Workplace universalism – the function of German industrial relations for the integration of migrant workers and refugees

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"The language is difficult, but work is easy."
(Refugee in vocational preparation)

1. Introduction

Migrant workers or refugees coming to Germany are not a new phenomenon. In fact, Germany can look back on a history of immigration. The subsequent integration processes were subject to intense public and political debates and challenging for all concerned. Again, when a huge number of asylum seekers entered the European Union in 2015 and 2016, 1.1 million of whom arrived in Germany, it caused unease and still is a divisive issue of societal discourse (Laubenthal 2019): on the one hand, refugees were supported by a significant proportion of the public and a variety of measures to promote their integration were launched (“welcome culture”); on the other hand, right-wing populism has grown.

The influx and the integration of refugees in the past five years as well as the political tensions regarding forced migration have posed a major challenge for German society. However, cultural differences do not seem to be the main problem here, but rather a lack of acceptance by parts of German society. A major field of societal integration where acceptance can be fostered – for refugees, other migrants or natives, that is, “established individuals” (Jiménez 2017: xiii) – is the labour market and the workplace. Even if there is no guarantee that successful labour market integration will result in societal integration, being employed usually represents an important step towards becoming an accepted and established member of society.

However, although acceptance is an important key to integration, we think that when it comes to the integration of refugees into today’s labour market, they are in a different situation compared to the migrants who came to Germany in the past. We assume that there are three important differences: first, depending on whether the context is labour migration or forced migration, there can be differences in the qualifications and orientations of the migrants; second, today’s labour demand; and third, compared to the past, the conditions for integration in society and at the workplace have changed.

According to research on workplace integration of migrant workers, industrial relations play an important role in workplace integration (Birsl et al. 2003; French et al. 2003; Hinken 2001, 2018; Schmidt/Müller 2013; Schmidt 2006). Whether or not
migrant workers are employed, social integration is a necessity at the workplace. However, despite studies showing the positive impact of institutionalized industrial relations, e.g. collective agreements or works councils (Kotthoff 2009), on workplace integration and, in consequence, on societal integration, the integrating function of industrial relations has not been sufficiently acknowledged in public discourses about the integration of refugees or in discussions about the future and the necessity of institutionalized industrial relations.

2. Research questions and empirical basis

In Germany, research has rather neglected the issue of integration of people of different origin at the workplace (Adler/Fichter 2014; Tapia/Holgate 2018). Apart from a few relevant studies, it is fair to say that for years, migration research has paid as little attention to the world of work, as sociology of work, industrial sociology and interdisciplinary research on industrial relations have to questions of migration and integration.

Some older studies on the integration of migrant workers showed that the question of a worker’s national or ethnic origin is, indeed, relevant. It is undisputed that applicants for apprenticeships with German names were preferred over those with foreign sounding names (among others Granato 2013; Scherr 2015), posted workers often have to work under extraordinarily bad conditions (Wagner 2014; Wagner/Lillie 2014), and some studies even predicted an increase of ethnic conflicts at the workplace. Even if there were no problems with integration at the workplace, it should be in our interest to determine the factors and mechanisms of successful integration.

Several research projects have started to explore the labour market integration of refugees. Parts of this recent research, however, seem to have performed a tacit regression towards a concept of integration which resembles the outdated idea of one-sided assimilation (Alba/Nee 1997; Jiménez 2017). This may be because in the beginning, quite a few researchers chose a rather pragmatic approach by focussing on obstacles to the integration of refugees into the labour market, such as deficiencies in language and professional skills. Without questioning the necessity to find out such factors that hinder labour market integration, this approach reaches its limits when it comes to understanding how and whether social integration – which empirically, and
definitely not just normatively, is always a mutual process between immigrating and established individuals respectively societal institutions – will be successful.

With reference to Lockwood’s (1964) distinction between system integration and social integration, we will look into two dimensions of workplace integration. The first dimension is structural incorporation, that is, we examine the matching of person and job. The second dimension is the social relations among members of an organization. Workplace social integration is always necessary, whether refugees or migrants are involved or not. The advantage of the concept of mutual integration is that it is not premised on an already integrated group or society into which the newcomers have to assimilate or integrate. Irrespective of all normative questions it thus lends itself to the examination of actual societal integration processes and the difficulties involved, which could not be understood with a concept of one-sided integration.

We will discuss these concepts of integration, compare earlier labour migration with recent forced migration, look into the differences and similarities of former labour migrants’ and today’s refugees’ workplace integration, and ask what role German industrial relations plays in these integration processes.

We assume that we will find a number of differences. First, refugees’ motivation to migrate as well as their migration trajectories differ from labour migrants’ and have an impact on their chances to find work. Second, unlike the heydays of Fordist-Taylorist mass production, the demand for unskilled labour has decreased, which again makes it more difficult for recent refugees to find a job than it was when the so-called “guest workers” came to Germany. Third, however, refugees today have better conditions in terms of learning the German language and support for vocational training. Fourth, the societal situation has changed. Compared to former labour migration, today’s society can look back on many years of experience with migration, which can be considered an advantage for integration processes but, on the other hand, anti-immigration sentiments are growing.

Therefore, our assumption is that the previous modus vivendi of workplace social integration will be destabilized and disputes about a new form of social integration may arise. Shifts in sector- and company-specific requirements may affect companies’ readiness to employ refugees and we expect to find varying constellations of integration, depending on the character of the respective institutional field.
We draw on the findings of three research projects conducted at the Research Institute for Work, Technology and Culture (F.A.T.K.) at the University of Tübingen. The projects were funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation (HBS).

In order to have a standard of comparison we refer to our research project “Employees’ origin and industrial relations at the workplace level” (2003–2005) (Schmidt 2006; Schmidt/Müller 2013). The empirical basis of this study consists of three intensive case studies in German manufacturing companies with 500, 700 and 1700 employees respectively. Company statistics were analysed, and interviews, group discussions and employee attitude surveys conducted.

In the second project “Company measures for integrating refugees” (2016), integration measures and support programmes were examined (Müller/Schmidt 2016). In 12 large companies, we conducted expert interviews with managers, training instructors and works councillors, focussing on the issue of refugee integration.

In the recently completed project “Co-determination and workplace social integration of refugees” (2016–2019), we investigated the social integration of employees of different origin in 15 companies in different industries (Schmidt 2019). Besides some expert interviews with representatives of the management, works councils and trade unions, this project focussed on interviews and group discussions with refugees and “established employees”, some with and some without a migration background. In this project 94 interviews were led with 155 persons.

Altogether the three projects provide an empirical basis of more than 150 interviews or group discussions, analyses of different company-related documents and statistics, as well as three employee attitude surveys.

3. Labour migration and forced migration

For former “guest workers”, it usually was quite easy to find a job because their recruitment was supported or even organized by the state and industry. In 1955, Germany and Italy signed the first recruitment agreement, to be followed by agreements with Spain, Turkey, Yugoslavia and other countries. This period of recruiting workers from abroad officially ended in 1973. Other migrant workers who did not have the opportunity to participate in recruitment programmes were helped
with their job search by relatives or other compatriots. In principle, labour migration is not only voluntary, but usually also planned: it is a deliberate labour market calculation and decision, even if not always based on sufficient information. In this context, the matching of worker and job is often a minor problem.

However, the early “guest workers” and subsequently arriving migrant workers were usually integrated into the segment of low-skilled labour, for instance, at the assembly lines of the automotive industry. Under the assumption that they would stay temporarily and leave Germany after a few years, neither German society nor the migrants themselves regarded this “underclass” integration as an issue of pressing concern. However, many of these workers stayed for good (Oltmer 2017) and became “locked-in” in the segment of low-skilled work – a position often reproduced in subsequent generations (e.g. Scherr 2015).

Today’s refugees face a different situation. Besides stresses and strains related to forced migration, insecurity and mass accommodation, refugees have to meet the requirements of a labour market demanding a certain level of language and occupational skills. First, compared to labour migrants, gaining access to a foreign country’s labour market is not usually the refugees’ predominant motif for migration. Of course, in labour migration as well as flight migration, pull as well as push factors play a role, and also refugees strive to improve their living conditions. However, their decision to leave their home countries is based on their wish to escape violence and unbearable circumstances. Force – persecution, war, civil war and natural catastrophes – is the primary reason of flight migration. Second, the demand for unskilled labour in manufacturing has declined and even low-skilled jobs in manufacturing and services require German language skills. Third, the legal status itself shapes differing “integration trajectories” (Söhn 2019), for example, employers are sometimes reluctant to employ refugees without a secure status in terms of a residence and unlimited work permit.

However, refugees also have advantages compared to former labour migrants. Although it is difficult to find employment, some refugees can get incorporated in segments other than low-skilled labour for two reasons. First, a significant proportion of refugees are better educated than many labour migrants who came to Germany in the past. Second, refugees, at least those who have prospects of long-term or permanent residence, have the advantage of receiving more support from the state,
volunteers and employment agencies as well as from companies offering internships, preparatory measures for vocational training and apprenticeships.

Whereas ideal-typical labour migration mostly results in incorporation in the segment of low-skilled labour, refugees will be integrated into different labour market segments, depending on the qualifications they acquired in their home countries as well as in Germany. However, at this point, it is still not clear how long the workplace incorporation of refugees will take. Due to a lack of language skills or legal questions regarding permission to stay and to work, currently, large numbers of refugees are still without work.

4. Refugees as apprentices

Our interviews showed that it is not easy for refugees to fulfil language requirements and to acquire the necessary vocational skills. All the refugees we talked to who were doing an apprenticeship agreed that of the two parts of the German “dual training system” – consisting of practical learning in a company and attending a vocational school – studying at vocational school posed a greater problem to them than work itself, but nearly all of them emphasized that they strive to do their job well and to meet the requirements.

Refugees in preparatory measures often receive intensive support from their instructors (Ausbildungsmeister) or other employees acting as mentors. However, because some of the refugees were already older than most apprentices normally are in Germany, they often experienced reconciling their apprenticeship with everyday family life as a considerable challenge, especially if they were in the role of the breadwinner. Here, an important source of motivation is that vocational training fuels the hope for a permanent stay and improved living conditions.

Language learning plays a crucial role in refugees’ integration processes. Differing learning success seems to be less a consequence of willingness and effort but of previous education, knowledge and learning receptivity. Some refugees learn in order to avoid deportation. This (negative) incentive, however, works only as long as there actually still is a chance to stay. The “three-plus-two rule”, as laid down in the German Residence Act, is a chance to stay for those whose asylum application was rejected. If certain requirements are met, such as a language level of at least B1/B2 (A2 is exceptional for special training programmes in understaffed professions like
elderly care), proof of identity and having no criminal record, then under this scheme a residence permit for the length of a three-year apprenticeship plus two years to collect work experience can be granted. Thus, it is a significant incentive for vocational training.

However, for refugees, not only does the chance to extend their stay and the hope for permanent residence have a positive impact, but also the belief that they can achieve their goals if they are hard-working. Most of the interviewed young refugees in preparatory measures or apprenticeships believe in the principle of merit, which they think is by and large (or completely) intact in Germany.

Yes, if one can work, you can achieve whatever you want. I can become a laboratory assistant for varnish, if I achieve it. Then I did it. (Refugee in preparatory measures; translated from German)

From the perspective of many refugees, the willingness to acquire skills seems to be the crucial part of integration. However, even being employed as a formally unskilled worker can be a source of happiness, especially when their own biography is not characterized by much education.

Yes. The work, I like it so much. Because what I learn here is very interesting. Because in The Gambia I worked through [physical] power. But here I work through the machine. I understand many machines now. You know, my occupation is important to me. It’s my occupation. (Refugee, construction worker; interview was conducted in English)

In some cases, however, there are also demotivating factors. Besides the politically and legally induced uncertainty, which seems to be the biggest problem, a few interviewees reported discrimination, mostly outside the workplace.

Moreover, companies may cause disappointment because they often pick already well-educated refugees for vocational training – sometimes even if deviating from a company’s normal apprentice recruitment policy – because of their accomplishments in language learning and their better prospects of being successful in vocational school. At first glance, this seems to be a good solution for both sides, but sometimes refugees fear that working as “blue collar workers” will devalue their previous education and class status as academics. It therefore can be assumed that many of them sooner or later will try to get other work or continue training to further expand their
qualifications. Companies should be prepared to offer internal career opportunities and training programmes.

Finally, because of much ado about “culture” in public discussions, it seems worth mentioning that, at least at the workplace, “cultural problems” such as punctuality or the acceptance of female colleagues or supervisors are not among the crucial problems. Even praying at the workplace seems to not be much of an issue.

Occasionally it was mentioned that refugees, but also other migrant workers and male colleagues with a German background, were having some problems with female supervisors, but this was mostly hearsay. An apprentice from Syria told us:

Some instructors were surprised at the girls learning, wondering why they learn industrial mechanics (…) I think this is quite normal here in Europe. (…) I was surprised, because we are in Europe (…), but I have noticed that some of the instructors are against it or just don’t really agree with it. (Refugee in apprenticeship; translated from German)

Some, often young refugees, have problems with punctuality, however, this is not a problem of “deep culture” (Shaules 2007), which often is connected with religion and cannot be altered without a change of personal identity, but is accessible through explanation and relearning. In any case, we found no identity-related defence of tardiness; however, what is a matter of cultural identity can be spatiotemporally changed (Barth 1969). Even if one regards punctuality as a feature of German identity (we are not so sure about this), this does not mean that, vice versa, tardiness, even if widespread, is identity-relevant for other cultures, because independent of culture there are rational reasons for punctuality in cases of coordinated work. Or, as a young refugee put it:

In all countries one has to be punctual at work. And if you work together with other people, you have to be a team player, that’s natural. (Refugee in preparatory measures; translated from German)

This does not mean that cultural differences are not important. Indeed, many refugees struggle with the strains and stresses of acculturation. One of them stated that it is impossible to change yourself quickly and completely – even if he admits to be thinking “almost like a German” already.
You do not know where you belong, that is, you no longer know: Am I there or here? That is, which [culture] I want to retain. Then, you do not know it anymore. This is a bit difficult (...) (Refugee, translated from German)

Actually, what he described seems to be an issue of deep culture, because obviously he is going through a kind of personal crisis and is afraid of losing himself. However, despite his inner conflict he does not refuse to change.

5. Workforce universalism

Companies, as several interview partners pointed out, are “no islands”, and cultural and political differences within society are also reflected at the workplace. This applies only as far as we refer to the fact that persons of every cultural background and of all political convictions participate in the world of work. However, comparing not only persons and their opinions but also their behaviour, we can detect pronounced differences between the world outside and inside the sphere of work.

In modern capitalist societies, the sphere of gainful work (i.e. companies and workplaces) is a social space with its own objectives and rules. The purpose is, on the one hand, the production of goods or the provision of services, and, on the other hand, making profits.

If persons want to be employed, they have to behave in a way that does not counteract these purposes. This is not only because cooperation is a requirement, but also because not only employers but also employees are usually interested in effective operating procedures (Kratzer et al. 2015). In order to fulfil their tasks, employees have to cooperate, day after day, even with persons with whom they would normally avoid contact. We have called this phenomenon “pragmatic cooperation” (Schmidt 2006; Schmidt/Müller 2013).

In order to prevent unproductive conflicts, it is necessary to treat co-workers at least occasionally with a minimum of friendliness and respect, even if they are otherwise disliked. This everyday experience does not remain without effect. Although cooperation starts as an extrinsic requirement and friendliness is at first more pretended than real, such encounters, especially when connected with facial expressions like smiling or other body language signalling friendliness, nevertheless evoke emotions. Cooperation fosters collegiality.
Hochschild (1983) called this mechanism of externally caused behaviour and its impacts on emotions “deep acting”. However, when prejudices, resentments and rejections continue to persist in other societal spheres or discourses, they do not simply disappear in the sphere of work. Instead, there is a cognitive dissonance between practised collegiality at work and discourse-based negative attitudes elsewhere (Schmidt 2006). A long continuance of cooperation may override a hostile attitude; however, as long as cultural and political differences are not discussed and changed deliberately, collegiality can collapse under the pressure of internal competition, as well as societal conflicts and negative discourses intruding from the outside.

In order to minimize potential issues of conflict and recurrent collapses, it seems useful to keep cultural and political differences outside the workplace. Conversely, collegiality among employees is often limited to the workplace, and we can conclude that there is a work-inherent tendency for collegiality. Collegiality can result in solidarity and friendship over time, but a breakdown of cooperation and forms of ethnic subordination are also possible.

“Pragmatic cooperation” thus is limited to the socio-spatial boundaries of the workplace while cultural and political differences get externalized. “Externalization of difference” is not only a result of “pragmatic cooperation”, but it also follows a general rule supported by both management and works councils. Externalization helps companies to avoid challenges and problems of diversity and relieves employees from the pressure to legitimize distinct cultural backgrounds and deviating political opinions.

In most companies investigated, we found that “pragmatic cooperation” actually works. Sometimes there were quite positive relations between employees of different origin. After a story about a prejudice-caused misunderstanding in the past, one of the migrants put it this way:

Actually, all of my colleagues are my friends, my former workmates, too.

(Migrant worker; translated from German)

Most refugees talked about good relationships at work. Although some reported very critically about state administration, police control and, sometimes, prejudices in society, most of them seemed to be happy with their workplace, supervisors and most of their colleagues. Internal discrimination and victimization seemed to be a rare exception.
Since refugees are in a vulnerable position, they are usually not interested in emphasizing their cultural distinctiveness – even praying seemed to be a rare exception at the workplace. One of the refugees explained that everybody has his “own habit”, but

at the workplace there is not any habit there. We have to work. We have to work. This is the normality. Your habit? You have to leave it at your home. When you come to work, leave your habit at home. Then, when we are together, there are no differences. (Refugee, construction worker; interview was conducted English)

Externalization offers refugees and other migrants the chance of being defined primarily in terms of performance and not of culture. Nevertheless, the willingness of refugees to externalize difference and to comply with “pragmatic cooperation” also depends on the behaviour of established employees and management.

Cooperation matters but so do the conditions of encounter. Research on prejudices found that encounters at equal status, the pursuit of common goals and institutional support (e.g. by law) foster common interests and mutual recognition. Frequent and lasting contacts entail particular positive effects (Allport 1979; Hewstone/Brown 1986; Pettigrew 1998).

These preconditions are fulfilled in many German workplaces because of the institutional framing and due to the fact that employees of different origin often have been working together for years. Although citizenship and status, in the case of refugees their status according to their asylum procedure, is of importance concerning a work permit, it is of limited relevance for the sphere of work. Migrants can join trade unions, have the right to strike, can elect works councils and be elected as works councillors themselves. Hence, in contrast to society and the political sphere, where citizenship determines legal rights in an unequal way, employees have the same rights at the workplace. We therefore speak of “workplace universalism”. However, this is equality of rules, not of substance. Because migrant workers often entered the segment of low-skilled work, they mostly still earn less than longer established employees.

Collective agreements and co-determination support universal rules and offer an institutionalized channel of common interest representation for all employees. "Pragmatic cooperation” and “workplace universalism” reinforce each other, and foster a
kind of “employees’ identity” based on the social situation, not on ethnic or professional identities. Under these conditions, employees normally articulate their interest as employees and not as representatives of a particular ethnic group.

This institutional frame for the articulation of interests generates a practical understanding of common interests and a self-concept of being an employee, hence, group identity based on interest. This is distinct from cases where a prior identity, based on origin or ethnicity, is the ground for articulating interests. Because the employees’ form of identity is based on similar social interests, it can be termed as “interest-based identity articulation” or “interest-based identity constitution”, whereas interest articulation based on a belief in common origin or ethnicity can be called “identity-based interest articulation” (Schmidt 2019). Without the institutional support of employees’ interest representation, it is likely that “identity-based interest articulation” would gain importance.

In sum, six preconditions need to be fulfilled in order to achieve workplace universalism: (1) application of the same legal rules to all employees; (2) working conditions which are determined by rules, that is, through collective agreements; (3) representative collective actors, usually trade unions; (4) externalization of difference; (5) pragmatic cooperation; and (6) an institutionalized channel of interest representation for all employees (Schmidt 2019). Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of workplace universalism as one mode of workplace social integration.

Now the question is whether “workplace universalism” also works when it involves the workplace integration of today’s refugees. Because it is an ongoing process, a definite answer is not yet possible; however, it is obvious that the constellation differs from that outlined so far.

Over decades, German trade unions lost members and the coverage rate of collective agreements declined. Although discrimination is prohibited at the workplace, the more effective rules of collective agreements (e.g. systematic grading structures) as well as trade unions or works councils are missing in many companies (Adler/Fichter 2014; Ellguth/Kohaut 2019).
In large parts of private services and smaller companies, several of the mentioned preconditions of workplace universalism are non-existent. Works councils hardly exist and trade unions are often too weak to enforce collective agreements, even in manufacturing where temporary work and subcontracting undermine workplace universalism. Although workplace universalism is still a relevant mode of social integration, refugees often work in sectors where incorporation takes place without fully developed universal rules and social integration is more difficult.

Many refugees work for temporary employment agencies; this means that they do not have the same status as a company’s permanent employees, which again makes it difficult to establish stable cooperation. Many refugees work in hotels and restaurants, or in logistics (BA 2019), that is, in industries where institutionalized industrial relations and co-determination are rare exceptions. About 35% of migrants from non-EU countries and 19% of German citizens work in atypical employment (Seils/Baumann 2019).
In a public transport company in Eastern Germany, the chief executive officer (CEO) not only approves the employment of refugees but also uses it as an opportunity to confront established employees with migrants. One could call his strategy a deliberate evocation of “pragmatic cooperation”.

Life is simply a school. (…) It is indispensable that they work together. (…) From today’s perspective I would say, it won’t work otherwise. (…) They have to get to know each other. (CEO, public transport; translated from German)

Local public transport also entails encounters between passengers and migrant employees. Therefore, the CEO’s strategy is both an attempt to catch up with Western workplace universalism as well as a step to extend it. While he is optimistic that his strategy will prove to be successful in the course of time, in the short term he worries about encounters outside the workplace.

I also have other things in mind. If I (…) employ people as drivers who obviously have a foreign background. We drive (…) around the clock, at first, they drive only during daytime. Because I wouldn’t have a good feeling at all if I knew they are standing at night somewhere (…) at the final stop alone. (…) that nothing happens and that first of all the [urban] population can get accustomed to it [foreigners]. They also don't know this. (CEO, public transport; translated from German)

This extension may be risky as the encounters with the passengers are much shorter and not on a regular basis. However, in this company, extending encounters beyond the internal social space is a necessary side effect of employing a diverse workforce. Furthermore, the social space of the workplace itself is also more open than in a traditional manufacturing setting. Even bus and tram drivers meet each other infrequently. Apart from technical workshops and administration, the boundary between the social space of the workplace and wider society is in the case of public transport not as clear-cut as we had taken for granted.

6. “Welcome culture” versus right-wing populism: a crisis of externalization

Besides the erosion of its preconditions, the concept of “workplace universalism” is under pressure due to two other developments. On the one hand, “welcome culture”,


in terms of special support for refugees, is not covered by the rules of workplace universalism. Help for outsiders needs a wider understanding of universalism, referring also to the world outside work. On the other hand, the influence of right-wing anti-refugee discourses on society has grown, which makes it more difficult to prevent them from affecting the workplace. The externalization of cultural difference is now more or less counteracted by the internalization of populist discourses. Figure 2 depicts the changed circumstances of “workplace universalism”, taking the integration of refugees into account.

**Figure 2: Workplace universalism under pressure**

Source: Based on Schmidt (2019)

Sauer et al. (2018) argued that cooperation is threatened not only by intruding right-wing populism and extremism, but also that the workplace is a source of populism of its own. Recurring processes of reorganization and pressure to perform can cause anxiety about social decline and the future in general. The biggest fear seems to
come from the risk of unemployment, exclusion and social descent. Furthermore, the financial and economic crisis, and predictions about job losses as a consequence of digitalization and electric mobility have fuelled feelings of uncertainty. Changes in gender relations also seem to play a role here. Growing uncertainty, stress and inequality might be reasons for discontent and, in the absence of popular alternatives by the left, a breeding ground for right-wing populism.

Populism at the workplace seems to be slightly different. The local establishment or the workplace, local management and colleagues with another background are not seen as reasons for a person’s discontent. Our impression is that the formula “good company, bad society” (Dörre et al. 2011) is still an apt expression for this finding. Perhaps some of the refugees interviewed would prefer to speak of “good company, bad state” because they receive support from the company and from civil society, but sometimes they have bad experiences with public administration and the police, and, of course, they are afraid of deportation.

Similarly, unhappy “established employees” seem to think that most colleagues and, often, the local management try to do their best, while globalization, Brussels, foreign headquarters or politics in general are to be blamed for all kinds of problems. Maybe the best formula for many employees, whether they are refugees or established employees, is “good workplace, bad elsewhere”. It seems as if this is not always identity-based interest articulation but a kind of localism or perhaps workplace identity, including sometimes migrant workers and refugees, struggling together against insecurities induced by the markets and a political “establishment” that is considered to be out of touch with the real world.

In an automotive company a right-wing group, not a moderate but an extreme one, was running for the works council elections and obtained about 13%, a similar result to the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) at the parliamentary elections in 2017. An interviewed works councillor assumed that some of the voters regarded the trade union (IG Metall) as a part of the “establishment”. Before the election, the works council faction of IG Metall was criticized because of their close cooperation with the management. Nevertheless, most employees had a different view and voted for IG Metall (about 80%), actually more than in previous elections. However, the danger of right-wing groups for works councils should not be underestimated. Right-wing ideas
and racism are still exceptions at most workplaces, yet it would be hard to find a company that is free of resentments.

Even migrant employees with a usually well-recognized status, like that of an instructor, sometimes reported that they were not fully accepted by German peers.

It’s just weird (...), there are colleagues you really get along with, but if the colleague is saying ‘Balkan’ to you five times a day, instead of [your name], so this makes you feel a bit shitty. Really, I neither call my colleague ‘Spätzle’ [Swabian pasta], or potato, or something. (...) [there is] always a bitter after-taste. (Instructor; translated from German)

A female colleague emphasized that in order to be accepted by colleagues, she always had to work more than others, and, on request, she confirmed:

I think so. I had the feeling, [it is] because of my origin rather than due to the women's issue. (Female migrant; translated from German)

Since discrimination and racism are not permitted in many companies, it is not easy for the external researcher and the affected migrant to assess how significant hidden resentments and prejudices really are. This seems to be one of the reasons why many of them deny all problems, whereas others suspect that behind the surface racism is the normal case.

In summary, it can be stated that despite some right-wing tendencies, at many workplaces “pragmatic cooperation” is more or less working, and where the institutional framework of collective agreements and works councils still exists, workplace universalism is still in place.

At some workplaces, diversity itself is regarded as a shelter against xenophobia and racism. A works councillor, a second-generation migrant, stated:

(...) We are more colourful (...) than many locations around us, and it is clear (...), certainly, not all of us have social democratic or left-wing views, there are certainly also many opinions right of the centre, but I think that because we are so colourful we counteract this well (...), that due to the fact that we are so colourful, I’d say, much is nipped in the bud here. I have four, five nationalities in each group, yes. (...) the group results depend on whether they function well or not. (Works councillor, manufacturing; translated from German)
In companies with a pronounced diverse workforce, “pragmatic cooperation” is both necessary and more stable too. However, the company with the right-wing faction in the works council, which we have already mentioned, also employs many migrants. Remarkably, many of the right-wing candidates and their voters were migrants themselves, mainly from Eastern Europe.

In a society with a history of migration, sometimes, perhaps somewhat prematurely, called a “post-migration society” (Foroutan 2015), former migrants try to defend their acquired claims. This shows that other boundaries of identity are necessary other than just a simple differentiation between Germans and “the others”. The distinction “them-and-us” must be flexible otherwise it would have disappeared long since. Maybe the quoted works councillor was a bit too optimistic, because a highly diverse workforce may counteract only the exclusion of established minorities but does not necessarily prevent newly created minorities such as “refugees” or “refugees with an Islamic or Arabian culture background” from being discriminated against.

Such distinctions need boundaries of identity and of rights to legitimize differences. If the exclusion of all “foreigners” is dysfunctional (particularly if you belong to it) and referring to a specific ethnic identity would be too small a basis, then creating other identities is necessary. For instance, seniority can become a distinction that fits with “workplace-restricted universalism”, but also with pure material interest.

Not only intruding right-wing discourses, but also actually increasing diversity and diversity management counteracts the externalization of cultural difference. In the latter case by encouraging migrants to make their cultural features and thus diversity at work visible. This is positive insofar as the pressure to assimilate decreases, but negative insofar as cultural or ethnic differences can become reified and even construed. Believed ethnic similarities (Weber 1972: 237) can gain importance and continuity by institutional support. This may solve some problems for a short period of time but, in the long run, if the diversity of groups but not individuality is primarily fostered, particularism and culturalism may result.

In the company where the cited works councillor stated that a diverse workforce could serve as an antidote against right-wing tendencies, diversity is supported by a systematic diversity management. An apprentice told us about his experiences:

(...) I am glad that I am here (...) [the company] is simply ‘multikulti’. At the beginning, I felt weird here, to be honest, as Arab among so many Germans. I
had never been among so many, because in the class one is always so divided, many Turks, Arabs (...). But here, at the beginning, you were among Germans a lot, you were thinking, maybe no one wants to talk with you, but afterwards, if one approaches the people, then you realize what kind of people they are. And then one sees, they have a heart for everyone here, and yes, we were also out there in the factory, and there you can see it also, nationality is actually not of interest, there you are one family and you try to make the best of it. If one (person) has problems, the other comes to help. (Apprentice with a migration background; translated from German)

Notably, he has experienced the workplace as multicultural because he also got to know Germans – this is what makes the workplace actually “multikulti” to him.

Some, but not all of the younger employees of different origin, often apprentices, convey the impression that during “pragmatic cooperation” they do not really experience the same as older ones. Unlike older Germans, or some colleagues from Eastern Germany or the first generation of migrant workers, many of the younger employees had already experienced diversity in school and kindergarten, and maybe in a sports club. This does not necessarily translate into an absence of conflict; however, dealing with people of different origin is not new to them.

Stimulated and encouraged by the management, by works councils or by some committed employees, a kind of “internal welcome culture” has developed at some workplaces, without which the risk of failure regarding the societal integration of refugees undoubtedly would have been much higher. Sometimes donations were collected from colleagues; some companies supported local authorities with buildings and helped by offering more or less improvised internships for refugees. Although some of these internships led to a regular job, more systematic vocational preparation took place later, and meanwhile quite a number of mostly younger refugees could start to do regular apprenticeships.

The Federal Employment Agency, welfare organizations and sometimes volunteers helped refugees to get access to companies; at the workplace, refugees often benefited from particular support measures, additional language courses and vocational training. However, what seems self-evident from a societal or humanitarian perspective is not evident from the viewpoint of “workplace-restricted universalism”. Even if the bigger picture shows that the refugees are in fact the underprivileged, the rules of
“workplace universalism” suggest that affirmative action is unequal treatment. Support for refugees, for example special vocational preparation, is considered unfair as long as other employees or their children do not receive the same.

In order to improve acceptance, in several companies where refugees received vocational preparation courses or an apprenticeship, additional places for employees’ children who could not yet get a training position (unversorgte Mitarbeiterkinder) were created. Although it is a useful side effect if help for refugees leads to help for others, the rationale for support for refugees cannot be based on workplace universalism, it needs a wider understanding of universal rule application and rule constitution. As a consequence, workplace universalism is under pressure from three sides: eroding preconditions, intruding right-wing discourses and the humanitarian need for a wider perspective of justice.

7. Conclusions

As we had expected, the matching process of today’s refugees is not as easy as in the case of classical migrant workers, because the structure of labour demand has changed and refugees are less prepared for labour market entry due to their migration motives. However, refugees receive better language and vocational training and have better chances to become skilled employees already in the first generation. Although the rise of right-wing discourses in society is not without influence on the workplace, in most cases it seems that social integration is not fundamentally affected. Political decisions and laws like the Residence Act or Integration Law shape the further process of integration, because they have an impact on employers’ recruitment policies, refugees’ learning motivation, and the character of encounters between refugees and established employees. The zigzagging policy of supporting integration on the one hand and the unsettling effects of constraining the legal rights of refugees and tightening sanctions, deportation attempts and actual deportations on the other hand, seems to be a crucial obstacle to integration.

Difficulties with social integration often result from unequal encounters between refugees and other employees, or, in our terminology, from the weakening of “pragmatic cooperation” which often occurs when co-determination by works councils and collective agreements are absent. Although the minimum wage law (MiLoG) and the general equal treatment law (AGG) reduce the risk that a distinct refugee underclass will
emerge, the risk of discrimination increases without works councils and collectively agreed wages. Whereas nowadays – as anticipated by the “workplace welcome culture” – a wider perspective of solidarity (“solidary universalism”, Schmidt 2015: 278) would be necessary in order to limit societal exclusion and skill shortages, unfortunately, the preconditions of workplace-restricted universalism are widely eroded or were never existent in many companies in the first place, for example in the private service sector (e.g. in hotels, catering, cleaning or logistics) where many refugees are employed.

However, we are optimistic that workplace integration of refugees will succeed in small establishments, in particular in craft companies, where close contacts and companionship may foster collegiality even without institutionalized labour relations. In other companies, in a climate of struggling with fierce competition or being under pressure by shareholders to maximize profits, it seems likely, however, that the vulnerable situation of refugees will occasionally be exploited.

Institutionalized labour relations, including unitary interest representation by trade unions and works councils, reduce the risk of splitting employees according to their origin or ethnicity. Therefore, they fulfil a relevant function for social integration. Statutory support for labour relations, for example by statutory extension of collective agreements or by backing the establishment of works councils, would indirectly help refugees as well as other employees.

Regarding the decrease in trade unions membership and the erosion of collective agreements, a partial withdrawal from anti-racism activities seems understandable, considering the right-wing tendencies among some rank-and-file union members. However, unitary interest articulation, universal rules and anti-racism belong together – you cannot have the one without the others.
References


