

LONDON'S POLISH BORDERS

Class and Ethnicity among Global City Migrants



London, Hammersmith



Victoria Coach Station



Jasło, SE Poland

DRAFT REPORT

Important:

This is a preliminary report on qualitative research undertaken as part of an ESRC-funded project ‘Class and Ethnicity: Polish migrants in London’.

Please do not quote without the author’s permission. The final report will be produced in Autumn 2006.

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Introduction

The following report summarises the main findings of a research project conducted at CRONEM, University of Surrey between October 2005 and May 2006. The research is a multidisciplinary study of recent migration between Poland and UK. It consists of an analysis of (i) quantitative data gathered from Labour Force Survey, Workers Registration Scheme and the Census and (ii) qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation and intensive press and internet searches. It aims to uncover the social, economic and cultural processes, which lie behind the recent, highly publicised phenomenon of migration from the New Accession (East European) countries to the UK. This report summarises the qualitative part of the research which focuses on how Polish migrants interpret their class position and ethnic affiliation and what effects these perceptions have on the multicultural landscape of London.

Main findings:

- We are witnessing an accelerating, circular, non-linear and open-ended migration where transnational orientations are dominant.
- Because they are moving between two social class hierarchies Polish migrants use a double reference strategy to make sense of their class position.
- Community is fragmented into several sub-groups, reflecting the super-diverse nature of London as a place where cultures and ethnicities meet but also where people are also constantly on the move, as they cross national and social boundaries.
- Polish migrants show a complex set of attitudes towards British multiculturalism; their whiteness, perceived very often as an asset tends to be more important than their Polish identity.

Methodology

a) As stated above, this report summarises data gathered through the methods of qualitative research. These methods, widely used in social anthropology and sociology, generate data through observation, interviews, or verbal interactions and focuses on the meanings and interpretations of the participants, i.e. how they make sense of the social world around them and how their understandings shape their role as active social agents in everyday life.

For many years migration research has used multilocal ethnography to analyze both ends of the migration chain. We followed suit by interviewing 50 people in various locations across London and 14 people in five different locations across Poland:

- 1. Sokółka – a town (25 thousand) in NE of Poland**
- 2. Bohoniki – a village (30 households) 10 km from Sokolka**
- 3. Pawłowice – a village (1000 inhabitants) in Western Poland**
- 4. Jasło – a town (45 thousand) in SE of Poland**
- 5. Kraków – third biggest town in Poland (circa 1m inhabitants)**

b) Our respondents in London were chosen after taking into consideration all the significant demographic features available from British databases (WRS, LFS) and from statistics in Poland. Respondents in Poland, though, were chosen among friends or family of the respondents we have interviewed in London. Due to the considerable social diversity among those migrating from Poland we were careful not to over-use the snow-ball sampling and to maximise the multiple entry method where accessing the different social environments in which respondents live in was a priority. Some (20%) respondents were recruited through friends or relatives but we were careful to generate a diverse educational, gender and occupational profile. Others were recruited randomly; some were contacted directly through the researcher's networks. By using these different ways of recruiting respondents and keeping close to the basic

demographic features of the migrant cohort we ensured that we could enter as many networks, social circles and types of migrants as possible. Nevertheless, as in most migration studies in such a dynamic and fluid social environment, the representativeness of our respondents should be treated with care.

SAMPLE

<p>Age:</p> <p>Below 25: 14 (28%) 25-40: 31 (62%) 40 plus: 5 (10%)</p>	<p>Education:</p> <p>Higher education: 11 (22%) Secondary: 34 (68%) Students: 5 (10%)</p>	<p>Sex:</p> <p>Female: 23 Male: 27</p>
<p>Geographical background</p> <p>Rural: 14 – 28% Small town – up to 50 thousand – 18 – 36% Town more than 50 thousand – 18 – 36%</p>		
<p>Occupation [in LONDON]:</p> <p>Manual labour in construction industry: [10, 20%] Construction industry subcontractors (owners of a company): [3, 6%] Couriers/drivers: [3, 6%] Catering/hospitality: [9, 18%] Cleaners/nanny: [9, 18%] Media: [4, 8%] Social service: [3, 6%] Industry: [3, 6%] Other: [6, 12%]</p>		

c) Timing: as the current migratory practices of Polish migrants started well before recent EU enlargement, we included a number of interviewees who had come to the UK earlier.

d) The respondents were asked to give an hour long interview in their native tongue where around 60-80 questions divided into 14 subsections were asked – please find

the interview guide at the end of the report. The semi-structured, open ended interview was designed to capture respondent's perceptions of their class, ethnicity and migration trajectories. In order to better understand the semantic complexity of the Polish spoken language a special Polish-English ethnographic glossary has been designed.

Transnational Europeans looking both ways

Our research so far shows the emergence of a transnational social space between Poland and UK depending on circulatory, back and forth movements of migrants lasting between a couple of months, frequent seasonal visits and several years. These visits were frequently repeated during the respondent's life cycle. These are overwhelmingly circulatory, non-linear migrations understood as a process rather than a one-off act.

Our respondents literally inhabit a world in between – both physically and mentally. 80% of our respondents make frequent visits to Poland, from 3 to 10 times a year. 70% of respondents maintain strong economic and life interest in their home community – i.e. buying land, investing in estates, businesses, education, job seeking, voting etc. 24% have bought or are planning to buy a flat or house from money earned in London, some even have done so during our research. Circular, temporal, non-linear patterns of migration are the norm.

What is even more striking and probably frustrating for policy makers and statisticians is that from migrant's perspective their migration plans are deliberately open ended, difficult to predict and highly opportunistic. Only 14% say that they will not come back to Poland. 20% say that soon they are going to come back and want to live in Poland.

The key, we believe is how the rest construct their life plans and a special strategy characterises these migrants. They undertake a strategy of what we call *intentional*

unpredictability - that is keeping options open, taking a ‘wait-and-see approach’ and adapting as life goes on, not excluding going back, bringing in families to the UK, travelling the world, moving further to US or Australia. So when we asked them about their plans to return to Poland we met these kinds of responses:

“I don’t know. No clue. Maybe yes, maybe not, maybe in three months maybe in ten years. I don’t know...”
(INT30_18.01_Lon)

“I don’t know...I’m not able to say now...”(INT4_6.11_Lon)

“I want to come back... but don’t know when”(INT20_12.12_Lon)

“Maybe I would prefer to come back, but my husband not... I can say that 50% I would like to go back and 50% to stay. Because I think that we have a good life here, and we are not sure what is in Poland” (INT15_7.12_Lon)

“Around a year or two. And also I wanted to go through a stage when I am commuting between Poland and London” (INT3_5.11_Lon)

I don’t have plans... really... you want to hear my plans? Ok, when the Heathrow project is over, in two years and then... you know I got very interested in what I do now... I like it, there is some fitness required there, we use some weird equipment sometimes, like that giant hands that lifts you up nine meters to fix something you know... it’s fun...and it’s a precise job... so the plans are that maybe London will be my base but won’t keep me here for ever, maybe I will do the same job but in different places of the world
(INT17_10.12_Lon)

I mean for some times I felt at home here, but now more and more I see it as an intermediary period and I want to go further on; at the beginning I had this excitement about London, I thought wow this is great, so much possibilities, total anonymity I liked it then to be lost in that crowd... but then quickly came back on the ground...because in Poland I had that structured life – a job from 8am to 4pm, in a suit, weekends drinking in pubs and discos ... but when I came here, you know this work on bicycles and all that – that was a bit surreal, total change... to live a bit of without responsibility, without knowing what the next day will bring.(INT36_25.01_Lon)

I don’t know really... I would like to go diving in South-East Asia... (INT37_1.02_Lon)

The statements above are the most typical. This strategy is also reflected in the statements made on the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) form where they were asked: *How long do you think you will stay in the UK?* Again, the replies reflect the contingency and fluidity of that migration flows. Around 43% stated that they intend to stay less than 3 months. 48% have left the question unanswered or ticked the 'I don't know' box (50/50).

Considering the average age of our respondents and their occupational patterns, the strategy of intentional unpredictability is perfectly adapted both to deregulated, flexible, contractual London service economy and the UK labour market in general and to the sometimes unstable socio-economic situation in Poland. It is useful for a broad range of individual migrants with various backgrounds, for instance:

- A farmer who comes back seasonally to cultivate his land and is not sure how long these trips can last
- A student who works in London but studies in Poland and comes to do his exams every month or two not excluding using his education in the UK
- A retired teacher who saves to buy a flat in her hometown but don't know what to do after that.
- A young businessman who after working few years in London secures a job in the Polish government.
- A respondent who tries to make a career in telecommunications, owns a bar in his native town in Poland but thinks also about working in Asia

These trans-European mobile actors open to all possibilities that arise, are probably the most striking feature of our research. This strategy has several advantages – it helps to adjust plans as life goes on, it increases the chances of success in London and it helps to keep a watchful eye on the labour market or property prices back home. So it helps them to take the best from both worlds. That strategy is part of what can be called the province-global city relationship. In this view migration from Poland to London has all features of moving from peripheries to the centre – and in fact for Poles coming from rural areas the

experience of moving to a larger town be it Warsaw, Krakow or London is seen as pretty similar. It involves moving from a familiar, known, emotionally safe but poor, closed and peripheral environment to an unknown, risky, unstable but potentially highly rewarding and full of educational possibilities wider world. Not surprisingly, a common pattern involves moving out of the parental home and going directly to London:

Q: So why did you decide to go to London?

A: Why? First of all... I mean, there was several reasons... one maybe seems less important but I was just bored with life to be honest, this monotony: work, home. My life looked like that – work, to see my girlfriend, then parents and to sleep...and to be honest I was too bored to look for work in Poland. I got used to that job in the brewery. I had good money so you know... it's not like that there is absolutely no job, if I were to look properly I would have found one. There is unemployment of course but... if you want you will find something. And then also that monotony at home; later before we married, myself and my girlfriend we lived together in our parents house... and then there was some sparks and misunderstandings between my mum and my wife, the situation wasn't cool really... I was going back from work tired and instead having some piece of mind there was some stress there; so we decided that we should leave, try something new, to reach further...

(INT31_20.01_Lon)

Looking at both worlds simultaneously has practical consequences. Research in Poland and London shows that this migration has all the features of an accelerating chain migration – existing migrants are constantly bringing in new ones and new ones create opportunities for their friends and kin back home. Living in London is a valuable asset in itself and by maintaining links with both ends of the migration chain our respondents built up social and economic capital that takes advantage of price differences and readiness to migrate by the fellow countrymen in Poland. And that readiness does not show signs of fading. In a survey last year 22% of Poles expressed their desire to migrate with a quarter pointing at the UK as the favourite destination (Social Diagnosis 2005). It is fair to say that the migration chain set up in the 1990s is now in full swing – 60% of our respondents confess to arranging work, helping with accommodation or other tips for their new coming friends or family. 40% say that they received direct similar help from others and almost everyone had in London someone they knew.

As our interviews in Poland show every migrant who comes back – for longer periods or just holidays – is a valuable source not only of hard currency but of information, potential employment and tips for would-be migrants at home. Migrants will sustain transnational links because they build their migratory social capital in Poland by being in London. Even if they come back, they make sure others replace them because this is how they raise their social status. This hugely increases the numbers and the density of migration networks through which communication about jobs, conditions, economic opportunities are being passed on. This expands London's Polish borders – to places like Sokółka in North-Eastern Poland where according to local authorities and people most knowledgeable about population movements and behaviour – priests – from 25 thousand inhabitants in last few years at least 2.5 thousand reside in or make frequent trips to London now.

So we conclude that the question many of British social policy makers may want to answer: 'are they going to come back or settle?' is a bit irrelevant and wrongly put. If at one stage of their life cycle they do come back – they make sure others replace them and if they do settle they will be a valuable source of social capital for newcomers. We believe that we are witnessing an established and sustainable mobility between Poland and UK that is likely to continue – on the condition of current economic growth – for years to come. Research in Poland shows that lifestyles represented by migrants, their independence and resourcefulness gains considerable respect and status.

In next chapter we will present what consequences this has for our respondents' understandings of their class position and how close is the tie between migration and social advancement.

Class and double reference strategy

Traditionally – both in the academia and public opinion – migration has been treated as a movement across countries and cultures but not as one where people move between one social stratification system to another. As Gillian 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. Ortnner suggests that this 'class blindness' can also be explained in terms of the pervasive ideologies of individualism and mobility (Bottomley, 1998)

We wanted to fill that gap and asked a number of questions regarding perceptions of class, life chances and inequality in Poland and UK. Moreover, establishing the above argument about temporality and fluidity of movements helps to understand perceptions of social class that our respondents express. What is striking was the reluctance to use the word 'class' itself – but the reason did not lie only in the legacy of the communist system where the notion of class dominated the official propaganda and is, therefore, avoided by both social scientists and the public. The other reasons lie in a set of individualistic, quite egalitarian, innovative, market and success-oriented values and aspirations which most of our respondents cherish – in fact a strong belief in an idealised meritocratic system of British free market economy does not allow class to be given any importance since acknowledging it would impede the readiness to respond to changing conditions and taking up opportunities that occur. It would involve agreeing that not all is possible here.

This self-encouraging device that denies the existence of class but promotes an individualistic, active and optimistic attitude towards social advancement is crucially important since the majority of people see migration as a step in climbing the social

ladder. Almost two thirds say that they have advanced socially. Even if someone sees itself as on the very bottom of the ladder, that person is still full of hope, belief in the myth of meritocratic paradise and individual skills recognition - like this person who at the time of the interview was unemployed and on the brink of sleeping rough on London streets:

Q: So where would you see yourself here?

A: Now, it would be on the very bottom...

Q: Ok, but you think it is easier to climb up here or in Poland?

A: Yes... it is much easier here...if I could get my chance, within six months I could bring my family because the possibilities here are just great...(INT3_27.10_Lon)

For most of our respondents moving out means moving up – financially and socially. We established the above by a number of different interview strategies:

- 1) By asking our respondents to develop a narrative about their life in both settings – Polish and British in relations to their lifestyles, occupation, money, status, work ethic, life chances, plans and to compare.
- 2) We also used diagrams designed for the International Social Survey Programme where respondents were asked to choose a model corresponding to both UK and Poland and then asked to point a place where they see themselves. Example:

These five diagrams show different types of society. Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes Poland and UK today. After that could you point where do you see yourself in that diagram in both countries?

Type A: A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom:

```
XXX
X
X
X
X
X
XXXXXXXXXX [PL]
```

Type B: A society like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom:

```
X
XX
XXX
XXXX [GB]
XXXXX
XXXXXXX
XXXXXXXX
```

Type C: A pyramid except that just a few people are at the very bottom

```
X
XX
XXX
XXXX
XXXXX
XXX
XX
```

Type D: A society with most people at the middle:

```
X
XX
XXX
XXXX
XXXX
XXX
XX
X
```

Type E: Many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom

```
XXXXXX
XXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXX
XXXX
XX
X
```

(INT10_24.11_Lon)

This method has its disadvantages of course as we refrain from ‘objective’ definition of class and ask the immigrants to define it for us. What it brings is the emphasis on the relational, situational and highly contested processes of construction of class consciousness. As Beverly Skeggs notes:

Class struggle is not just about collective action, for when are we aware of physically encountering a class? But it is also about the positioning, judgements and relations that are entered into on a daily and personal basis. Living class, which I’d argue is different from class-consciousness, is very much part of how class are made (Skeggs 2003)

‘Living class’ for our respondents is inseparable then from their transnational self-positioning. What is important is their constant use of two reference points to construct their class position – both in Poland and UK. As we seen, their pattern of mobility and frequent visits back home secures their position in Poland where they gain higher social status as a source of crucial information, potential contact etc along with an economic one. Our argument is, then, that having two reference points Poles successfully manoeuvre through two class systems making the best or trying to make the best of two worlds again. Of course, research in Poland showed that in the eyes of family and non-migrants sometimes economic gain was linked with status loss – but the ambiguity of what consist of status in highly mobile and undergoing a profound social change Polish society helps migrants to explain their migration act as a correct and most rational choice to be made – not only in terms of economics but wider life experience.

What we believe is important here is to move beyond the category of ‘economic migrants’ since our respondents talk about their migration in much broader perspective taking into account educational and self-realisation values such as learning the language, acquiring new skills, developing a sense of self-esteem, gaining experience etc. This another reason why Poles see their migration act as a upward social mobility process. A typical example is the narrative below:

I went to work, even though I didn't have to, since parents were giving me money but I wanted to get some experience... but in London everything I learned and my mentality totally changed. I am different person totally changed... even in last three months I changed after I got that blow from life... so everything has changed and London gave me a huge experience; I managed to get by during these harsh three months and I think that if I could make it alone in London I can do it anywhere on my own. So many different jobs I did here, in so many places there was at times just pure improvisation, in restaurants where I needed to know everything where I knew nothing, but I managed... so London is a great place to mature and to get experience – about people first of all, because you can meet people from all over the world; about tolerance, about cooperation with other people, about work... but first of all London helps you to mature.

(INT18_10.12_Lon)

This is a paradox which a lot of British as well as Polish social scientists encounter – people in low-earning positions, often with degrees accept their work and life in low-earning positions. But on the condition of intentional unpredictability and that a point of reference of one's social position is situated back home, reinforced by frequent visits – this is both psychologically and socially acceptable. Also the temporality of that employment helps people to see it in a context of treating London as a 'school of life'. In other words, Polish migrants (especially people with university degrees) are ready to make a step back in order to make a further leap forward later on – no matter if it is back in Poland or in the United Kingdom. Poles are ready to postpone their reward for few years for the price of gaining new networks, experiences, language, financial capital etc.

As research in Poland shows that social/economic status gained here is mostly consumed over there, these people do make the traditional British understanding of class a bit irrelevant. A builder, cleaner or au-pair, whom middle-class families in London may see as at the bottom of the social ladder, may sometimes have a flat, a house, a piece of land, or a café in the center of Krakow back home. Nation-centered, state-centered perspectives on income, status, class are, therefore, insufficient, one-dimensional and empirically false in the case of transnational migrants who are able to keep their feet in both places in an attempt to get the best of two worlds.

Ethnicity as double edged sword

This individualistic readiness to manipulate and contest common perceptions of class and a set of market oriented and individualistic attitudes is of crucial importance when we get to the other set of questions concerning ethnicity. We are used to the multicultural corporatist view which sees ethnic groups as bounded and homogeneous entities totally separate from others and which stress ethnic solidarity and cultural inner cohesiveness as a desirable norm. However, our research reveals that this picture is much more complex. Individualistic and fast-success oriented migrants see ethnicity sometimes as a liability and a double-edged sword rather than as an asset that brings benefits. It can be useful but as a basis of mutual trust between strangers competing on the same labour market it may be a source of deep disappointment. Ethnic solidarity is obviously a distant ideal sometimes:

There is a saying, you probably heard this that a "If a Pole will not do any harm he will not help you" ...and besides some started to make more money, for them it is big and so if he came from a small village in lubelskie [Polish south-east rural area] and having there 20 zlotys [3 pounds] felt really rich, when he got a thousand pounds it changes him completely he is so self-sure of himself... as I said a lot of friendships were broken here and did not pass the test...(INT5 _10.11_Lon)

Q: Now you work for a Pole...

A: Yes, and I said never again.

Q: Why?

A: I'm not going to swear...

Q: Go on, I am translating it into English anyway...

A: They are son of the bitches [skurwysny]... they cut the money, take care only for their ass and they just don't give a shit, if you are going to get beaten or what...nothing...they are going to take piss of you even...with my boss it's like that. I am maybe young but I don't like it.... (INT22 _19.12_Lon)

...I really dream of working in an English company and to have the lest contact with Poles possible...I don't know somehow I just can't digest it [the Pole's presence] (INT2 _22.12_Lon)

I heard a lot about Poles as bosses that they don't pay, that they make trouble, some of my friends had these kind of problems, but I haven't heard anything like that about the English.... I haven't heard before that Poles can be like that... (INT33 _21.01_Lon)

A: "...some time ago a Pole [employer] needed a plumber, I go to him, there he sits, kurwa and he asks what I do, that we will see later when he sees me working, but I risk also, because I risk that... you may risk that I know nothing and you will just fire me after one day, but I risk that I will work for you and you won't pay me...so you know both of us we risk...so we are in same shoes..."

Q: This is that trust you mentioned...

A: Of course it is, this is the basic.

Q: So this why you trust more an English employer than the Polish one?

A: Yes, and the thing is that with the English employer when you make your mark, your reputation, it spreads out, I built a network... he refers me to others and etc. and when I get the keys to some house and he trusts me, and I try to leave without leaving a sign that I was there. (INT21 _ 16.12_Lon)

Our respondents share very often urban myths about Polish employers etc. stressing the fact that ethnic affiliation is not a sufficient basis for mutual trust. As the above quotes show, the risks are always higher on the side of an employee.

Another clash between ethnicity and class occurs when Poles experience the uncomfortable feeling of being associated with the crowd they would rather distance themselves. Polish migrants being ethnically labelled from outside at the same time realise how diverse in terms of class the Polish society is and how far the myth of uniformity is from reality. So behaviour that makes them feel ashamed of other co-ethnics is a source of fear for their reputation, which is seen as crucial in the competition of the labour market and general acceptance from the British majority. Respondents tend to explain in rational-economic terms that the behaviour of criminals, shoplifters, drunkards, home-less etc. is diminishing their chances on the labour market by 'staining' the reputation of 'Poles':

Q: you travel on the LU and there are some drunken Poles talking loudly and swearing. What do you feel?

A: What I feel? Disgust. Disgust because I'm also a Pole and simply I... automatically think that people who were looking kindly at me before may change their mind because they will associate them with me... and that once I get a drink I would behave like them...(INT21 _ 16.12_Lon)

A: Shame... I feel stupid for them...when drunk and quiet then ok, but when they start a mess I feel very ashamed... I read a book and ignore them.(INT34 _21.01_Lon)

Poles are caught here in their national sentiments trap: nationalistic ideology informs them that they ideally should help and feel commonality with their kin when abroad – the reality is somewhat different and fierce competition on the market makes ethnicity a double edged sword – it can help, but also it can be a source of deep disappointment, as every belief can be abused. In a fiercely competitive environment it is the networks and migratory social capital that counts – not ethnic affiliation. One may say that Poles abroad learn that ethnic ties based on sentiment do not function very well in capitalist environment of labour market competition. Or rather they are being redefined. The successes of businesses which translate ethnic ties into economic ties are a proof. The ethnic economy has flourished during the last two years – the massive proliferation of Polish delicatessens in London from 8 to 45 in last four years is a most visible proof.

The end of community?

Establishing the above enables us to look deeper into what lies behind the statistics that show us the development and decline of the Polish community since the WWII. Keith Sword in his monograph (Sword 1994) on the Polish community in Britain written in the mid-1990s concluded that: 'the Polish community is in decline' since it has 'failed to hold the loyalties of its younger generation and to tap the energies of many of the newcomers'. Sword could not have anticipated that a decade later some 400 thousand Poles would arrive within a couple of years. But has it revived the community? From our research it is quite clear that we can hardly talk about a 'community' – understood as a coherent, monocultural and cohesive social group - so the answer is no. Only 10% of our respondents could be identified as knowing some members of the established community or taking an active part in the life of the established Polish community with its roots in post-WWII refugee movements – and these are people connected with that world mainly through their work in the media or social service. The rest, nevertheless, have formed small subgroups or communities of their own around the fast expanding hip hop and pop music, professional associations, cultural associations, new media, sexual orientation, or many other formal and informal networks. Others living in a state of 'temporality' stay disconnected taking advantage of easy access to Polish cable TV and Polish beer in the nearest corner shop. One notable place where members of all cohorts meet and where ethnic identity is being powerfully reinforced is the Polish Catholic Church, which is witnessing a huge increase in its parishioners across London.

London has been recently characterised as a super-diverse global city (Vertovec 2006) where hundreds of languages, ethnicities and cultures that could be found within. The rapid fragmentation of the community into separate sub-groups shows that Polish migration adds to that super-diversity the dimension of time – people being in constant movement – and lifestyles that bridge across cultural and ethnic boundaries. So London is super-diverse not only due to its ethnic composition or economic status of its residents but due to the diverse patterns of mobility of people living transnational lives and

connecting it to numerous places around the world – Poland emerging as one of most important places in Europe.

Poles in Multicultural London: whiteness as asset

Coming to our last argument, we asked several questions about our respondents attitudes towards London multiculturalism. There are some striking contrasts here. For some (mostly young, educated Poles from urban backgrounds) multiculturalism is one of the biggest London assets. They see the city in educational terms as a place where one can meet the world, but also as an immigrant's paradise. London provides a social space where it matters more what you do than where you are from. Multiculturalism through Polish eyes is the product of the myth of meritocracy and the value of work which is cherished by Polish migrants – 'everyone can make it here' – is the often repeated motif. So around 30% express a very positive view of London ethnic/cultural diversity of which the quote below is a typical example:

Q: London is culturally and ethnically one of most diverse cities in the world. You have sympathy or dislike for that mosaic?

A: Sympathy I think... as I said, the whole world is here, it's very specific and I like it a lot, it is great; one have difficulties in imagining that so much cultures can live together peacefully, work together, live together and nothing happens... I did not see anywhere anything... like [that before]... over here no one is surprised by seeing a black, a Chinese...in Poland people are surprised...(INT6 _8.11_Lon)

These highly mobile, cosmopolitan Poles stress the thrill of moving to London and being in the city where the 'world lives'. The deep interpenetration of hip hop culture between Poland and UK provides a classic example of the direct outcome of this view. One of the groups which are becoming increasingly popular, Inner Circuit, a black hip hop band, is actually managed by a Polish migrant, a hip hop artist from Chrzanów.

On the other hand 30% express a strikingly different view seeing ethnic pluralism as pathological state and express more or less racist views. Drawing on their own experience of a much more ethnically homogeneous country our respondents express surprise and often hostility towards the current state of affairs. Moreover – what is interesting since shows a mentality change - our respondents are very critical about the level of tolerance among their co-ethnics back home. 90% say that ‘Poles are not tolerant’ towards others, mainly meaning people from Asian and Black minorities, and that they would not imagine ethnic pluralism in Poland on London’s scale.

Q: Would that multiculturalism work in Poland?

A: Impossible... Poles are not tolerant enough... among the English it is because of their history... they feel that they have used them in colonial times and now tolerate their migration... as Poles we did not have any colonies so a black person will be always a black problem...(INT11 _ 25.11_Lon)

A: Not now... not in nearest time...as I said Poles are not tolerant and I am afraid that not it wouldn't work...this would be a problem....(INT7 _ 12.01_Lon)

What is striking is that our respondent’s narrative about London multiculturalism tends to play down their ethnic identity in favour of race – their whiteness or Europeaness. Poles tend to see cultural diversity in colour-coded terms, not as a mosaic of cultures, religions etc. Ethnicity tends to be pushed aside by colour. We believe that Poles are quick to treat their whiteness as an asset. In a highly competitive environment – as we have seen in the case of ethnicity – every possible characteristic can be used as a resource. In their opinion their identity as whites puts them on a higher level in the hierarchy of migrant groups.

Q: Do you think being a Pole is an advantage/disadvantage?

A: Neither.

Q: And being white?

A: This makes life easier.

Q: Why?

A: Well, that's what I think... (...)... why it is advantageous? Well it is better to be white than not to be white...I would rather not continue that talk...I'm just glad I'm white...

Q: Why?

A: Well you know, England is a country mostly governed by whites. As it is probably better to be a black in Nairobi, that's why it is better to be white in Great Britain, or London. (INT4 _6.11 _Lon)

British are much more relaxed about us than the ones with darker skins...but this is only my opinion...Poles have a good reputation...(INT9 _23.11 _Lon)

Q: So you think Poles are treated better than immigrants from other parts of the world?

A: Yes, because we assimilate very quickly. Because we are white migrants and people come here to achieve something...

Q: You mean that skin colour helps?

A: Oh yes definitely yes...between Poland and UK there never was a conflict...there is always a positive story... because there are so many times when Poles did something good for the English... (INT_23.11 _Lon)

Two explanations can be suggested to read through these attitudes. First is the ongoing process of a search for European identity by its citizens. Poles, with the enthusiastic support of their current political elites, are emphasising an identity based on Christianity and nationalistic ideology. Also the temporary status that migrants deliberately chose help to sustain the feeling of separateness from local and national community. Feeling as temporary guests, tourist and Europeans, some respondents react with verbal hostility towards ethnic minorities during the interviews. The perceived 'non-Europeaness' of

ethnic minorities helps some of the respondents to reconstruct their newly discovered Europeaness. The second reason is the British attitude towards new migrants. The general cultural acceptance and even enthusiastic approach towards Polish migrants in British society has a more disturbing feature: many of our respondents working for white British employers stress that being ‘white’ is an advantage and that is what their employers tell them.

“Nobody will tell you that, but it is an advantage. You can feel it” (INT26 _03.01_Lon)

“Q: But is it that they [Poles] have an advantage of being white?”

A: [No hesitation] oh yes, of course it is... it’s always harder for a black guy...”(INT35 _23.01_Lon)

Q: But do you encounter some racist bits [at work]...

A: ... No... or maybe yes, I did; with my boss; one of them... he said once what he thinks of blacks that they are... and he’s happy with the Poles...(INT31 _20.01_Lon)

About other nationalities... hmmm... where I work, in that English family, these people do not tolerate the Hindus. They say that there are far too many of them... and that they own this country, that England belongs to them and they are pissed off that there are so many of them [Hindus]... I think they like us, Poles because we’re here....(INT33 _21.01_Lon)

If Polish migrants get positive feedback on their perception of whiteness in their workplace, on the streets, it happens also in British public discourse, although disguised in a more polite manner:

“The New Europeans are hard-working, presentable, well educated, and integrate so perfectly that they will disappear within a generation”

(Anthony Browne, The Spectator Jan 26 2006)

"We have no problem with immigration from Poland, which is valuable to all sides... The government must make a reduction in numbers from elsewhere. What they could do is reduce the number of work permits for the rest of the world.,,

(Sir Andrew Green; BBC Today, Nov 20 2005)

Our preliminary findings suggests, then, that this issue will grow and tensions will develop not along racial rather than ethnic lines between Poles and other minority groups.. However, we must not forget that it is usually the pattern of mobility that determines levels of participation, integration and attitudes towards others. However, it is far too early to judge the outcome of this situation for multicultural relations in the UK. Clearly, there should be further investigations into the matter.

Summary and health warning

Because we are dealing with a very dynamic, fluid transnational population of highly mobile EU citizens, any study of Polish migrants is a risky endeavor. We find that our stereotypical and popular perceptions about notions of ‘class’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘community’ are continually challenged and contested by people who successfully cross borders – social, geographical and human. We have, nevertheless, reasons to believe that Polish migrants offer us a valuable insight into current construction and debates around Britishness, whiteness and multiculturalism. However, research on migration in the post-enlargement EU is only beginning. Our research is just a small step forward.

As stated above this is a preliminary report on our ongoing research. We took the opportunity to publicize it at a special conference at the Polish Embassy in London: ‘London’s Polish Borders: Migration between Poland and Great Britain two years after enlargement’. We are open to all your comments and insights. As science is a social space, which flourishes only when ideas are freely exchanged, we look forward to your comments.

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Appendix:

Class and Ethnicity: Polish migrant workers in London

Economic and Social Research Council funded study

Interview guide for a qualitative, semi-structured interview

Introduction – the project and some personal information about the researcher

1. **Biographical data of the interviewee.** *A) Could you please tell me some details about your upbringing? B) Where were you born? C) Where you grew up? D) What jobs your parents do? E) Could you tell me about your education? F) What jobs did you do after finishing it?*

2. **Question on work ethics.** *a) A list of occupations is shown: 1) managerial 2) professional 3) businessmen 4) service 5) skilled manual 6) farmers 7) unskilled manual. Do you think there is a ranking in these divisions? Please indicate which jobs are most valuable in your opinion, which deserves most respect? c) What was the attitude towards education/work at home? e) Where your parents pressing you to work or continue to study?*

3. **Question on perception of class/inequalities/divisions in Poland.** *a) I would like to discuss with you your ideas and notions of social divisions there. In your opinion is Poland socially divided society? b) What does your occupational and educational career/history tells you about social divisions in Poland? c) Do you ever think of Poland as a class society? d) What is necessary to climb socially? e) Where in all these divisions you mentioned you see yourself?*

4. **Motivations, migration path, networks in London** *a) Ok, you are in London now, why did you come here? b) How long have you been here? c) What*

jobs did you do, and you are doing now? d) How much do you earn? e) Why you took this particularly job? f) What are your plans?

5. **Question on perception of class/inequalities/divisions in Britain. a)**

You told me about divisions that influenced your career/education/perspectives in Poland. Are they as important in London? b) Do you think Britain is a socially divided country? How? c) How you would describe these divisions? d) Britain is said to be a very class oriented society. Do you think so? e) Do you see yourself as part of this society?

6. **Invitation to compare both settings. a)** *Given your experience in*

Poland and in London, I would like you to reflect on the differences and similarities here and there. b) Do you think there are any differences between social divisions you described back home in Poland and here in London? c) What are the differences at workplace? d) What are the differences in life chances? e) Where is it easier to climb socially?

7. **London lifestyle data a)** *Could you please tell me something about*

your lifestyle, what do you do after work or on weekends? b) Do you rent/own a flat/room? c) Do you have mostly Polish friends or non-Polish?

8. **Connection with Poland a)** *How often do you go to Poland? b) Do*

you ever help friends and relatives in Poland get a job or flat or somehow inform people about migration prospects? c) Would you encourage or discourage people to come here? d) Are you planning to come back to Poland? e) When? f) What will make you come back? g) c) Do you save to send to Poland (How much?), save to make an investment in Poland or consume everything here?

9. **Visualisation/modelling/structuring of class self-positioning in Poland and UK**

These five diagrams show different types of society. Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes Poland and UK today. After that could you point where do you see yourself in that diagram in both countries?

Type A: A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom.

```
XXX
X
X
X
X
X
XXXXXXXXXX
```

Type B: A society like a pyramid with small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom:

```
  X
 XX
XXX
XXXX
XXXXX
XXXXXX
XXXXXXX
```

Type C: A pyramid except that just a few people are at the very bottom

```
  X
 XX
XXX
XXXX
XXXXX
  XXX
   XX
```

Type D: A society with most people at the middle:

X
XX
XXX
XXXX
XXXX
XXX
XX
X

Type E: Many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom

XXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXX
XXXXX
XX
X

10. **Identity, ethnicity and relations to other Poles** a) *How would you describe being a Pole in London from your own experience?* b) *Has living in London changed your attitudes to other Poles?* c) *As you know there are many Polish living in London now. Do you like it?* d) *What do you think of Poles who are living here since WWII? (If known)* e) *Do you think being a Pole is an advantage/disadvantage?*

11. **Identity, ethnicity and relations with the Other** a) *what do you think of London's cultural diversity? Do you like it or not?* b) *And do you think it is working?* c) *Would it work in Poland?* d) *Do you think Poles are treated better/worse because of their skin colour?* e) *Are Poles tolerant to others?*

12. **Religion:** a) *How religiously observant you are? (Scale: 1) I believe and practice; 2) I believe but do not practice; 3) I do not believe* b) *is being a catholic (if you are one) any different here than in Poland?*

13. **Personal:** a) *Did you changed by being here?* b) *And how?*

14. **Real life scenarios. Interviewee is asked to respond what does he feels in particular situation.**

Scenario 1: you travel on the LU and there are some drunken Poles talking loudly and swearing. What do you feel?

Scenario 2: you hear a joke about Poles at work. Do you feel offended or tell another one?

Scenario 3: You meet someone whose parents were Polish, who was born here but does not speak Polish – is he a Pole to you?

Scenario 4 Would you prefer to work (put your priorities) for 1) English 2) Polish 3) Arab 4) Hindu 5) Russian 6) doesn't matter for who, matters for how much

Scenario 5 your child/brother/sister goes out with a dark skinned girl/boy.

Scenario 6 you go to a dentist – would you chose a guy with a Polish-sounding name (Kowalski) or an Asian sounding name