Liminality at work in Norwegian hotels

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Abstract

Hotels are spaces of temporary accommodation, but they are also important temporary spaces for an increasingly mobile and segmented workforce with different backgrounds and motives. In this paper we wish to address the temporary and transitional nature of hotel work by employing the term 'liminality'. More specifically, we analyse the hotel as a liminal space for transient workers that view this work as a temporary endeavour. By drawing upon data from a study of hotel workers in Norway, we discuss how the liminality of hotel work may be understood. Here, we turn to an important debate within tourism studies on the blurring relationships between consumer and producer identities in resorts, often referred to in terms such as 'working tourist' or 'migrant tourist-worker' (Bianchi, 2000). For a relatively privileged group of workers, the hotel becomes a space of liminal lifestyle pursuits as well as a space of work. We also contrast this privileged group with a different and less privileged liminal group of 'expatriate workers' (cf. Longva 1997). Bianchi (2000) highlights the potentially problematic effect of transient lifestyles and consumption of recreation, a problematic we wish to develop further by investigating how worker representation and solidarity develops in liminal spaces of work. While strategies of liminality may have a transformative impact on the individual, their aggregate effects might simultaneously alter the way in which hospitality work is negotiated – from the collective to the individual level. As such, hotels as employers of working tourists pose a great challenge to collective representation, and may undermine effective worker action for less privileged groups of workers. The final section of this paper addresses this challenge, asking what bearings the individualism that dominates liminal work spaces has for trade unionism in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Liminality, work, mobile workers, hospitality industry, trade unionism, liminal spaces

Introduction

Hospitality workplaces constitute important spaces of work for mobile workers throughout the world. As such, these workplaces express globalised spaces of social relations, and bring together workers with starkly different motives for seeking this particular kind of work. The combination of structural characteristics of the tourist economy and individual worker strategies create highly dynamic, but also fragmented and unstable, workplaces where worker solidarity can only emerge as a result of well-crafted organisational strategies. Hospitality unionism can be seen as labour's attempt to establish fixity in workplaces characterised by flux. On the surface of it, worker mobility and worker organisation seem to stand in a direct conflict. In fact, each of the forms of mobility highlighted by Zampoukos & Ioannides (2014) in their depiction of hotel work seems to challenge a tenet of traditional trade unionism: Part-time workers' movement between multiple employers within the same sector challenges the principle of workplace organisation, seasonal movement in and out of the hospitality sector undermines the sectoral basis of hotel unionism and, finally, the migration in and out of tourist resorts and metropolitan labour markets rocks the geographical foundation of trade unions. In a sector where students, tourists and short-term migrants are highly represented in the workforce, all these forms of mobility interact with another movement – that of every worker's life-cycle – in particular ways. For organised labour, this fluidity threatens the trade union organisations' rationale as a site for skills- and career development, and erodes support for long-term organisational strategies.

As mobile labour enables employers to pursue flexible employment strategies, the need for proper regulation of working conditions and the representation of workers through trade unionism becomes even more acute. This is the dilemma which this article will conceptually and empirically explore. The notion of liminal spaces of work (Underthun 2014) represents the theoretical foundation of this discussion. Liminal spaces are spaces that are "in-between [and] implicates the existence of a temporary boundary or 'lime' [Latin for threshold]" (Thomassen 2012: 22). Our argument is that mobile workers in the tourism industry often find themselves in these temporary liminal spaces, by choice or not. Due to the temporary nature of these liminal spaces, workers carry different expectations and commitments in ways that imply a greater degree of individualization and less personal desire for leverage in the negotiation of employment relations (cf. Garsten 1999).

We argue that the challenge for hotel unions is formidable, yet not insurmountable. Organizations have to adapt to, appeal to and effectively represent a diverse group of mobile workers. Based on research on hotel workers in Norway, this paper addresses this challenge through, first, by conceptualising how the liminality of hotel work can be understood and, second, by discussing its implications for solidarity and organizing.

Liminality at work

As spaces of work, hotels host a range of mobile workers with different subject and power positions (Hall 2005). Hotel workers often share a transitional position, meaning that their hotel jobs represent a short- or long-term stop in their search of an appropriate life path or a different career (Richardson 2009; Garsten 2008). As such, worker mobility in the hospitality sector is an expression of what Bauman (2005: 15) refers to as a 'liquid' kind of modernity. However, when Bauman notes that mobility is increasing, he also emphasizes that mobility is unevenly distributed in the era of contemporary globalization. There is a fundamental difference between the mobility of choice and the mobility that stem from necessity (cf. Duncan et al. 2013).

In this article we turn to the concept of *liminality* (Van Gennep 1909; Thomassen 2009; Turner 1977) to explore this transitional and uncertain state and phase of work in the hospitality industry. We assert that while liminality typically is used to refer to personal disengagement and life transitions, it is also possible to include more work-related notions of flexibility, precariousness and employment mismatch into the discussion. Moreover, we argue that liminality not only represents a transitional and 'in-between' state for the individual. It is also relevant when considering the transformative and structuring power of collective forms of liminality (Turner 1977). These might be brought on by structural processes of globalization and flexibilization, and take particular forms in labour markets characterized by high levels of migration, staff turnover and the individualization of work relations. Such expressions of liminality at the group and societal level challenges and potentially undermines how workers are collectively represented.

Van Gennep (1909) uses the concept of liminality to understand transitional rituals. He describes how liminality or *liminal rites* represents the middle stage of in a transitional process where it succeeds the *rite of separation* and precedes the *rite of incorporation.* In the rite of separation, the person would typically abandon a former status, for instance when a migrant decides to leave for a different country because of a failing local labour market or when a student passes graduation. In the rite of incorporation, the new status is accepted and normalised, for instance when the migrant has settled into a new country and found his or her place in a new labour and housing market. The phase in between is described by Van Gennep as the *rite of transition* or *liminal* rite. In this phase of a transition, Van Gennep asserts that a new or parallel identity emerges through displacing a former identity, during whichthe liminal subject faces (and accepts) great challenges. The labour migrant looking for work in a new country may for example temporarily accept a marginal or mismatched (cf. Kalleberg 2007) position in a labour market even if this breaks considerably with the expectations the person had in the country of origin.

As a broader concept of societal change, Turner (1977) engages the liminality term for analysing social transformations. Here, Turner points to processes of transition and uncertainty through the dislocation of existing structures and that liminality works on several scales, from the individual to macro-structures. As such, Turner also mentions how liminality can become institutionalised – that the "suspended character of social life evidently takes on a more permanent character" (Thomassen 2012: 28). An example is when Garsten (1999: 608) reflects upon if a liminal kind of "[…] 'temping' [temporary and casual work] has become an institutionalized state, a more or less permanent way of working".

Thomassen (2012) elaborates on Turners points by demonstrating the ways in which this suspended liminality works through different temporal horizons and at different scales. In temporal terms, Thomassen distinguishes between liminal *moments*, *periods* and *epochs*. He also distinguishes between individual and aggregate subjects of liminal experience, ranging from *individual,* via the *group*, to an entire *society* (see table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of liminality

Thomassen (2012) also emphasises the spatial dimension in Van Gennep's work. Perceived at liminal spaces, these transitional experiences are also *territorially expressed*, for instance through spatial boundaries, border zones and thresholds.In the hospitality sector, examples of territorial liminality include the individual worker experience of being temporarily disconnected from ordinary chores through enjoying a stay as guest in a hotel, yet the hotel can represent the everyday space of social encounters or work negotiation to a majority of workers in the same hotel. A space perceived as liminal by someone standing on the outside looking in, may be perceived as completely normal by people on the inside.

   The resort can also be a liminal space for a larger aggregate of individuals, for instance for the groups of seasonal labour migrants who chooses the skiing resort as a place of work in order to combine leisure pursuits and breadwinning work (Duncan 2008; Ainsworth and Purss 2009; Henningsen et al. 2014, Lundmark 2006). Whether the liminality term can be understood as something beyond the state of transition (Thomassen, 2012), Turner (1977) also suggests that societal liminality can have spatial expressions. An example is the diffusion of neoliberal work arrangements (Peck and Tickell 2002), where ideals of temporary and flexible work create thresholds in the labour market that confront collective ideals of welfare distribution and strong industrial relations – hallmarks of Scandinavian working life (Moene 2007).

   A particularly relevant process shaping the territorial and temporal dimensions of liminality in hospitality work is labour migration (Lusis & Bauder 2010; Alberti 2016). In a segmented labour market, migrants often provide the labour market with flexibility and show a willingness to perform low-paid work, often in non-standard work relationships that deviate from the norm of permanent employment (Kalleberg 2003; McDowell et al. 2009). Labour migrants who fill these niches might be attracted by the wage increase (in relative terms) or driven by a lack of work opportunities in the place of origin (Lusis & Bauder, 2010). But in the hospitality sector motives for migration may also be very different. In urban metropoles, for example, travellers are attracted by a cosmopolitan lifestyle and cultural experiences. Many fund their temporary exile by working in the hospitality sector, an environment that is seen to fit the positive narrative of globalised freedom (Bauman 2005). Yet other labour migrants are forced to abandon their place of origin due to a lack of work opportunities.

   Displacement and disconnection are key features of labour migration. The migrants leave and gradually distance themselves from the social structures at home. Temporarily returning to the place of origin is thus associated with a sense of disconnection, while it alsotakes time to

incorporate new social structures in the places of arrival. Being a temporary foreign worker thus often means inhabiting spaces in which one feels socially alienated (Longva 2005). Such a situation is not uncommon in the contemporary world of work, and can be said to constitute a truly liminal experience.

The temporal dimension of liminality conditions migrant workers' political potential. When migrants are disconnected from social structures over longer periods of time, an incentive for being incorporated into new social structures might increase. But there is no guarantee that this potential will be realised, as it depends on the institutions and organisations in the place of work (Jordhus-Lier & Tufts, 2014; Alberti 2014).

Moreover, the liminal positions of labour migrants are often cemented by regulatory landscapes. Many groups of liminal migrant workers find themselves in exceptional spaces where regular work life norms do not apply. These spaces might range from seasonal migrant work on farms to export processing zones (Devasahayem et al. 2004). But labour market segmentation in the hospitality industry also produce less visible territorial expressions of liminality, including hotel departments dominated by a single ethnic group (Aasland & Tyldum, 2016), ethnic stereotyping in recruitment procedures (McDowell et al. 2009) and entire resort communities where the workforce is dominated by tourist workers (Henningsen et al. 2014).

Ideal-type Liminal Subjects

Drawing on Longva (1997) and Bianchi (2000), we can identify two contrasting ideal types of liminal labour migrants: the 'expatriate worker' and the 'working tourist'. While they are both characterised by a liminal position at an individual as well as a group level (Aasland and Tyldum, 2016; Henningsen et al. 2014; Underthun & Aasland, 2014), they can be distinguished from each other by their different freedom of mobility (Bauman 2005).

A good example of the 'expatriate worker' from the labour migration literature is Longva's (1997) account of Indian seasonal labour migrants and their experiences as construction workers in Kuwait. These workers become liminal subjects through spatial displacement. Longva describes workers' experiences and strategies of postponing needs and accepting power asymmetries in a highly stratified Kuwaitan expatriate labour market. The migrants find themselves in a temporal form of 'unreality', where ascetic behaviour in temporary exile is

related to what Longva (1997:182) calls the 'politics of acquiescence': liminal subject accepts subordination at work in a way that they would usually protest against. Demanding higher wages and fair treatment is perceived to hold great short-term risk in the form of deportation for the individual worker or reducing the economic returns of their exile. Therefore, Longva argues that collective action does not constitute a rational course of action for these workers. The liminality of their existence encourages workers to favour individual strategies. Guest workers are dependent on good relations with their employers or 'sponsors' to keep their residency permit. Thus, labour conflicts are in most cases solved at the inter-personal level. To most workers, the rewards of working in Kuwait outweigh the negative aspects of unfair treatment. Typically, the 'expatriate worker' ideal type is positioned in asymmetrical power relationships without readily available exit opportunities. Collective representation of this group is conditioned by their migrant status and the lack of legal protection in their place of destination.

The other ideal type, the 'working tourist', is also based on previous scholarly work. Benson and O' Reilly (2009), Cohen (2011) and Gorz (1985) all point to a very different form of lifestyle migration associated to 'emancipatory' travel rituals and alternative living. In these situations, the migrant worker is a tourist as much as a worker (Bianchi 2000). Here, strategies of migration and work are often motivated by a liminality of choice.

Cohen's (1973) term 'drifter' originated as a description of subjects that found alternatives to mainstream lifestyles and work arrangements, following the growing popularity of backpacking in the 1970s and 1980s (O' Reilly & Benson, 2009). Backpackers started supporting their travels with occasional work, and while this was often portrayed as a necessary evil, Adler & Adler (1999) argue that work often accompanied recreation as an integral part of lifestyle tourism. Moreover, such work often took place within the same realm as recreation did – namely, the hospitality industry.

Bianchi (2000: 108) uses the 'migrant tourist worker' to capture this subject position, and also points to the potential dilemmas it contains. First, being a working tourist blurs the boundaries between the consumption and production of hospitality services (Urry 2011), making it difficult to identify with a worker identity. Second, and related, the dual identity of tourist and worker undermines collective representation as the self-interest of the working tourist may imply that desires of consumption are stronger than the interest of upholding rights as a worker (cf. Gorz 1985).

The 'expatriate worker' and the 'working tourist' face similar challenges in the labour market, such as being regularly underpaid or not offered appropriate contracts. This can be justified in a liminal position by the promise of delayed gratification (Longva 1996) or a kind of parallel gratification in the sphere of consumption (Bauman 1998; Duncan et al. 2013). Therefore, they often choose to avoid collective representation during their time in liminal work spaces. Liminal workers may hesitate to involve in the politics of work in the present, as they judge these issues to belong to another stage of their career – and therefore to another place and time.

For these reasons, we posit that organised and sustained expressions of worker solidarity are challenged by group liminality in the hospitality sector. Trade unions' institutionalised struggle for rights might not appeal to workers standing on the threshold between a past left behind and an unpredictable future. Organised labour also tends to have difficulties penetrating the exceptional spaces (back-of-the-house departments, ferries, family-owned restaurants and resorts) where migrants in the hospitality industry often work. And finally, the class-based worker identities on which their struggle is based often do not resonate with liminal subjects.

But as Turner (1977) has warned against, the individual strategies of liminal subjects may backfire. This is more recently supported by Garsten (1999: 608), who observes that the "transitional qualities of liminality has become in itself a permanent condition" as temporary employment and high mobility is normalised over the course of workers' life trajectories. When considering the great shift in job opportunities for a generation of educated youth, the liminal period of work may indeed become an epoch. Garsten also points to the dangerous image being portrayed of the 'empowered flexible worker' as she questions individual strategies over collective strategies among liminal subjects. Their unwillingness to support existing forms of worker representation lead her to the conclusion that "temporary employees are simultaneously the agents of such change, and its victims" (Garsten 1999: 616).

Of course, not all workers in the hospitality industry share this sense of liminality. In fact, the two groups highlighted above are working alongside many other categories of workers, many of whom are experiencing a work situation based on very different time horizons and embeddedness in place. Some workers in the industry have made a career choice before they entered the industry, whereas others have decided to commit long term to their job. It is among these groups of workers, whose skills and aspirations align with those of the hospitality industry in general, that the levels of unionisation historically have been highest in Norway and elsewhere. But an industry that is perceived as being a transitional phase in the careers of so

many, the liminality of some can potentially affect the solidarity of the entire workforce. In this way, accepting or normalising the hotel as an exceptional and liminal space may undermine all workers, both those with a long and short (or liminal) perspective.

The link between liminality and worker solidarity speaks to a broader debate around societal transformation, and to the processes of labour migration, economic globalisation and work restructuring in particular. As global capitalism has entered a period of recurring crises, and the hospitality industry being rapidly and profoundly impacted by instability (Tufts 2014), neoliberal governments have sought to re-regulate employment markets in ways which allow employers to pursue more flexible employment practices. Flexibility has become a guiding principle in working life, and does have a real appeal as many workers find real benefits in less rigid work arrangements. Far too often, however, the power to determine the conditions of these arrangements lies with employers, whose idea of flexibility is thriving off the ambiguities of liminality and risk (Allen & Henry 1997; Beck 1992).

When flexible employment regimes combine with increasing labour migration and widespread youth underemployment, the question is whether liminality might emerge as a more structural societal characteristic, as indicated by Table 1. As such, liminality possesses a transformative kind of power and may alter social structures or become a more or less permanent condition (Thomassen 2012; Szakolczai, 2000). In this way we could say that individual work experiences in liminal space converge with a broader form of societal liminality. Thomassen (2012) asks whether social liminality understood as a social transformation more or less in its completion represents a 'post-liminal' state rather than representing the transitional character of liminality. However, when considering the realm of employment, we would argue that the (neoliberal) order of flexible and temporary work is confronted with the 'norm' of a standard employment relationship and that social liminality can be seen through that very struggle. Not yet hegemonic or 'normal', the social liminality characterising precarious work arrangements destabilises established institutions of the standard employment relationship. For instance, as an increasing number of workers choose to accept sub-standard working conditions or avoid collective representation due to a liminal position in both temporal and spatial terms, the wider structure of industrial relations and workplace solidarity is affected. This has led some observers to suggest that trade unionism in its traditional form is no longer relevant for liminal worker subjects (see, for instance, Standing 2011 and his discussion of the precariat). With this discussion in mind, we now turn our attention to liminal positions in the Norwegian hospitality industry.

Liminal Workplaces in the Norwegian Hospitality Industry

The Norwegian hotel industry is placed in a national context that differs from the neoliberal Anglo-American regimes which attract much attention in the academic literature (e.g. Wills 2005; Tufts 2014; Gray 2004). This is relevant when assessing the degree of societal liminality. Norway has a high national unionisation rate, institutionalised social partnership and with the standard employment relationship still being a norm in the labour market (Moene 2007). The hospitality industry, however, represents a periphery in this national labour market model, marked by increased subcontracting, growth in temporary staffing, deregulation of employment contracts, low levels of unionisation (despite high tariff coverage) and a well-organised employer side (Bergene et al. 2014). Clearly, then, hospitality workplaces in Norway face a range of threats to their social cohesion, let alone to any organised union efforts. Many of these resonate with challenges documented in research on other hospitality labour markets, including: the historical lack of institutionalised industrial relations (Gray 2004); capital mobility, creative destruction and rapid changes in hotel ownership (Tufts 2014); fragmented workplaces and a labour process governed by discriminatory managerial strategies (McDowell et al. 2009).

Not all of these factors can or should be reduced to the notion of liminality. Still, we would argue that certain characteristics of the Norwegian hotel industry, particularly those related to management's extensive use of migrant and short-term labour, correspond well with the conceptual discussion above. In the Oslo region, as in other cities, hotels are workplaces which attract groups of liminal subjects such as students and migrant workers. Since the turn of the millennium, different groups have entered (and left) the hospitality sector depending on socio-economic factors: workers from Eastern European countries following the 2004 EU expansion, Swedish youth travelling to Norway for short-term work during periods of high unemployment in Sweden and an increasing number of workers from Southern Europe following the crises in the Greek, Spanish and Italian economies.

Our findings are drawn from a research project on hotel workplaces in the Oslo region. The data collection took place from 2009 to 2012 and included a survey with workers in 40 hotels of different sizes, market niches, ownership forms and geographical locations. In addition, we conducted qualitative interviews in selected workplaces and with representatives of the main

trade union organisation, *Oslo hotell- og restaurantarbeiderforbund* (since 2007 a part of *Fellesforbundet*). Findings from the qualitative research (see Jordhus-Lier and Underthun 2014) and detailed descriptive statistics from the survey (see Jordhus-Lier et al. 2011) have been published elsewhere. The methodology of the study has also been accounted for in Aasland & Tyldum (2016). Hence, we will here only focus on the findings with direct relevance for the argument presented in this article.

The survey gathered core information on 867 individuals, of which 44% responded to an in-depth online survey. The study revealed that the hotels in the Oslo region has a typical hospitality workforce in that young and female workers dominate, with just under half of all hotel workers being Norwegian. Asian and other Nordic (mostly Swedish) are the most common country backgrounds among the non-Norwegian workers. Whereas Norwegians are in a majority in administration, booking and reception work, and workers from outside the EU dominate in cleaning and dishwashing, Swedes are overrepresented in the waiting profession (Aasland & Tyldum, 2016). Cleaners contrast with other groups in the hotel by experiencing less job security, less co-determination and being less satisfied with their jobs (Jordhus-Lier et al. 2011). This can explain why this profession, which historically has been peripheral to organised labour, joined the hotel trade union in large numbers during a recruitment drive in the 1990s. And for this reason the unionisation rate among African and Asian workers (43 per cent) is far higher than the average (22 per cent). Among the other major migrant group in our survey, short-term Swedish workers, this rate was as low as 3 per cent. This can be read as a telling illustration of how different experiences of group liminality shape the organisational landscape in the hospitality industry.

This assumption was corroborated by a correspondence analysis where a number of variables are distributed in a plot according to their distributions: categories with similar distributions are placed in proximity to each other, categories with dissimilar distributions are far apart (Aasland & Tyldum 2016):

Figure 1: Correspondence plot of hospitality workers in Oslo

The correspondence plot reveals great discrepancies between groups of workers along two axes, where one relates to the permanence of the job and the other to working conditions. The job

permanence dimension corroborates and nuances the assumption made above. The country background is variable is distributed widely, from "Rest of the world" at the top of the plot to "Sweden" at the bottom. Among Swedes in the survey, more than half said they had been working in their present job for less than a year (Aasland & Tyldum, 2016). In between these poles, other geographical variables appear, with "Other West Europe" leaning toward a long time horizon and "Norway" and "New EU" leaning towards a short time horizon. If we read the plot along the working conditions dimension, we see that different groups at the hotel have very different experiences at work, with "Cleaning" (and, to a lesser extent, "Waiter") at the negative and "Manager" at the positive end.

Based on this correspondence analysis, we discerned three different ideal types, whose characteristics can tell us a lot about the liminality in the labour market (Underthun & Aasland, 2014). The first category, the *career worker*, can be found in the top left quadrant. These workers have invested in their hospitality career through acquiring skills and credentials, and are rewarded through positive work experiences and a match between their education background and their present job. The second category refers to the variables at the bottom of the plot and is labelled *transient worker*. This can be considered to be the most liminal group of hospitality workers. The category includes positive as well as negative work experiences, but this is attributed less weight by the respondents because they are all characterised by short time horizons. The category of the transient worker clearly exhibits similarities with the above-mentioned 'tourist worker'. The third ideal type is what we refer to as the *stuck worker*, appearing in the plot's top right corner. This group is characterised by a combination of long time horizon and negative work experiences. The precarious nature of employment that these workers have to deal with is expressed in far more negative terms, as they perceive a high risk of losing their jobs and have few other alternatives in the job market. Many of the stuck workers have also experienced discrimination at work. In other words, while stuck workers still find themselves on the 'threshold' of the Norwegian labour market, their insecure and temporary situation shows signs of permanence. The category of the stuck worker differs somewhat from the ideal type of the 'expatriate worker', yet there are also similarities in terms of their position in the labour market. As in Longva's (1997) case from Kuwait, the stuck workers express an inferior power position in the labour market, and many also express a mismatch between their current job and career hopes. Yet, unlike the expatriate workers, the stuck workers have longer prospects and a desire to improve their situation. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the variables appearing in this quadrant is therefore union membership.

Attitudes to Trade Unionism

Hotel workplaces where a substantial part of the workforce fall into the transient worker category can prove a tough challenge for trade unions. In one of the hotels we studied, a chain affiliate close to the airport as well as to a commuter town with a sizable population of labour migrants from Sweden, Swedish employees had overwhelmingly chosen to stay out of the local union. They were all newcomers to the workplace, and expressed a combination of sympathy and indifference over the thought of joining the union:

> "I have thought a lot about it. […] It brings safety. I don't really need it, but it can come in handy. Everybody is a member in Sweden, it is less common here in Norway." (Swedish chef, 2011).

The quote underscores the paradoxical fact that workers from a country with one of the highest trade union densities in the world (67.3 per cent according to OECD 2016), are least likely to organise in Norwegian hotel workplaces. As many of them are eager to increase their number of working hours during their sometimes short employment stints in Norway, their interests diverge from those of the hotel trade union, whose demands include a stricter regulation of working hours. A leader of the hotel trade union compares short-term migrants from Sweden to other liminal subjects:

> "What we see is that the main enemy to organising locally are the Swedes who are here for only three months, or students who want maximum flexibility, that do not want a work plan to comply with, or those who are dead scared to do anything and simply do not understand what you are saying. Of these, the latter group is possibly the easiest one to sway to join us. (Hotel union representative, 2011)"

This is not to say that organising workers from outside the EU is a straightforward challenge. Language barriers and cultural differences might work as disincentives, but once a 'stuck worker' has joined the union, it will likely represent a long-term gain in membership. A representative of the private sector union confederation (Fellesforbundet) who himself had a background from the hospitality echoed this sentiment:

> "It is a bigger task to train a Thai woman than a law student, but the student disappears and the Thai women might stay for 20 years." (Office bearer, Fellesforbundet, date)

We are now starting to discern a picture where transient workers, typically of Swedish origin, are relatively happy with their short-term employment situation and choose to stay out of organised labour, whereas stuck workers, most of whom have a non-European background, are willing to organise but still express dissatisfaction with their work situation. While this implies that unionisation appear more relevant to stuck workers than transient workers, the trade union still faces challenges in appealing to both groups.

Some of the reason for the failure to address the concerns of both these groups of liminal subjects can be found at the workplace level. In above-mentioned hotel where the Swedish workers were non-unionised, interviewees described an informal social network of Swedes in the workplace. Within this network, workers, supervisors and even the hotel manager socialised in ways that allowed precarious workers to circumvent their lack of job security by building relationships of trust and friendship across the organisational hierarchy. While many of these Swedish workers could be characterised as transient workers, and experienced a liminality which clearly discouraged them from expressing class solidarity, they maintained another form of solidarity based on a shared national identity. Similar networks could be observed among workers from other nationalities in other workplaces.

In one of the Oslo hotels we studied, where the cleaning department could boast a high union density, the difficult situation of workers in the stuck worker category was revealed through interviews with union members. The workplace was an upmarket, downtown hotel, and while the main trade union representative of the hotel claimed that they had one of the strongest workplace locals in the entire country, a supervisor in the cleaning department lamented that the trade union did not function at all. In her opinion, cleaners experienced a complete lack of interest from the trade union, and their concerns were not addressed unless they made a complaint to the union representative. Like in many other older hotels in Oslo, this workplace had a long and strong tradition of organised waiters, who had achieved significant levels of co-determination and economic rewards from management. But their colleagues in the cleaning department had yet to feel that they benefited from their union membership in the same way.

Arguably, the workplace descriptions are symptomatic of Norwegian hospitality unionism in general. Local trade union organisations appear rigid and bureaucratic to workers whose careers are not bound to the sector, to those who are merely passing through and to workers with a minority background and to those who are employed in the workplace periphery. The leadership of the hotel worker union has for a long time lacked minority representation and, since a merger of two locals in 2014, also been predominantly male.

As a contrasting case to the study of the Oslo region, our research also included a study of a mountain resort a few hours outside the capital, where we interviewed seasonal workers, permanent workers and management of the main apartment and hotel firms. Interviews with these workers provide a contrasting (yet complementary) insight into more pronounced expressions of liminality at work. Not only is this small labour market even more stratified and segmented than the urban hospitality market, it is also highly seasonal. Among the workers who travel to this town for a few months each winter, are transient working tourists and workers who could be characterised as 'expatriate'. Like in Oslo, many of the waiters were Swedish. Colloquially referred to as 'seasoners', Norwegian and Swedish youth came to the resort motivated by the skiing and partying facilities, but many of which took up paid work to fund their expensive lifestyle. The 'seasoners' described their existence in the ski resort as a 'bubble' (Henningsen et al. 2014 132):

> "Life in [the resort] is about waking up in the morning with the thought – which mountain should we climb today? The freedom and attraction of the mountain had to be financially supported, and for this reason the working conditions were less of a concern: "you end up having to accept whatever they offer you [...] I want to be here!" (Swedish hospitality worker, Henningsen et al. 2014:132).

As seen in other ski resorts, hospitality work is expressed as a strategic choice to support lifestyle choices (Duncan et al. 2013; Duncan 2008). This group bore many of the characteristics of the 'working tourist' discussed earlier (Bianchi 2000). However, most of these individuals were liminal subjects 'by choice' (Bauman 2005: 4), were young and had little experience from work life in general. These workers also seemed either ignorant of or did not engage in the fact that their working conditions were illegal in terms of low wages and too long hours.

In stark contrast to the 'seasoners' were a group of male and female workers from the Philippines who had come to work as cleaning personnel for one of the main apartment rental agencies. These workers did not engage with the local community due to the language barrier, they were underemployed by the rental firm and had to sit for days waiting for work. Moreover, they did not pursue any lifestyle ambitions as they kept to themselves and reduced their consumption to a minimum. This group shares similar traits to the 'expatriate workers' described by Longva (1997). For these workers, earning money was the sole motivation. In between these two groups where a number of Eastern European workers, who were less isolated than the Filipino cleaners but who participated much less in the ski resort lifestyle than the 'seasoners'. Unsurprisingly, unionisation was almost non-existent in this ski resort, and interviewees expressed opposition to the idea of joining a trade union. But among the group of transient workers, there were workers whose temporary existence in this resort had become more permanent as they had found a partner and a place to live in the area. These were also among the interviewees who expressed most concern among the sustainability of their own working conditions.

The Hotel Worker Strike in 2016

While we postulated that an emerging short-termism is presenting a challenge to worker solidarity in the hospitality sector, a revealing test of the effects of liminality would be to examine organisational unity during a concrete case of strike action. This is indeed what took place when Fellesforbundet, the trade union organising hotel workers in Norway, ordered a total of 7200 of their members from hotels and restaurants across the country to stop working during a four-week period in April-May 2016. The union's main demand was the right to local collective bargaining, a common practice in Norway which had not been a part of the collective agreement for hotel and restaurant workers. This was the first major strike in the sector since 2002, and provided a critical test of the strength of a hotel trade union that has experienced several waves of short-term migration combined with new business practices of outsourcing and labour hire during the last decades (Jordhus-Lier 2014a).

Talking to representatives of the trade union leadership, it seems as if the strike of 2016 took place in a situation where the patterns of liminality were slightly different from five years

earlier, when we conducted the interviews and survey presented above. Liminal subjects were still prevalent, but short-term migration from Sweden had declined as the Swedish economic situation had improved. Migrants from the crisis-ridden economies of Southern Europe, on the other hand, had increased rapidly. Trade union leaders explained that these workers were often in a desperate economic situation, and took up low-paid work in restaurant kitchens and in hotel departments where their lack of Norwegian language skills were not deemed too problematic. Interestingly, union representatives also argued that short-termism had become more pronounced on the management side. In their view, young hotel directors with a business degree were in the process of replacing an older generation of hotel directors, and a highly competitive corporate climate had favoured a business model where a focus on cost cutting and revenue management often came at the expense of skills development and professionalism.

Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to ask: was collective action undermined by worker liminality during these spring weeks of 2016? According to the leaders of the union on strike, the answer was a resounding no. On the contrary, the intense mobilisation of workers during this industrial action and the strong support hotel workers received in the general public, served to solidify organised labour and bring new workers into the fold. As one of the trade union leaders put it, "people found together". Workers who had hitherto been divided by physical, cultural and organisational divisions in the workplace (Jordhus-Lier 2014b), suddenly discovered each other in the picket lines outside the hotel. Moreover, divisions between striking and non-striking workers did not follow a clear pattern of in terms of country background – as could be expected from the correspondence plot above. Instead, the union attracted more than 1000 new members over the course of the strike. Even among many non-unionised workers, support of the strike was noticeable:

> "They didn't do their job, to put it that way. Even if they were at work. […] They didn't feel that it was alright to their colleagues." (Office bearer, Fellesforbundet, 2016)

By way of summary, the events in the spring of 2016 indicates that while liminality is an emergent phenomenon of hospitality work, in Norway and beyond, the barriers it presented to worker solidarity were not unsurpassable. Paraphrasing Gray's (2004: 27) point, that "service sector jobs are not innately 'bad'", neither is service sector unionism out of sync with their liminal workforce by some law of nature. But while the strike action was deemed successful by

unionists and observers alike, there are still huge obstacles facing the representation of workers in Oslo hotels. Many of these will resurface once the drama of strike action has given way to regular working days. By returning to the concept of liminality and the findings presented in this article, we will assess these obstacles in the concluding discussion.

Building Worker Solidarity among Liminal Subjects

In this article, we have let the concept of liminality be a guide to our analysis of hospitality work in Norway. Liminality refers to a transitional state, and has in this case been used to understand how subjects and groups experience work in Oslo hotels and a Norwegian ski resort, and how they view efforts to build worker solidarity. For hotel workers in our study, liminality is a phenomenon with individual, group and societal expressions: individual liminality, because the hospitality sector is viewed as a career intermezzo by substantial parts of the workforce; group liminality, because the workforce contains a groups of mobile workers whose connection to the Norwegian labour market is loose and unstable; and societal liminality, as the regulation of the labour market itself gradually seems to encourage risk-taking behavior and mobile lives.

Our empirical investigation of Norwegian hotel workplaces does reveal a pervasive liminality in the workforce, but along contrasting trajectories. Transient workers in Oslo hotels comprise of students and some migrant groups, who have chosen to take up work in Norway due to various crises in a globalised and interconnected European labour market. These are typically attracted by employment opportunities and with a willingness to work in flexible and intensive arrangements. Other migrant groups, however, have come to Norway with a long-term perspective, but are often dissatisfied with their working arrangements. Although sharing many of the same characteristics when it comes to worker heterogeneity with the urban hospitality labour market of Oslo, workers in the ski resort express liminal positions in a more pronounced way. Few have long-term perspectives, and despite negative work experiences they resist collective efforts because they do not want to risk losing the advantage of having a (temporal) job. This can be partly explained by the seasonal nature of work, where 'expatriate workers' typically have short-term work permits, but we also found that the fear of jeopardizing short-term gains also was true for other vulnerable groups that had longer prospects. Interestingly, the most 'precarious' groups of hotel workers in Oslo have a strong inclination

of union membership, while the liminal space of a ski resort does not seem to be conducive to investing in collective representation.

Workers shift between being mobile and being 'stuck' throughout their hospitality careers. Workers from outside the EU have travelled the farthest in their search for work, and are often faced with few alternatives to move on – both in geographical and career terms. Transient workers typically view themselves as very loosely connected to the Norwegian labour market, and tend to envision their long-term future elsewhere. But even among this group, many gradually find that their temporary work is becoming a permanent existence.

Unionists in Oslo hotels have given themselves a mandate to unite and represent the entire workforce. Worker solidarity in the hospitality sector suffers from fragmentation on different levels: outsourcing and labour hire, cultural and language barriers, as well as the short-termism described in this article. As stated above, not all challenges to unionism can be explained by the liminality that is experienced in the sector. But to organisers and shopstewards in the hotel trade union, worker liminality is identified as a real problem that is hard to solve. In contrast to networks and solidarity based on national identity, class solidarity – at least in the stable, institutionalised form that Norwegian trade unions represent – seems to be particularly affected by workplace liminality. In short, it seems as what trade unions have to offer fails to appeal to liminal subjects.

To conclude, these obstacles can be read as a threefold challenge. First, trade unions organise around employment-related interests when many of the transient workers are paying more attention to practices of consumption. Not least is this an issue among young people and 'working tourists', which constitute a substantial part of the hospitality workforce. This is an obstacle which is hard to overcome without compromising the basic principles of trade unionism. Second, trade unionism centers around class-based worker identities, when many migrant groups rather identify with nationality groups or other migrant identities. In our research, it seems as if solidarity based on migrant identities and nationality often are more resistant to the flux in these liminal workplaces than class solidarity.

The task of appealing to these workers is what Alberti (2014: 168) refers to as "the challenge of turning intersectionality into a powerful terrain to re-build collectives". For a trade union, tackling this challenge may involve choosing between establishing separate campaigns migrant workers are organised 'as migrant workers', or to attempt to incorporate migrant workers 'as workers' in the existing union structures (Alberti et al. 2013). While Fellesforbundet and its

predecessor have chosen to follow the latter route, and have been quite successful in recruiting long-term migrants from outside the EU, they have had far less success with transient workers. Moreover, their impressive membership figures aside, they have still to include any of these liminal groups in a meaningful way in the union leadership beyond the workplace level.

The third and final challenge, with the most direct bearing for the conceptual discussion presented here, is that the organisational presence of trade unions is perceived as static and rigid in face of an increasingly fluid and flexible workforce. While it is understandable that trade union organisations choose to limit resources spent on workers which, at best, are likely to become members for a short period of time, the growth in this part of the workforce might soon make them impossible for the union to disregard. For transient workers, on the other hand, engaging in trade unionism will involve spending substantial resources and costs, with potential benefits only being realised in the long run. For some of them, it is likely that union activity is associated with increased risk of being marginalised in informal workplace networks or to come at the expense of consumer-based lifestyle. In an industry where many workers are motivated by the possibilities of a fluid, mobile and flexible job market, a trade union must also be able to showcase a dynamism that appeals to the instant concerns of its members. This is perhaps precisely why the immediacy and drama of a strike served to build unity in a fragmented workforce, even among liminal subjects, in a way that everyday union activities have not been able to do.

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Table 1. Dimensions of liminality

Subjects of experience	Temporal dimension	Territorial expression	Examples
Individual liminality	Moments, periods or epochs in a person's life	Individual displacement, threshold existence	The expatriate labour migrant in a trans-local position, the working tourist in-between leisure lifestyle and labour market thresholds
Group liminality	Group patterns (moments, periods or epochs)	Group displacement, voluntary or forced confinement in threshold spaces	Groups of seasonal labor migrants in winter resorts; informal networks of Swedish employees in a hotel
Societal liminality	Societal transitions (moments, periods or epochs)	Spatial frontiers of societal transitions	Neoliberal work regimes, the expansion of thresholds in the labour market and the dismantling of collective representation

Source: Adapted from Thomassen (2012) and Underthun (2014).

Figure 1: Correspondence plot of hospitality workers in Oslo
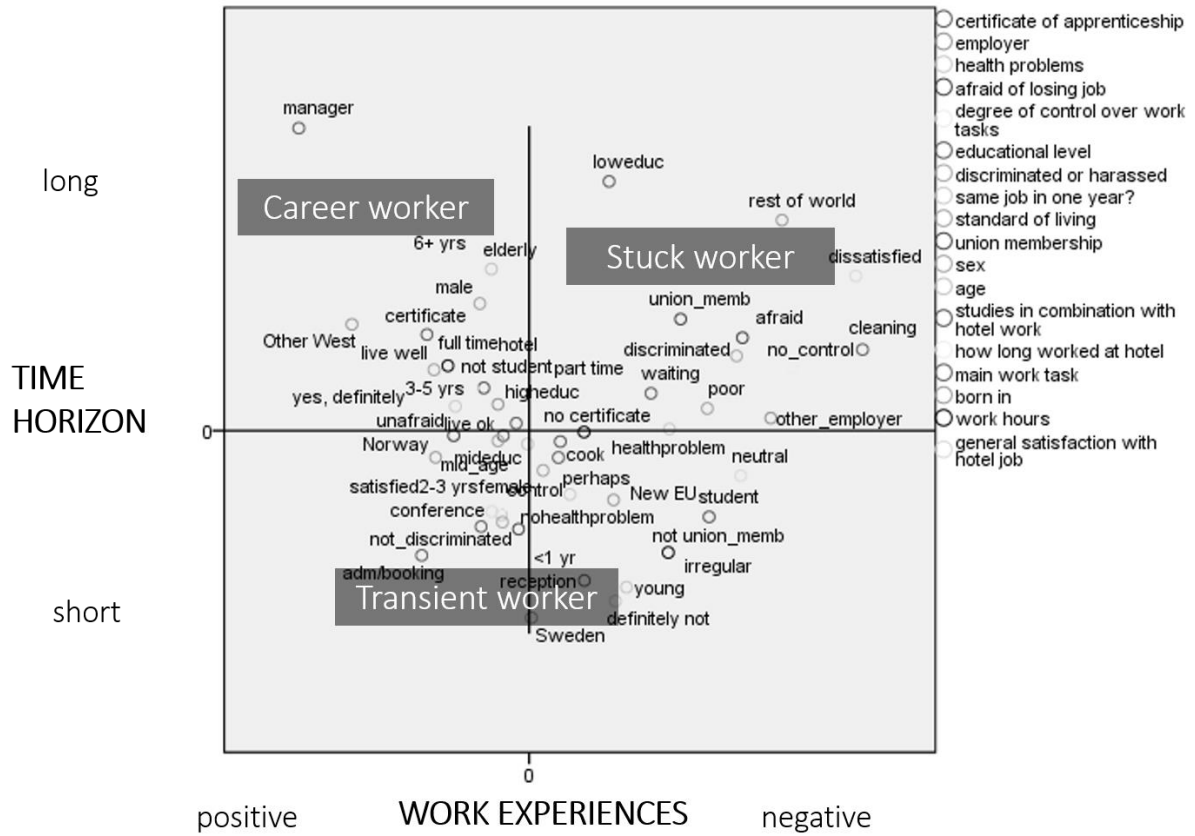
Source: Underthun and Aasland (2014)