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Between Cooperation and Hostility – Constructions of Ethnicity and Social Class among Polish Migrants in London

Abstract

In the scholarship on Polish migrants, one of the frequently mentioned themes is the question of hostility expressed by Poles towards their co-ethnics. Analyzed through lenses of competition for the same economic resources or breakdown of bonds of solidarity due to migration, these explanations do not give full justice to the complexity of the phenomena. We deal with a paradox here since expressions of hostility or social distance by Polish migrants towards their co-ethnics stand in contradiction with the social and collective nature of Polish migration culture in general. In this article, I take an anthropological perspective on myth-making practices to explain why Polish interviewees are so eager to emphasize that Poles do not cooperate and cannot be trusted once abroad. I argue that the importance of this myth for social actors stems from its power to contest dominant Polish narratives equating ethnic ties with moral ones and its ability to insert the notion of social class into the assumed homogeneity of ethnic category.

Key words: ethnicity, social class, trust, cooperation, solidarity, myth

Introduction

As Glick-Schiller, Caglar and Guldbrandsen have argued (2006) the uneven emphasis on ethnicity in comparison to other factors is one of migration studies' major methodological sins. Putting on 'ethnic lenses' while doing ethnography among people labeled under particular 'ethnic' category may be revealing, but equally obstructing the researchers' gaze on individuals' and groups' social life. Mary Erdmans makes a similar point describing various factions of Poles in Chicago: 'we perceive the distance between groups as being greater than the distance within groups and this epistemological tendency, causes us to overlook heterogeneity within groups and dismiss internal borders' (1998, p. 7) and urges us to look at circumstances under which a group sharing similar identity cooperates, shares resources, norms and values and when it chooses not to. Numerous scholars have argued that having acknowledged this shortcoming we must keep in mind another, previously forgotten aspect of migrants' identity – class (Bottomley

1998; Vertovec 2007; Guarnizo, Sanchez, Roach 1999) and take into account how in individuals' perceptions these two social constructions relate to each other. A detailed ethnography of peoples' actions and meanings they construct around these notions reveals how individual strategies contest, manipulate and negotiate to their own advantage this reification of ethnicity against which scholars rightly warn us. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the overemphasis on ethnicity and culture has obscured the analysis of how hierarchies and stratification are produced in the domain of the symbolic. As Gilliane Bottomley notes:

> One of the complexities of this area of study [immigration] is its inevitable association with political programs and debates, a field of struggle within which the role of the 'disinterested observer' is not readily available and hegemonic forms of knowledge not easily contested. In the US, for example, an emphasis on ethnicity, race and, more recently, gender, has tended to subsume class as an analytical category (1998, p. 32).

If that 'culturalisation of migration' (Stolcke 1999) has resulted in an increased interest in ethnicity and treatment of migrants as 'bearers' of specific traits separating them from the majority, it is crucial to ask why the notion of social class has not been treated as a part of the process of 'cultural ordering' and popular multicultural discourse. As Bottomely and Stolcke argue it is almost as though the notion of ethnicity, with its egalitarian overtones (rich or poor, everyone is English, Polish or else), has removed uncomfortable questions about class, inequality, poverty and social justice. This argument however rests on an assumption that in everyday lives and discourses, people treat the two notions – class and ethnicity – as separate and belonging to different social realms. As I will attempt to show in this article, if we carefully look at the roles and functions of usage of ethnicity in everyday life, this may be less so and the relationships between the meanings of these notions in everyday usage reveal that both are interdependent cultural tools with which social actors negotiate the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Ultimately, the notion of ethnicity and social class is constructed, used and made meaningful by people living in the real world – whether they are academics or people who are the subject of research by those academics. As an aspect of social relationships, not an objective and reified feature of an individual or a group (Eriksen 1993, p. 12) ethnicity is performed and 'done' in a communicative dialogical situation and this also includes a dialogical interaction between the researcher and an interviewee or between a social actor and its audience – be it private or public. In this article, I aim to trace and make sense of a particular aspect of that performance which features in numerous studies among Polish migrants conducted in the last decade. This aspect can be loosely defined as a social commentary or discussion on trust, solidarity, moral ties and obligations among co-ethnics in a migration context. The social commentary performed by a social actor usually focuses on the perceived lack of these features and on perceived breakdown of norms of trust and reciprocity in the eyes of both migrants and researchers, which results in expressions of hostility and social distance towards co-ethnics. As I will demonstrate further in the article, there are several angles of this discursive distance or hostility which Polish migrants express towards other Polish migrants. Despite this theme often being identified

by scholars as recurring, academics usually left the matter with a materialistic or economic explanation pointing to the increased competition for resources or social ghettoization limiting the range of available networks. But there seem to be much more at stake, since, as I will attempt to show, the notion of increased competition and hostility among Polish migrants does not live up to empirical scrutiny, as studies highlight the overall social and collective character of Polish migration involving a great deal of cooperation and social capital. We are confronted thus with a paradox where people tell us that 'Poles hate each other' or like the more popular paraphrase of hobbesian saying goes: 'Pole to a Pole is like a wolf', but at the same time we witness a great deal of reliance on Polish networks and an emergence of numerous transnational social fields since the last decade (Glick-Schiller et al. 1994) based on cooperation and trust.

To state that people say one thing and do another may seem quite banal but after all it is anthropology's bread and butter as the question of culture, norms and values involves the eternal problem of the disparity between the normative and practical dimension of social life, between the 'ought' and 'is' and between the norms and strategies of implementing them or explaining why it is hard to do so. The analysis that follows involves a critical reflection on the terms used by both the academia and people in question. After all, ethnicity is produced and manufactured across the spectrum of social life and we should look at the meanings from the point of view of the academia, policy making and everyday discourse 'on the street' in relation to each other, not as separate discursive realms inhabited by ideologically constructed elites and the masses.

Of Poles and Wolves

The notion of mistrust between Poles and, more generally, the debate on cohesiveness of Polish society has a long tradition and it isn't my aim here to trace back all its historical linkages (for an overview see: Kojder 2007). In the context of the debates over migration in Polish culture, in what I elsewhere call the Polish 'dominant emigration discourse' (Garapich 2008b; 2009) the imaginary mental change which Polish migrants supposedly undergo – once they leave their homeland – results in increased materialism, individualism and egoistic attitudes visible in the action of prioritizing the individual profit over collective good (Erdmans 1998). This perception is (to some extent of course unintentionally) supported by numerous academic accounts of migrants engaging in ruthless competition, backstabbing, mischievous practice and the like. For example, in one of the early studies on Polish migrants in the UK in late 90s, Franck Duvell and Bill Jordan (1999) noted that the level of trust between migrants is very low. According to Jordan (2002, p. 4), Poles:

> engage in unrestrained competition, including informing to the authorities on each other, in order to get other's jobs. Every service, ever amenity has a price. They exploit each other mercilessly; they cannot be relied on to keep promises. Is this the shape of social relations beyond transition? Is this what happens when hypermobility under global capitalism replaces the rigidities and stagnations of socialism?

Duvell and Jordan thus ask a classic Putnam's style question: to what extent individualism and lack of cooperation can be compatible with market economy and democracy, a dilemma also very much present in Polish sociological debates over trust and the post-socialist cultural legacy (Sztompka 2000; Buchowski 2006). In a rather pessimistic conclusion, Jordan argues that 'Polish migrants by their economic behavior, […] pose the question of how much mobility is consistent with a well--functioning democracy, with loyalty and solidarity, and even with the accumulation of social capital (norms of reciprocity and trust) that is required for the efficient working of a market economy' (Jordan 2002, p. 4). A similar picture is presented by Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazlowska's study on Polish migrants in Brussels (2001; 2005) whose relationships are presented as marked by tough competitiveness, materialistic mental framework, jealousy and the contrast between cooperation and trust within small family groupings and sense of mistrust, even hostility towards those outside the family groups. This results in social anomie (2001, p. 290), breakdown of norms in the form of frequent theft, cheatings, exploitation and breakdown of marital relationships (2001, p. 291–292) which tunes with Duvell's and Jordan's conclusion about the negative consequences of migration on society. In various degrees, other scholars also comment on the issue, however in much less objectifying way and offering less analysis, rather elaborating on what interviewees have said and offering a short explanation. For example, Svasek notes that 'Polish migrants tend to have ambiguous feelings about other Polish migrants' as on the one hand they offer support and network, but on the other they are a potential threat to their public reputation (Svasek 2009, p. 129). Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara highlight that 'the idea that Poles do not help each other was a recurring theme in many interviews' (2009, p. 161) and that 'there is a binary opposition between particular Polish networks and more general population of Polish migrants who were constructed as unhelpful and even dangerous' (ibidem). They explain this opposition as a consequence of internal economic competition within a group sharing similar range of networks which leads to ghettoization due to the 'weakness of strong ties'. The theme of ambiguous perception of co-ethnics and even hostility is a feature of other publications (see: Garapich 2007; 2008; Eade et al. 2006; Ryan et al. 2008; Pietka 2011; Lassalle et al. 2011; Andrejuk 2011) also in US (Erdmans 1998; Schneider 1995; Bukowczyk 1996) and it is clear that researchers in the field encounter this attitude fairly frequently. An in-depth analysis of the phenomena has been presented by Małgorzata Irek (2011) who argues that contrary to the standard account, Polish migrants demonstrate features of trust and cooperation and that the perceived anomie and internal conflict has been overstated. She demonstrates also that the perception of Polish migrants as divided into neat categories and groups is misleading and that there is lots of evidence pointing to mutual cooperation and networks between the groups described in the literature as separate and isolated. What may be even more revealing is the level of interest about the issue from the point of view of the traditional and social media. It is enough to search in one of numerous Polish migrants' internet discussion forums for themes that circle around 'trust', 'cooperation between Poles' 'solidarity among Poles' to be met with a deluge of comments, debates and feature-long essays. As an occasional commentator to

the Polish press in Poland and UK, I lost the count on how many times journalists asked me to comment on the issue on whether the old saying that 'Pole to a Pole is like a wolf' reflects the true nature of intra-group relations. The very fact that this discussion is kept alive not just in the academia but within the public domain, as well as private conversations, is a testimony of the crucial cultural significance of the question on trust between Poles, whether they do cooperate and form a cohesive group or is it just a pure fantasy. This fact hasn't been noted by researchers, but I argue here that it is this eagerness and willingness to debate the issue which holds the key to the question why migrants, as well as people researching them pick upon the subject of trust – both as a subject for an academic article and for an on-line discussion.

From my own experience, two types of distancing/hostility expression strategies can be identified which is consistent with findings in other studies. First, as these comments show, is the classic warning, that you cannot trust a Pole and that Poles cheat each other and break the norms of social and economic exchange:

'Because from the part of Poles you can expect only a scam and you can be cheated'.

'Because what you see is that Poles are exploited all the time, but by whom? By other Poles!'

'So this is really horrible for me'.

'What does it tell about Poles? Kurwa...where should I start?! [laughs] there is a lot I could tell you about...First of all... they are mean, bad, envious... rarely it is otherwise'.

The following exchange is typical with a range of emotions being expressed, from distance and avoidance to strongly marked class prejudice:

Q: Has living in London changed your attitudes to other Poles?
A: I avoid Poles... I avoid them to the extent that I don't want to say that I'm from Poland... Sometimes observing what happens and listening that here a Pole stole this and over there a Pole did that... here a band of drunken Poles have beaten up someone...
Q: Like in Warsaw...
A: Well, not really... Here I think it is because a lot of total scum comes to London to work; all these peasants who work on building sites, typical prostak, [simpleton, rough] guys who don't know how to say hello or thank you. So that's why I try to avoid them. And also let's be clear – no Pole will help you in London unless someone lives here for a very long time.

Anecdotes, gossips, recalling one own's or someone else's personal experience frequently refer to the employers breaking their promises, being cheated, Poles shoplifting etc. Someone stresses the fact that he was not paid the proper wages (by a Polish employer), another recalls that his (Polish) employees stole from him, or someone else says that he was stopped by security in a shop, because the shop had bad experiences with Poles. As already said, these stories are very common not only in the interviews, but also in the media, web forums and national debates, and they are framed as simple warnings and simple fact statements.

The second strategy is an elaboration of the first one, with an element of self-reflection and assumption about the status of ethnic ascription by dominant society. The interviewees in this context usually move from sharp criticism and hostility towards other Poles to a comment on what does it mean to him/her personally and how others' immoral actions affect their own status and reputation. Respondents usually use the notion of shame to describe this sense of discomfort. Interviewees often expressed that they felt 'ashamed' and sometimes they would 'hide' or 'disguise' their Polish identity when witnessing or hearing of an example of norms breaking by their co-ethnics. For instance, these comments were given when asked a hypothetical question on their feelings when witnessing a band of drunken and loud Poles on the public transport:

'I pretend I'm English'

'I would stand and tell them not to behave like idiots'

'What can you do? But it's a shame because it is true, I've seen it'

'Very much indeed, it bothers me... because I am in a different country and people look at our nation as Polish, and they just think: «My God what kind of nation it is»'.

The crucial element of that discourse is its ambiguity. Here, Poles are trapped by their own acceptance of nationalistic and essentialising understandings of ethnicity. Shame – the emotion of committing a social gaffe – is the result of their perception that nations, groups, people like the 'Poles', 'French' and 'English' are 'natural' and share specific substantial and essential characteristics and if someone behaves 'badly', this will be extrapolated to all Poles, including the interviewee. In straight and simple words, this interviewee describes this as taking care of one's own reputation:

> Well, there could be two answers... First of all it is normal stuff. A group of English can drink and be loud as well. Second, it is a shame a bit... we are guests after all... I do not speak Polish then [in this situation] I hide even... not only because I am ashamed but to avoid a situation where they would start to be friendly with me and raise the fact that we are co-ethnics...

Others share the feeling and try to understand it:

> I feel ashamed. Because really do you see any other nationalities that are sitting on the benches in parks and drinking? I didn't see other nationalities... really... maybe some homeless English yes... but here you see Poles like in towns in Poland sitting on the benches in parks and drinking. National sport or what? Maybe some group of young English would walk with a Smirnoff or something but it usually covered... These Polish... it just reminds me Poland and that's sad.

> I feel a bit ashamed... from one side because they swear and are drunk and just get on my nerves and also because they are Polish so they bring shame to the ethnic group I belong to.

Although these comments have several additional meanings and possible interpretations of their functions, the argument here is that both discursive

strate-gies point to a strong emotional role the distancing, ambiguity, criticism and often hostility towards co-ethnics play in the everyday speech and performed attitudes of Polish migrants. So often recorded by researchers, they are not, however, a mere description of facts, they are not simply statements of how the things are. I argue that they hide a layer of much deeper meanings and should be treated as a social commentary and resistance to dominant hegemonic narratives and categories rather than empirical accounts of true relationships between Polish migrants. To understand this we must now contrast what most of Polish migrants say with what they do and the social and collective features of their migratory route and modes of settlement.

Paradox of Trust and Ethnicity

Despite migrants' eagerness to depict co-ethnics as ruthless and immoral, the fact is that most Polish migration has been facilitated by pre-existing social networks and these connections are vital for both mobility and settlement purposes. As many studies have shown, migration from Poland is mostly network driven (Ryan et al. 2008; Sumption 2009; White 2011; Iglicka 2008; Grabowska-Lusińska, Okólski 2009), although as Okólski and Kaczmarczyk argue (2008) this tendency varies from country to country and that after the EU accession the pull factor of the labour market has stimulated more individualistic and less network driven migration strategies. Nevertheless, for a vast number of migrants migration to London depended on whom someone knew, the amount of what scholars call 'migratory social capital' (Grabowska-Lusińska, Okólski 2009; Górny, Stola 2001) one could mobilise and what social networks in London one could tap into. The role of connections and migratory social capital is not limited to the migration decision making process. Getting a job, accommodation or advice from informal sources seem to be the preferred method for Polish migrants. In ethnographic studies in London boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, Redbridge and Lewisham (Garapich 2007; Garapich and Parutis 2009; Garapich 2009a) or large surveys (Iglicka 2009, p. 113; Sumption 2009) the vast majority of respondents, when asked about how they found employment, stressed the role of friends, family and informal referrals. In addition, as I showed elsewhere, the migration industry (Garapich 2008) has institutionalized informal networks of support and advice and mutated into a multimillion pounds business affecting various aspects of Polish ethnic institutional life. On more intimate and social level the majority of migrants who would eagerly engage in distance making and reproduce the hostile attitude towards other Poles are very likely to spend most of their time with co-ethnics, working with them, living with them, spending free time with them, attending the Polish church, going to Polish shops or relying on various services of co-ethnic networks.

As Irek rightly notes (Irek 2011) this presents individuals – and researchers – with paradox, since expressions of distance and hostility are not matched by what people actually do. This paradoxical situation is a source of tension and ambiguity as people on the daily basis are confronted with contradiction between ideological aspects of the notion of ethnicity and its daily practical implementation. The conflict

between the implicit egalitarianism of nationalistic discourse essentializing the horizontal ethnic bonds and the particular goals of individuals lies at the heart of the answer on why is it that Polish migrants, when interviewed or when they get together or when conducting an on-line discussion, so enthusiastically engage in most negative description of fellow Poles. The ideological underpinning and moral obligations stemming from Polish nationalism present a normative framework which demands certain forms of behavior and a particular moral economy. Nationalism symbolically constructs a permanent state of Turnerian *communitas* (Turner 1995) – a deep horizontal comradeship, a brotherhood of individuals whose backgrounds, differences and individual characteristics are erased at the expense of communal, egalitarian, collective and unifying entity (Anderson 1991, p. 7) – the nation. As the father of Polish nationalism, Roman Dmowski says: 'Men are first and foremost members of a nation; only secondly are they divided into social classes within the nation [...] the first commandment of the citizen's catechism is solidarity, a sense of union with the entire nation' (Millard 1994, p. 111).

But the nation is also a moral entity and it is this equation between moral and ethnic community, described by Chałasiński as one of the most important aspects of Polish national identity (Chałasiński 1968), which is a source of tensions among Poles. Traditionally, these moral obligations had strong militaristic meanings and led the 'nationally aware' gentry to construct its role as the sole educator of the masses' sense of national belonging which needs to be stimulated in order to rise against foreign oppressors. Relative lack of success in creating a unified front with the gentry as leaders, leads the dominant classes to keep asking: 'why don't the masses rise up against the occupiers?' – a question, according to Szacki, which defined the central problem of Polish nationalism (Szacki 1987). This question highlights the uneasy relationship between social classes in Poland and shows how the horizontal language of ethnicity and nationalism ('we are all Poles') obscures vertical power relations between different groups. Freedom in dominant Polish national discourse is thus seen as freedom of the constructed whole (the nation) from foreign powers, not the individual freedom from social and economic inequalities or uneven power positions. Thus, in many ways Polish nationalism, by symbolically leveling class distinctions, was actually reproducing existing power-relations within Polish society. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1991) refer to these modes of perception as hegemonic discourses of ethnicity and nationalism which see ethnic groups as bounded and homogeneous entities where ethnic solidarity and cultural inner cohesiveness is the desirable norm. Ideologies of nationalism (Anderson 1991) link ethnicity and morality, emphasizing a sense of communal obligations towards others who are assumed to share the same essential traits, cultural meanings and symbols. This tendency has the effect of overlooking social class and inequality, especially the role of power relations that influence individuals, groups and families in their daily lives.

Moreover, this tendency also overlooks peoples' ability to contest, negotiate and rebel against dominant narratives produced by the elites. People in their daily lives find it hard to live in such a state of contradiction between the normative obligation of solidarity and trust to fellow Poles and the fact that it may carry a level

of risk inherited in all encounters with strangers. Hence, as producers of culture, Poles construct their own meanings, narratives and ways of making sense of ethnic and moral bonds. It is here that the need to resist and contest the dominant equation of moral and ethnic community arises and it is here that we find an explanation of why Polish migrants so eagerly engage in discursive hostility which perplexes so many researchers. The answer lies in treating these narratives as myth-making practices contesting the dominant narratives and dealing with the contradictions every normative framework presents.

The Myth of Polish Conman

The fact that people say one thing and do another is a dominant source of conceptual and emotional tension between the ideologies, ethical guidelines and normative systems of rules and values born out of a process of tradition-making, on the one hand, and everyday reality, its complexity and context, on the other. This tension, contradictions and conflicting world perceptions are dealt with in numerous ways. Many anthropologists focus on the role played by myth-making and the production of specific narratives that aim to overcome, control or obscure the apparent contradictions between what people say and do, between the sets of norms and values and mundane, everyday practicalities of everyday lives. Myths, as Anthony P. Cohen observes (1975, p. 13), among many features and functions are: '[...] a means by which men make use of elements in their sociocultural experience to mediate the contradictions with which social life confronts them [...]' and '[...] used to reconcile society to inevitable truths, and to resolve or render tolerable the contradictions which appear in social life'. According to Levi-Strauss, 'the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction' (1963, p. 229) – they resolve an internal, logical conflict between the binary oppositions; in our case the opposition between the ideal and the practical, between the 'ought' and the 'is'.

The dominant nationalistic discourse, by emphasizing the dominance of the collective over individual, imposing moral obligations on members of a group and sacralizing the doctrine of sacrifice to liberate the state, manages also to explain why ideals of nationalism are not yet realized, why the majority of members of Polish society were not actively engaged in the nationalist struggle of the 19th and the 20th century, why the message of the elites so often falls on deaf ears of yet 'uneducated' masses. However, we must be careful not to overestimate the ability of the elites to project their myths and narratives over the members of the society, who do not share their positions of power. In fact, strong counter-narratives are also at play resisting and questioning this hegemony and these off-set the control of cultural production from part of the elites. Using the understanding of myth by Cohen or Levi-Strauss I argue that the story that Polish migrants are so engaged in is a myth-producing performance and should be treated as a particular set of discursive performative actions, a narrative that tries to ease and diffuse the cognitive tensions stemming from the disjunction between the dominant ethos imposed from above and the grey reality of everyday life.

I call the discursive agency which I interpret here as the *myth of the Polish conman*. Its power and attractiveness stems from contrasting two identities belonging to two sets of realms in order to create a sense of unease – national identity, with all its symbolic power, implicit morality and notion of romantic sentiment, combined with the *conman*, an embodiment of violation of rules and norms governing society. In contrasting these two identities while telling the myth the teller demonstrates that they belong to two totally different social orders and that we should not mix them together. The myth contests, therefore, the notion that ethnic ties translate into moral obligations, that ethnicity is in fact a form of kinship imposing moral duties. By telling a story of a Polish migrant cheating or breaking social norms, individuals send a message that in a labour market, in real life, ethnicity is not an a priori source of mutual trust or expanding networks or getting along. It may help, but it is also prone to exploitation and abuse.

It is interesting to note that in my research often those who showed the greatest hostility towards co-ethnics, were construction workers. This was not just about competition, although there was an element to it. But it seems that the answer lays in the fact that construction industry labour market, with its casual, flexible, informal structure and informal recruitment practices, is an area where social capital and mutual trust are highly valued assets and the price of a broken promise or dishonesty is high. Polish builders, then, constantly remind each other that just being a Pole is not enough to draw conclusions about their ability to keep a promise. In fact, a naïve faith in the link between ethnic ties and morality may be a source of deep disappointment, broken promise, lost contract. The myth is a daily, constant and casual way of reminding people about the relativity of the ethnic bonds.

There are other social functions of the myth that should also be taken into account. First of all, telling the myth acts as moral preaching – it is a reminder about moral obligations that, however unrealistic and broken in everyday life, remain important. By stigmatizing and condemning the perceived immoral behavior of Poles, people are projecting an ideal mode of ethnic ties that bring with them specific moral obligations towards co-ethnics. By showing what is wrong, the desirable state of affairs is established. However, this is a function that stays in the domain of the ideal – it is an ideal to which the group should aspire. For instance, this form of moral ordering is behind frequent complaints about cohesiveness of Polish Diaspora in comparison to other presumingly highly organized diaspora groups, i.e. Jewish, Ukrainian etc. On the other hand, it acts also as a reminder that ethnic links do not have to (by definition) lead to enhanced cooperation and higher level of trust. By telling and retelling a simple story, the teller then both contests as well as reproduces the norm that ethnic ties translate into moral obligations. In case of the builders it acknowledges that ethnic ties do have value but may not be enough to form a basis for a rational decision.

The second function is also pragmatic and has value for everyday interactions. By its immediate, and 'reality checking' character it can be considered much more important than the 'idealistic' one. It is a case of what may be called – reversing Michael Billing famous term (Billing 1995) – strategic banal 'anti-nationalism'. Through individual activities, day-to-day actions and agency dominant discourses

concerning nationalism, ethnicity and morality are challenged. It says: 'ok, this is the ideal, but this is the reality'. It is a decoding message to make people aware of the perils of putting too many expectations on thinking stemming from particular ideology.

The message rationalizes an emotional sentiment or, as Max Weber saw it, the 'affective criteria' about not treating other Poles as a source of social/human capital and trust only because they are co-ethnics. 'Don't trust someone just because he is a Pole' – says someone who engages in the myth telling. Among people looking for work this information forms a piece of crucial knowledge – the same as that concerning employee insurance on building sites, or about how to find accommodation and so on. It is a reminder that sentiments do not count very much on the labour market, or rather that the idea that they count may be wishful thinking. In Poland people do not trust other co-ethnics a priori, of course, but it is clear that through the search for information, networks and capital, ethnic ties seem more valuable when abroad. This is true to some extent. The circles of Polish friends, the migration chain networks, the booming migration industry and ethnic economic niche are a proof that ethnic ties do, indeed, translate into business, cooperation, economic interest and, in certain circumstances, are an important asset. However, as with all sentiments and ties based on an ideology and an imagined vision of 'sameness', this assumption is vulnerable to abuse. The 'Polish conman' myth is a reminder to all that it is nice to talk in Polish with a stranger but being Polish is not a prerequisite of trust, cooperation and friendship. Ethnicity in this narrative is presented as a double edged sword: it may be useful as a potential platform where people can share resources but due to its emotional character it can easily be abused. Knowledge of this ambiguity is transferred via the myth of a Polish conman.

But there is another layer of meanings which makes this story particularly popular. The ambiguity expressed by contesting the link between morality and ethnicity is a constant reminder of internal class differentiation of Polish society and that Poles are diverse vertically in terms of access to power, wealth, education and visible display of status. As noted earlier, narratives by Polish migrants about their co-ethnics are often woven around the ways by which class differences are established – through education, behavior, geographical location (rural-urban), appearance, language, tendency to abuse alcohol or foul language, sexism, dress, social gaffes etc. In this case, playing down of ethnic affinity is a necessary outcome of raising class distinctions. These distinctions are set to prevent people from being associated with the 'wrong crowd'. As I noted, Polish migrants are extremely sensitive to this particular issue – that misbehaving, lower class and generally not 'presentable' Poles 'stain' the reputation of the entire group. The external ascription by the host society, the presentation of a large group of migrants under an ethnic label furthers this tendency as ethnicity is after all a form of class transgression. The use by the dominant British society of the ethnic label, requires thus a stronger and more powerful counter-response in the form of the constant story-telling about Poles being 'wolves' to each other. In a dialogical situation where the audience is the generalized positive reference group – the British – the need for strengthening these class distinction increases. Thus the myth-telling opens up the ethnic category to

include social class as a marker of identity. In this case, 'being Polish' looses its class neutrality and assumed egalitarian undertones, as a nationalistic ideology would like it to be, and becomes associated with low status characteristics – physical work, rural background, bad taste and the like. The myth, in essence, is an escape valve from rigid egalitarianism of the nationalistic concept of 'us'.

Conclusion

The popularity of the myth in the media, everyday discussions and its presence in the academic literature on Polish migrants stems from its multifunctional character and this article dwelled on just a few of them. They all relate to the complex world of meanings of hegemonic symbolic structures constructed by the elites, politicians, educational system and the media and reflect how these meanings are manipulated and redefined by everyday actions of people on the ground. Polish migrants seem to offer their own versions of social reality out there, their own constructions on what does it mean to be Polish or what is the relationship between class and ethnicity. The myth of Polish conman demonstrates that this relationship is a very important feature of making sense of the world – it both contests the hegemonic structures of meanings, and at the same time retains some of its more practical features. Ethnicity in this narrative proves to be a double edged sword in social relations and in a migration context, as both their values and threats increase – it can be an asset, as well as a source of disappointment or undesirable class transgression. The myth is a way to deal with these complex situations without becoming too dogmatic and idealistic or naïve and vulnerable.

The argument above puts also into perspective the commonly held view that Polish society suffers from a lack of crucial components of a healthy and prosperous society – social capital, trust and norms of reciprocity (Czapiński, Panek 2007). But from my perspective of researching migrants since the last 7 years, it seems that just because people express their reservations about ethnic ties, does not mean that they do not engage in mutual cooperation, trust building, civil society construction and so on. It is the very categories that are used that are questioned, not the idea of trust. It would be overwhelmingly wrong and a-sociological to assume that Polish migrants, due to their migration, become more cunning, mean, untrustworthy and lacking the basic social norms. On the contrary, the very existence of a vast and strong multiple transnational social fields and multiple ways of belonging and being shows that Poles strongly rely on and value their co-ethnic connections. It is the hegemonic category of ethnic/moral bond which generates hostility. It seems that their criticism, disdain and contempt relate more to the ideologies of the nation and the dominant cultural norms, which derive from the history of Polish nationalism, than to direct reality.

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Streszczenie

W badaniach nad polskimi migrantami, jednym z powracających tematów jest pytanie o wrogość Polaków względem innych członków własnej grupy etnicznej. Problem analizowany jest przez pryzmat konkurencji w dostępie do zasobów ekonomicznych, załamania się więzi solidarności z powodu migracji lub zmian w systemie wartości w wyniku indywidualizacji życia społecznego. Wyjaśnienia problemu dotykają jego ważnych aspektów ale nie opisują złożoności tego fenomenu. Mamy w tym przypadku do czynienia z pewnym paradoksem, ponieważ wyrażanie wrogości czy społecznego dystansu w stosunku do członków tej samej grupy etnicznej, charakterystyczne dla polskich migrantów, stoi w sprzeczności ze społeczną i kolektywną cechą polskiej kultury migracyjnej. W niniejszym artykule przyjmuję perspektywę antropologiczną analizując praktyki tworzenia mitu wyjaśniającego dlaczego polscy respondenci tak gorliwie podkreślają, iż Polacy za granicą nie współpracują ze sobą i nie można im ufać. Uważam, iż waga tego mitu dla aktorów społecznych wynika z ich siły do kontestowania dominujących polskich narracji, które stawiają znak równości pomiędzy więziami etnicznymi i moralnymi, oraz możliwości wprowadzenia pojęcia klasy społecznej w zakładanej homogeniczności grupy etnicznej.