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I. CONCEPTUALISING IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND CLASS
IN RECENT MIGRATION STUDIES

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New Wave, Old Ways? Post-accession Migration from Poland Seen from the Perspective of the Social Sciences

Abstract

The unprecedented post-accession wave of Polish migration to the UK has resulted in research comparable to that on the Great Migration in the USA. This research uses similar methods and analytical categories to those of the Chicago School, involving an analogy between Polish migrants and Black slaves and stereotypes that have been perpetuated by generations of scholars up to the present day. This article suggests that new social qualities are emerging in contemporary migration from Poland to the UK because of the travel and communication revolutions, questioning the adequacy of former research methods in its analysis.

Key words: migration studies, post-accession migration, research paradigm, ethnocentrism, Znaniecki

The post-accession wave of Polish migration to the UK is said to be unprecedented in both magnitude and structure, triggering the attention of social scientists and resulting in a corpus of research comparable in size to that of the Great Migration of Blacks from south to north within the USA. And strangely (or perhaps typically) enough, this research is being conducted with the use of similar methods and analytical categories to those used by scholars from the early Chicago School who made the now forgotten analogy between Polish migrants to the USA and American Blacks migrating north to cities like Chicago, as well as using the same working methods, analytical concepts and attitudes towards the researched group, and even the same stereotypes. Robert E. Park, William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, who established these standards, were revolutionary for their times, but a century has passed since then, and although building on the achievements of the earlier scholars is a standard procedure in social sciences, when the original meaning is forgotten and the main body of research takes on a life of its own, the research comes to resemble what Bruno Latour (2005) has called the chicken in America running around after its head has been cut off. It thus seems quite legitimate to question whether the chicken can see the new phenomena at all, and the most likely answer is no, for it is highly probable that, in the process of being constructed and theorized in the old way, whatever 'new' might be happening is being overlooked.

Based on contemporary research, one might think that, apart from quantitative changes, the 'new migration' is in fact old: the analytical concepts that date back to Park's research on the Great Migration are producing strikingly similar results in our times. We still use the same criteria of analysis, and although the tried and trusted pull-push factors are now being recast as the 'exponential dynamics' behind decisions to migrate (Favell 2008), in describing them we are still using the same hierarchical concepts of structure based on age, gender, borders, nations and classes, which appear again and again in slightly different configurations: the same hierarchical concept of culture and the same concept of distance are used, and the same social and emotional problems described, with the same migrant figure of the marginal man trapped between conflicting cultures. Very similar biographies are quoted, the main motifs revolving around the balance of economic and emotional loss and gain resulting from migration. Even though modern analytical concepts such as social and cultural capital or social networks are being used in research on Polish post-accession migration in Europe, the texts always boil down to describing the good old factors mentioned above, and if the author is Polish, a reference to the country's painful history is a must. The configuration of factors is different from those described in earlier waves, but this seems to be the only observable novelty of the 'new' migration to the UK as described by researchers.

One could explain this continuity with the universality of human condition: after all, basic human needs and emotions have remained the same ever since the first recorded texts proved it. But then there is a general understanding that social reality (not only in Europe) has changed immensely in recent years. Technological advances have made it possible to see and talk to another person 'live' online without going to great expense, so that neither mobility nor communication are any longer the privileges of the rich. Cheap mobile phones, equipped with more memory than the computer responsible for sending people to the moon, and satellite technology, which has solved the problem of location, make it possible to be connected from the most marginal locations at any time and to organize a computer teleconference to meet with a group of friends, each being on a different continent, to have an on-line family celebration or to talk to complete strangers who share the same interest. Cheap airlines offer affordable and quick transport to the majority of world's destinations, not to speak of the new political situation within Europe without the Iron Curtain and with an enlarged EU zone where even more people can travel without any formal difficulties. Space and its relation to time have dramatically changed, yet in social analysis we still apply the same criterion of 'proximity' as existed a hundred years ago, and even the 'new' concept of 'spatiality' is but a different name for distribution in traditionally understood space, chopped up by different vertically constructed borders. Yet, it is enough to observe people to see that this concept is no longer universally applicable, that physical distance measured in metres and kilometres does not matter in the way it used to: people may be travelling with other passengers on one train, yet they do not talk to the person sitting next to them but to somebody on the other end of their mobile connection, who may be many miles away.

The neighbourhood is rapidly becoming an irrelevant idea, the nation is increasingly losing its significance, becoming but a symbol of the past, and class does not need to exist at all in cyberspace. A look at the web is enough to confirm that at every single moment of time there appear millions of new informal networks, which have been formed by real people and have no definable structure but can be instantly mobilized for political action, with unpredictable social consequences of great magnitude. There is not even a name for these ephemeral 'unstructured structures', for the majority of the newest analytical concepts available to the social sciences are 'new' only in relation to the Great Migration. Introduced in the middle of the previous century, where the classic unity of time, space and action was still valid, they are outdated when used with contemporary phenomena, as are the research methods that oblige one to quote intellectual genealogies and to adhere to theoretical frameworks that prevent the development of a completely new approach. The standard questionnaires do not allow for much flexibility, but split the social world into a priori set categories that lack the ability to account for whatever 'new' might be happening, while the obligatory written consent of participants not only automatically excludes scholars from research into informality, a major part of social reality, but also makes it almost impossible to obtain a sample large enough to reveal anything that has not been recorded before. It happens very often that a really sophisticated theorization is made and several different publications appear based on one sample of just thirty to fifty participants. Similarly, statistically representative data on migration are obtained in the ever-popular 'ethnosurveys', which, although much closer to reality than the standard surveys, are still based on the illogical assumption that even those respondents whose lives depend on secrecy (in other words, those who lie to the taxman) will confess all in writing to migration researchers.

While the lack of adequate methods for research into qualitatively new phenomena connected with the communication revolution is by no means a peculiarity of Polish migration studies, but rather a general weakness of the contemporary social sciences, the persistence of the standards set by the scholars of the early Chicago School and the extent of their influence on research into Polish migration, especially that done in the West, is extraordinary. Although in the introduction to *Polish Peasant in America* (1927) Thomas and Znaniecki wrote that subject had not been chosen because of some peculiarity of Polish migrants, but rather to illustrate a theoretical point, both the theoretical construction of the argument and the figure of the migrant peasant himself became peculiar. Poland became a white version of 'dark Africa', while Sambo, the plantation slave, a superstitious, lazy imbecile, a drunkard and a family abuser, resistant to education and acculturation and 'chronically given to stealing and lying', became Polish. Indeed, some paragraphs from *Polish Peasant* read like the infamous *American Negro Slavery* by Ulrich B. Phillips, but unlike the latter, which was discredited within thirty years of its publication, Thomas and Znaniecki's work was a groundbreaking study of migration: its value for sociology is unquestionable, it set the standard for generations of migration research and, since it was in English, it was instantly available to international audience.

The Polish peasant, who was an illustration of a very ethnocentric theoretical point, became synonymous with the social bottom: the poor migrant from

a backward country with no culture of his own and no education whatsoever, who needed to be acculturated to the standards of the superior, American civilization, a handy template for all the later research on migrants from any disadvantaged country to the USA or to Europe. Although contemporary research in social sciences claims to be free from this early ethnocentrism and the concept of assimilation has been declared passé, the universal figure at the social bottom is still prominent in the mainstream of migration research, having been re-dressed as a social actor with 'low cultural capital', at the bottom of the ethnosurvey, the 'unskilled undocumented migrant with no language skills', condemned to a life of utter misery unless he is helped by the privileged but generous members of the society.

The image of Poland, sadly lagging behind the civilized world, presented as a poor, underdeveloped country inhabited by drunk, ignorant but envious and mean peasants, religious to the point of superstition but harassing their wives and children, totally uncivilized and not capable of self-help or self-government, struck a responsive note not only among Western social scientists eager to explore the primitive cultures and social pathologies of communism and anti-Semitism, but also amongst the Polish literati, who had long cherished the negative national auto-stereotype fostered by the occupying powers, whether the three neighbouring empires of Austria, Prussia and Russia, Hitler's Third Reich, or later the Soviet Union. Again the dynamics of stereotyping and auto-stereotyping were here very similar to those that applied to American Blacks, and there was the same combination of rejection, shame and patronization, but since the context had been lost, this seemed to be a distinctive feature of the research on Polish migration and a 'badge of Polishness'. One could quote quite a few English-speaking authors' books on Poland and on Polish migrants with a description of a Polish village biased by this attitude. Unfortunately the great bulk of native Polish research that could have counterbalanced this bias has never been translated. It is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the 'new' migration that the voices of 'the Poles themselves' can be now heard, for there suddenly emerged numerous publications by young, English-speaking Polish scholars who, apart from their linguistic skills, have political and economic opportunities to affiliate with institutions in Western Europe and to conduct research there.

However, this does not mean that the old bias has completely disappeared: the envious, mean, drunk, cheating Pole, who compensates for his 'low culture capital' by participating in informal social networks, is still very much visible, being present even in the interpretation of Polish narratives in cyberspace as a shameful background to the highly educated, young Polish migrant unhappy at being down-skilled – very much in the spirit of Znaniecki's classical dichotomy. Of course Znaniecki, although a Pole himself, was no less biased than the later Western scholars. He was writing from the position of a privileged, educated heir to the Polish romantic tradition that had divided Polish migration into the 'noble' political exile of elites and the ignoble economic migration of the dark masses, the tradition of the strongly positivist zest in his native region (which had to face the Prussian *Kulturkampf*) aimed at elevating the 'dark peasantry'. Here they were: the soldiers and poets expelled from their fatherland, and the dark masses in need for help, migrating to escape hunger. The division became a gold standard for Polish migration

studies, which in Great Britain was represented by Jerzy Zubrzycki's widely known study of Polish migrants, *Soldiers and Peasants* (1988). There is an obvious structural similarity between the two, and it should come as no surprise that Zubrzycki, a soldier himself, wrote his doctoral dissertation under Znaniecki's supervision.

The present generation of scholars researching the 'new' Polish migration in Europe have found themselves trapped in this heritage, despite recent efforts to move beyond it (Garapich 2011), for as long as they use the same, hierarchically constructed analytical categories as nation, status, class or 'culture capital', whatever is written now will still be just a quantitatively modified repetition of whatever was written before, and they will become entangled in the post-colonial rhetoric of patronizing and shame, even if the figure of the unskilled peasant might have been upgraded to that of the sneaky plumber undercutting local prices. But while Thomas and Znaniecki's original research put the case of the Polish peasant in the wider context of other group's experiences, contemporary studies of Polish migration (except for the studies of general demographic trends within Central and Eastern Europe, e.g. Okólski 2004) tend to be constructed exclusively around this particular nationality (with the concept of nation being preferred to ethnicity). In more than twenty pages of a recent bibliography of publications on Polish migration (Kicingier and Wienar 2007), only three actually compare different ethnic groups abroad (e.g. Praszalowicz 2005). Similarly, of the plethora of publications on Polish immigration to the UK since 2004 only a few draw analogies with other nationals, these again being mostly new EU members (e.g. Spencer et al. 2007), for the now fashionable 'comparative perspective' consists mainly in putting together in one volume several articles by different authors describing different national groups (e.g. Triandafyllidou 2006), rather than making a consistent analysis of the similarities and differences between them.

The new face of east-west migration (Favell 2008) has not yet been appreciated, for current research is just the newest facelift of what has been done ever since migration research started. There is a remarkable resemblance between the phenomena connected with Polish migration to the UK, described as new, and whatever had been described earlier, in other regions and other population groups, and earlier in Polish migration to the UK, although admittedly this migration was not yet adequately described. We can name just a few themes in the new research that are prominent in most recent publications on the subject (e.g. Burrell 2009), listed on Ann White's Polish Migration Website:¹

1. A different mix of permanent, circular and temporary migration strategies and the disappearance of asylum and transit migration. A very similar mix has been present since the early 1990s, when Poland ceased to be a socialist country. There was no longer a political reason for asylum, and consequently the UK ceased to be a transit country for migration to the USA and Canada, with some exceptions like a continuing wave of Polish Roma claiming asylum on the grounds of racial discrimination. Fourteen years before the 'new' wave of migrants arrived, there was the

¹ [online:] <http://www.bath.ac.uk/polis/networks/polish-migration/>, accessed 12.01.2012.

same ambivalence and the same speculations by scholars concerning the permanency of migration as it is now, for although obtaining official permanent residence was difficult for Poles, it was not impossible, and apart from those who stayed as spouses or small business owners, there was an army of informal 'over-stayers' on tourist and student visas, who had no permanent status in the UK but also no intention of returning to Poland for any purpose other than a short visit to renew a visa. The situation was made even more complex by the fact, that from the death of Stalin till 2004, official permanent status in the UK was desired because, amongst other obvious advantages, it made it possible to make frequent return trips to Poland.

2. The different exponential dynamics behind the decisions to migrate: the prevalence of economic motives with the total disappearance of political ones, and the simultaneous appearance of the phenomenon of the 'searchers': young educated migrants in search of experience and adventure described in the 'new' wave – not a new phenomenon itself, but still a refreshing departure from the prevailing animal symbolism in migration studies. Very much the same mixture of reasons was characteristic for the post-transition migration of the 1990s. And the 'searchers', usually language students, were increasingly present from the 1970s, with even greater visibility in the 1980s.

3. The predominance of the highly educated and skilled, though with simultaneous down-skilling is by no means 'new'. It was there with the earlier waves of Polish migrants, and it was particularly visible during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s with the wave of highly educated Polish professionals claiming political asylum (which does not necessarily mean that the reason for their migration was not economic), and it was a common practice for the wave of informal migrants of the 1990s (again, never appreciated for its real size) although the anti-communist bias made it difficult to appreciate the general level of education of the Polish population.

4. The different distribution of the sexes, with the seemingly equal proportion of men and women who migrated first, with the family following later. Gendering migration is by no means a new phenomenon peculiar to the new wave, and the migration of Polish female 'chain starters' had been happening throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with a peak in the earlier wave of the 1990s, which was connected with their informal employment.

5. The splitting of families and the emergence of the 'European orphans'. This is a classic theme of migration research. The problem has been known in literature since Homer, was discussed by Thomas and Znaniecki, and has increasingly been felt in Poland since the 1970s, when Poland was sending contract workers to neighbouring countries (and to the Middle East), while their families stayed behind, causing an acute social problem in the border areas. Similarly, the informal migrants whose numbers steadily increased during the 1980s also left their families behind.

6. The articulation of class among migrants has always been there and is as old as research on Polish migration into the UK itself. Equally familiar is the problem of migrants becoming a new 'servant class', but it is coming to the fore again, as 'class' has returned to the favour of sociologists in the absence of any new analytical concepts.

7. The emergence of Polish transnational migration networks. Although the analysis of the new migration through the perspective of transnational networks is a major step away from the vertically constructed Chicago paradigms, neither the approach nor the networks themselves are distinctive of the 'new' wave. The whole process of Polish migration to the UK in the socialist period went through networks (with the exception of some political asylum-seekers), and if we may speak of any change, it was just the reverse, for after the opening of the UK border in 2004 an invitation from 'somebody' with permanent residence was no longer needed, and it became possible to migrate without knowing 'somebody'. Networks have traditionally filled the vacuum described by Thomas and Znaniecki between the family and the state in Poland, with 'nothing' in between (the list of Western scholars who were sucked into this vacuum would be quite long), and in the context of migration they were traditionally described under the same label as migration chains. The first works specifically on Polish migration in Europe using the concept of networks appeared already in the 1990s. As for the transnational perspective itself, it is still not free from methodological nationalism, as there is an epistemological abyss between different diasporas, and in practice the new texts are organized around the old analytical concepts of status, class and all types of capital.

8. The 'nomadisation of Europe' is by no means new and cannot be attributed specifically to Polish migrants. Apart from the disputable accuracy of the very term 'nomadisation', with the only nomads in Europe being 'Gypsies', the dramatic increase in mobility in Europe could already be observed after the fall of the Iron Curtain, when there was a comparable wave of informal migration of Poles to West European countries, the UK being very popular by the virtue of the favourable exchange rate, accompanied by equally big waves of Byelorussians, Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians and Romanian and Slovak Roma coming to Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK as traders, informal workers, self-employed or as businessmen, with a wave of western 'searchers' and employees of global corporations going in the opposite direction.

9. The significant influx of people from small towns rather than large cities in Poland and the relatively even distribution of migrants throughout the whole country in the UK rather than being concentrated in large centres, as well as the new relationship of the local with the global, with people identifying themselves with small localities rather than larger administrative units. Again, this is by no means a particularity of the new migration but has long been described by Polish researchers (Jaźwińska and Okólski 2001). The Polish peasant himself was not from a metropolis, nor were the migrants described by Zubrzycki (1988), the majority of whom originated from different provincial towns in the east of Poland, while in Great Britain, apart from the London suburbs, they were dispersed in different parts of the country, usually small towns and villages, where they were followed by the large but 'invisible' wave of informal migrants of the 1990s. And the 'new' dialectics of the local with the global has long been known and described, with a tendency to identify with small regional units becoming a basis of European regionalism.

So what, if any, are the distinctive features of the 'new' wave?

The obvious difference as compared to the previous periods is quantitative. With the increased number of immigrants, the 'critical mass' necessary to create a 'minority ethnic group' has been reached. 'Ethnic community' would be the standard term here if it was not for the fact that Poles do not tend to live in territorial clusters and do not like to organize themselves in groups other than informal networks. Despite this dislike, the Polish presence in the UK finally became visible: an ethnic market emerged with ethnically specific services such as shops, restaurants, the transport of goods and people to Poland, and highly specialized private medical care. Polish media appeared, new schools for Polish children, Polish students at English universities and Polish workers in factories, restaurants and hospitals, while a large proportion of formerly illegal workers, such as builders or drivers, became legally employed. Fortunes started to be made in ethnic niche businesses. But again, placed in the context of other migrant ethnic groups, the same phenomena can be observed ever since the time of the Great Migration, with the emergence of a Black middle class, teachers, clerks, ethnic businesses and the first millionaires to grow rich on ethnic products, the most famous of which were a skin whitening cream and pigs feet. In the Polish case this would probably be medical services and a dish of sauerkraut called *bigos*.

As one of the old migrants said, 'With all these shops and all these Poles around, England now feels more like home'. But for the new generation of migrants, often descendants of former smugglers and illegal workers, it is a very differently constructed 'home'. It is no longer a fixed place in a claustrophobically constructed space divided by different borders, but a welcoming, wide open cosmopolitan space in which they can reside if they choose to, without making any ideological commitments. They have become the Cosmo-Poles.

And although one might claim that the cosmopolitan idea is nothing new and that it has become increasingly popular in the era of globalization, it was an old concept dating from before the communication revolution, reserved for the chosen circles of the rich and privileged, at the top of the social hierarchy, who had an economic margin of freedom to move conceptually 'above' the level of a single state, up to the level of humanity. With the communication revolution, the cosmopolitan idea is being transformed into a qualitatively new, horizontal category accessible to the *gens modestes*, the ordinary people, whoever they are and wherever they might reside. But since this new cosmo-identity is not hierarchical, actors do not have to choose between a single nationality, two nationalities or the whole of humanity. Unlike Park's marginal man, torn between two mutually exclusive cultures in a hierarchically constructed reality, the new migrant does not have the epistemological obligation of defining his or her 'self' as a Pole or a Brit, for these set categories do not apply to the horizontal world of informal networks. Here a migrant is just a node in an ever-changing universe which he is free to shape himself.

Thus, while it is quite safe to claim that the new wave of Polish migration has not yet been constructed as a new social phenomenon, the chances are that, due to the enormous amount of research it has attracted, once scholars overcome the theoretical limitations of traditional social theories, the case will become a milestone

for the next generations of migration researchers across the world, with the 'Cosmo-Pole' replacing the Polish peasant.

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Streszczenie

Bezprecedensowo wielka poakcesyjna fala migracji Polaków do Wielkiej Brytanii zaowocowała liczbą badań porównywalną z dorobkiem szkoły chicagowskiej w odniesieniu do Wielkiej Migracji w USA. Okazuje się też, że badacze współczesnej polskiej migracji stosują metody i kategorie analityczne podobne do używanych przez badaczy ze szkoły chicagowskiej, włączając w to analogię między polskimi migrantami a czarnoskórymi niewolnikami oraz stereotypy powielane przez pokolenia naukowców, aż do czasów nam współczesnych. W niniejszym artykule zwracam uwagę na jakościowo nowe zjawiska społeczne rozwijające się we współczesnych migracjach z Polski do Wielkiej Brytanii. Zjawiska te są wynikiem rewolucji w sposobach komunikacji werbalnej i podróżowania, stawiającej pod znakiem zapytania przydatność wcześniejszych metod badawczych do analizy nowej rzeczywistości społecznej.