having become a manual worker", and performing a difficult job seen as "bad for your health", was expressed not by describing the tasks required by the job, but by *silently suppressing* difficult working conditions experienced as a humiliation or disregard for social rank. The refusal to accept the condition of a worker was equally expressed in the interviews when male refugees cried, or when they laughed nervously, turning their eyes away, or when they showed the scars of a work-related accident that had taken place on a building site where they worked to "provide for their basic needs",

to “survive”, whereas they defined themselves, for example, as musicians. This was notably the case of Serge, a thirty-six year old refugee from Cameroon, living in Bulgaria since 2003, who had trained as an electrician. This refusal to accept their new status is also expressed in striking stories of betrayal, of never being offered jobs that matched their expectations. We also observed that some refugees tried to hide the nature of their work from those whom they had known in their “former life”.

Women did not seem to have the same difficulty openly expressing the suffering associated with their new condition. Theoretical approaches to the psychodynamics of work and its connection to the sociology of work, which stress the importance of gender relations,¹⁴ cast light on these differences in the way of experiencing and expressing suffering. Using the example of nurses and nurses’ aides, Pascale Molinier argues that there is a gendered distinction in defense mechanisms. The dimension of self-mockery “with respect to one’s own vulnerability is the essential component of ‘feminine’ defense mechanisms”.¹⁵ The counterpart of the men’s denial of suffering is the female tendency to exchange within the workplace not only their reactions to work, but also emotions, feelings, doubts. This is a difference with respect to suffering that also shows up outside the workplace, even during the interviews in our survey. Women’s “feminine” expressions of vulnerability contrast with the men’s “macho” perspective, the latter being marked by men’s learning to suppress emotions from their earliest socialization¹⁶ making it impossible to cast a glance of self-mockery on one’s failures or weaknesses, and more generally, to talk about them.

The lack of acceptance of working-class status is also expressed in a double problematic of solitude: solitude with respect to colleagues, emotional solitude. The experience of a loss of status can in fact create a second difficulty in integration into a work-collective: the desire to show that one is better than other people, and trouble identifying with others. Andreï is an example of this, a forty-year old Moldovian

¹⁴ Dejours 1998 and 2010; Molinier 2004; Hirata and Kergoat 1988.

¹⁵ Molinier 2004: 84, and 2012.

¹⁶ Guionnet 2012.

refugee, trained as an engineer. In France, he worked for a month in a factory producing pneumatic tubes, but he was not kept on as a permanent employee, because his colleagues felt that he worked "too fast". In his account, he described his exacting relationship to his work, repeating several times, "I know how to do everything", "I'm a good worker", "I don't know how to work slowly", placing himself as superior and in competition with his colleagues when he affirmed "I can do two people's work". The experience of loss of status here was accompanied by a "macho" defense against suffering, which valorized his capacity to bear such suffering¹⁷: the defense of a man who "had always worked", who, before his exile, was able to supply the needs of his wife and children, and who intends to continue doing so, whatever the conditions he is faced with.

Another form of solitude is connected to what [male] refugees describe as an inability, out of shame for what they have become, to create durable emotional relationships with women. The gendered dimension of the problems associated with loss of status is then expressed in the feeling of shame in the face of financial dependence on their partners. Whether they work without being able to supply all the family's needs, or are forced to give up manual labor because their bodies are physically exhausted, the fact of being "dependent" on their partner was experienced as negative by the male refugees we met. The image of head of household or of male breadwinner was turned upside down. In this case, the reworking of identity linked to the experience of loss of status affects the gendered part of their identity.

The accounts of refugees from Africa whom we met in Bulgaria, whether they were "former students" become refugees, or newly arrived refugees, lead us to insist on the physical dimension of the reworking of identity. Refugees who were doctors, engineers, electricians, or police officers in their home country or by training, but in Bulgaria were working on construction sites or in warehousing, long-term or just for the moment, see part of their problem as being reduced to their bodies in two ways: they have become a "worker's body", a mere source of physical strength, but also a body "of color", a racialized body. These two reductions seem

¹⁷ Dejours 1998, 2000 and 2010.

especially painful when they invoke sexual stereotypes. So, for example, [male] African refugees in Bulgaria are “invited” to take walk-on roles in movie productions and musical videos filmed in Sofia, not because they are actors but because they are “black” and “commercially” valuable in a country where blacks are rare. They speak with shame of their participation in videos alongside women portrayed as sex-objects. Some accept a role in these videos because they are better paid than a day's work on a building site or a stall at the wholesale market in Sofia. Their relation to manual labor is colored by their shame at being reduced as a consequence of their low earning-power to sex-objects, at the same time that their bodies are involved in a complex network of domination and reification. To the experience of domination at work (the sense of being constantly exploited), to the experience of racism (which they encounter daily in Bulgaria, and which can go so far as to leave physical marks on their bodies as a result of attacks by skinheads), we can add the experience of suffering connected to a kind of eroticization undergone as a function of their ethnic origin, something that should be taken into consideration in order to understand their relation to manual work.

Distaste for being a “care-giver”

Women's connection to suffering as a result of loss of status seems to have a gendered dimension, associated in two ways, and paradoxically, to the problematic of “care”.

One might consider that being assigned tasks and roles associated with care-giving faces women with the need to accept their own suffering and that of others, and to promote a certain kind of relationship to oneself and to the world, which constitutes an element of the gendered part of their identity. But if the work of care-giving is associated with loss of status, this relationship to oneself and to the world may become problematic. Women, as we have said, seem to find it easier than men to speak of the suffering connected to their new situation, and we met women who expressed distaste for being allocated to the “care” sector [which might mean working as a cleaner]. Refugee women working as industrial cleaners

suffered by being reduced to cleaning up other people's filth, to being badly paid, to working outside of normal hours, to spending a lot of time on public transport, all with little recognition. That was the case of Shereen, an Iranian woman aged 45, married and the mother of four children, who had been living in Bulgaria for the past ten years; in Iran she had been a high-school teacher of Persian language and literature. The example of Zeina, an Iraqi woman of Shereen's age whom we met in France, also fits this pattern. She had fourteen years of experience as a physics teacher in Iraq. For her, the job cleaning offices offered her by the central employment agency, *Pôle emploi*, seemed a "social death".¹⁸ Nevertheless, that is what she did for several years, before opening a small business with her husband in 2012. For these women, working as cleaners, or finding that they were only offered work they considered degrading, was experienced as proof of a refusal to recognize their qualifications and competencies, and as a reduction of their social existence to a female stereotype. Here again, the change of identity resulting in the experience of loss of status was effected by means of gendered stereotypes, and affected the gendered part of the women's identity.

Living with working-class status

Refugees who found they had become working-class did not simply suffer this situation, they reacted to it in varied ways, and here too gender matters.

The discourse of courage and engagement in "masculine" activities

The discourse of courage is one example. Men's accounts sometimes recognized the work of a manual laborer as being admittedly difficult and putting a strain on their bodies, but it remained work of which they "had no fear". There is nothing original about these accounts, but we might reflect that those refugees who had already lived through life-threatening events and done difficult work in their home countries or on the road, could in exile, more readily than other refugees, use their past courage to

¹⁸ Goffman 1989.

valorize their present situation. We might wonder whether the *discourse of rejection* towards those without work and who were hiding behind the difficulties of finding work, especially in France, does not function on analogous principles. To show or express courage, strength, even insubordination, not to complain, not to show concern for one's physical health, to dismiss all those who refuse to accept the same (difficult) working conditions – all this is part of being a real man. These two types of discourse are “manly defense strategies” directed against suffering, echoing the clinical findings of Christophe Dejours.¹⁹ The discourse of courage and the language of “manly” rejection both come from an attempt to “live with” the situation of being working-class, all the while denying the difficulties this new situation brings with it. Inversely, the fact that the female refugees we met did not resort to this kind of discourse does not mean that they were not courageous. If the discourse of virtue is gendered, that does not mean that the virtues themselves are.

For men, participation in sports, in music, and in religious observance constitutes another form of adaptation to their new working-class situation. They seek other sources of satisfaction and recognition, to make up for what they have lost. Among the women we met, this takes other forms.

“Care for loved ones” and the language of autonomy

In fact, among female refugees who have become working-class, compensatory recognition takes place inside the family circle, in both France and in Bulgaria. Paradoxically, while being a paid “care-giver” for outsiders, a mark of working-class status, can be a source of shame, “caring for loved ones” becomes a vector of valorization and biographical continuity. Being involved in their children's success at school is another resource which compensates for the difficulties such women experience in work situations which they associate with a refusal to recognize their pre-exile professional competencies. The family then is no longer merely a vector of compensatory recognition, but also of biographical continuity.

¹⁹ Dejours 1998 and 2010 (especially chap. 1).

Another example of a gendered compensatory strategy concerns participation in community organizations helping the poor (especially in Bulgaria), helping other immigrants, helping people in distress. Such "volunteer care" efforts then become a way to repair injured self-esteem. By means of these two examples, we might posit the hypothesis that the reworking of the identity of female refugees-turned-working-class strengthens rather than weakening or destabilizing gendered social relationships.

However, in the discourse of some women, manual work remains associated with expectations of emancipation. That is the case for female refugees who did work of this kind during their journey into exile but who today, once they have arrived, are forbidden by their husbands to take a job. For these women without remunerated work outside the home, *any* job, including manual labour, is a *source of autonomy* and independence. In these cases, a minority in our study, their new situation is not associated with a loss of status.

This article set out to open up a field of research concerning the gendered nature of blue-collar or low-paid service work among men and women who were recognized refugees. These people generally perceive such work as a loss of social and professional status, putting their identity in question in a way that amplifies the experience of exile, making it a dramatic "break with the world to which they had been accustomed".²⁰ This break can be accompanied by various kinds of changes in gendered identification (destabilizing or reinforcing masculine or feminine stereotypes), and gendered norms offer different resources and make possible different strategies for coming to terms with a new situation generally considered unenviable.

While for the majority of refugees we met who had become working-class, their new situation was a source of loss of status and of shame, this was not the case for all refugees. The nature of their biographies and professional histories was the determining factor. Some refugees, such as men originally from Bosnia or Kosovo now living in France, or Somalian refugees living in Bulgaria, generally with little education, young, and unattached, said that they "knew

²⁰ Pollak 2000.

how to” “wanted to” and “could” do everything. Being hired as a manual laborer for them meant that becoming a worker; and being able to work raises self-esteem and allows refugees to find in their work a basis for dealing with the reworking of identity provoked by exile, a situation in which the break with the past and everything they were used to is, at least to some extent, irreversible.

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