

Destination: World



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What is migration: an acute social problem, an anomaly that upsets the world's natural order and should be eliminated? Or maybe a natural and welcome phenomenon that has been present throughout the history of mankind? What significance does it have for such countries as Poland?

International migration and its consequences are among the most controversial social and political topics of recent decades. Migration, defined as the movement of people from one area to another, usually provides the empirical background for various debates, whether in the context of multiculturalism, "the clash of civilizations," the impact of globalization on the role of the state, cultural diffusion or ethnicity. Even so, the actual understanding of the word "migration" may vary from person to person.

When we think of migration, we are reminded of shocking images from media reports – Muslims praying on the streets of Paris, Africans drowning while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe, homeless Poles on the streets of London, and Mexicans swimming across the Rio Grande by night. Migration brings to mind both empty schools in Poland in the areas affected by emigration and colorful crowds filling the streets of Berlin and Madrid, both terrorists and global finance workers who move from one country to another every several years. In short, migration permeates every aspect of life in the modern world. It is one of the symptoms and factors behind the

massive social and demographic changes that we call globalization.

Migration facts and fictions

When perceived through the prism of culture, migration creates certain dissonance in the postmodern world. In public discourse and in policy debates it is predominantly conceptualized as a social ill, a certain anomaly. When discussing migration, the media, commentators, philosophers, and politicians create a binary world filled with threats. At the one end, there are safe communities of indigenous inhabitants, native societies living according to their own time-honored traditions. At the other end, there are invaders – immigrants who upset the established social order, bring their obscure habits, and may "contaminate" native cultures by importing novelties. What lies at the core of xenophobia, after all, is the notion of a perfect world with no contact with strangers.

But it is clear that no such world has ever existed. When homo sapiens emerged a few hundred thousand years ago and took over almost every ecological niche on the earth, when cities and industries flourished, when the civilization of the 21st century developed – what lay at the heart of those developments was movement by humans from one place to another. Migration is an adaptive trait. The transition of the human species from a nomadic lifestyle to a relatively settled one took place with the arrival of the Neolithic Revolution some 8,000 years ago. On the timeline of evolution, that is like yesterday.

Nonetheless, the public in the developed world tends to "pathologize" migration. When describing such a perspective, Stephen Castles uses the term "sedentary bias" to refer to an epistemological tendency behind the fiction that societies are separated from one another by clear-cut borders. Conceptually, it is based on the conviction that migration and, by the same token, the mingling of cultures lead to degradation and should be avoided, which is yet another fiction, because human identity and culture are based on confrontation with others.



London's Notting Hill Carnival, presenting the traditions of Caribbean immigrants, attracts around a million visitors every year

In the grip of the state

Anthropologists and sociologists realize that the social reality is far more complicated. Even so, those myths did not appear out of nowhere – they are linked to one of the products of the contemporary world: the state. In managing different populations, the state wants to identify them, quantify them, and determine their spatial distribution. Effective population control, tax collection, and enlistment for military service, all require the criteria of membership in a given group – citizenship. The state employs various means to accomplish this goal. It “manufactures” citizens who share the same culture through the education system or the job market and sometimes resorts to soft symbolical methods on the verge of religion and ideology. One way to maintain the state and its ideological mandate is nationalism, or the belief in the existence of actual kinship ties between members of a given society, “metaphorical kinship,” to cite the term used by anthropologist Thomas Eriksen, and the resultant ethical obligations between members of a given nation. Nationalism – both as an ideology and as the general conviction that there is such a thing as a nation – creates the fiction of distinct monolithic states and cultures, with discursive phrases such as “Poland is inhabited by Poles” being seen as natural and even biological facts (after all, it is only “natural” that Poland is inhabited by the Poles and Germany by the Germans). Meanwhile, references to the

Vietnamese who live in Poland or the Poles who live in Germany are less “natural,” obvious, and understandable, indicating a certain anomaly that may be tolerated but signals a certain deviation from the norm.

Migration disrupts the world of myths created by the state and the ideologies that serve to legitimize it. Migration is the empirical, direct, and interactive face of the social reality, in which cultural melting pots, hybrids, diffusion, borderlines as well as complex local, regional, ethnic, class and gender identities are the norm. It is the face of not only globalization but also urbanization, which has been present in the history of mankind for thousands of years – without migration, no city would ever have been built. I am writing these words from London, a metropolis that could be described as the model of a global settlement of the future. Out of its 10 million residents, 38% were born outside the United Kingdom. By the same token, it is a place where such words as “migration” and “foreigners” have completely different tones to them – they are virtually platitudes, mere statements of fact.

Draining Poland of blood?

States have always regulated the identification of their populations and such issues as migration and emigration according to their capacities. When laying down civic rights in the 19th century, the Germans adopted the principle of *jus sanguinis* to allow emigrants (chiefly

Migration, state, and transnational society

those who had left for the United States) to return to Germany. In turn, in the times when Poland's statehood was feeble or non-existent, so too were its capacities to identify and control its population. In such periods, Poland was forced to employ "soft" symbolical methods to create an imaginary community and enforce the loyalty of its members.

Poland has been a state of emigration for 200 years, with such issues as the migration of Poles and the role of the émigré diaspora invariably sparking off animated discussions. Again, migration was seen as a deviation from the norm. References to biology that blamed the process for "draining Poland of blood," "undermining the fabric of the nation," and "uprooting people" along with the emergence of powerful literary symbols (such as Sienkiewicz's lighthouse keeper) were aimed at mobilizing the elite to impose stricter controls on migrants. Attitudes to migration proved crucial in shaping nationalism in Poland – when Jews or Rusyns moved away from Poland, the process was seen as a welcome phenomenon that contributed to "polonization," while the emigration of Polish peasants was perceived as a threat. Such a perspective creates certain dissonance, because members of both groups often migrated for similar reasons: poverty, economic exclusion, discrimination, and lawlessness.

Polish discourse is visibly slanted in favor of a particular kind of migration: the emigration of political and military activists following every failed national uprising. From the perspective of the state's interests, such nationalistic undertones are understandable: more than 10 million peasants and Jews migrating from Poland are not as powerful symbols as several thousand famous revolutionists and poets. Hence, the former simply migrated "for bread" while the latter formed what is known as the "Great Emigration", the former were disempowered nameless masses while the latter are remembered as specific individuals, their poems still taught to children nowadays. Psychologist and sociologist Danuta Mostwin believes that this is the underlying reason for the tones of despair and loss that dominate Polish migration discourse: "In Polish culture, the notion of emigration occupies a special place. It has a unique meaning, compared to other cultures. Although the root of the word 'emigration' is derived from the Latin '*migrare*,' emigration is

defined in Polish encyclopedias as 'the act of leaving one's country of origin on a permanent basis' while the dynamic meaning of moving on or moving forward is left out."

Mostwin forgets, however, that culture is not a conceptual monolith but rather a space where different discourses, meanings, and narratives clash. In anthropology, understanding of culture has already shifted away from the objective definition seeing it as a static combination of rigid and coercive concepts. It is rather inclined to place emphasis on its flexibility and changeability after such authors as Abner Cohen, Frederic Barth, Thomas Erikson, and Clifford Geertz. Most importantly, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson observe, such concepts are created in the field of power. Deeply rooted in debates on the meaning of Polish national identity and its consequences, migration offers individuals a chance to articulate and demonstrate their independence and subjectivity and to contest the concepts described by Mostwin.

Escaping the state

Hence there is also an approach that defies the traditional notion of migration in Polish culture by highlighting such aspects as emancipation, dynamics, and development. To illustrate this approach, Aleksandra Galasińska cites the example of "small stories" used by migrants to defy big narratives. When analyzing why the Poles living abroad are so eager to condemn their compatriots, I also described the banal day-to-day defiance of nationalistic concepts that impose a normative hierarchy of behavior against Poles in general and efforts to counter them. Once treated as a tool for creating myths, the saying "man is a wolf to man," popular among Polish migrants, proves an instrument for neutralizing the prevalent imperatives to trust the members of one's own ethnic group and allowing class distinctions to be drawn within it.

When approached from this perspective, Polish migration culture is characterized by confrontational tensions between the individual and the community. And therein probably lies the problem, since the scale of recent migrations brings the crux of the matter to the fore. Recent departures from Poland represent one of the largest migration movements in postwar Europe. According to Poland's Central



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sions between the individual and the community therefore prove to be a matter of different self-fulfillment levels and priorities.

Migration poses a problem for the state. At the same time, for individuals the state is seen with hostility, and migration is seen as a strategy of resisting it and getting more individual autonomy. Under favorable structural conditions, the Poles, culturally skilled at migration, move away to European countries, without showing any remorse for the empty kindergartens and demographic crisis they leave behind in Poland. Even so, they are not completely indifferent to what is happening in Poland. The magnitude of the money transfers they send back – almost equal to the EU assistance for Poland (25 billion PLN in 2007, 17 billion PLN in 2011) – proves otherwise. It is more indicative of the emergence of a transnational society, with many of its members being rooted not only in Poland but also in foreign countries. And this means weakening the state's exclusive ideological mandate to control individuals and enforce their trust as well as undermining the authority wielded by state institutions.

In the light of anti-institutional and anti-state traditions in Polish society, future historians may analyze the migration of hundreds of thousands of citizens in search of a better life as a way to express individual subjectivity, reject the state's authority, and establish new forms of identity. And it does not matter whether we mean multiple citizenship, European citizenship, or the permanent movements in a transnational space. Polish society is in fact becoming a transnational society. For the time being, the state fails to keep up with the changes brought by this confrontation. ■

Further reading:

- Garapich M. (2012). Between cooperation and hostility - constructions of ethnicity and social class among Polish migrants in London. *Studia Sociologica* IV, vol. 2. Kraków.
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- Mostwin D. (1986). Emigrant polski w Stanach Zjednoczonych 1974-1984. [The Polish Emigrant in the US, 1974-1984]. In: Paszkiewicz M. (ed.). *Polskie więzi kulturowe na obczyźnie* [Polish Cultural Bonds in Emigration]. Prace Kongresu Kultury Polskiej na Obczyźnie, vol. 8, London.

The streets of Oxford are filled with both natives of Great Britain and foreigners from far-away regions

Statistical Office (GUS), there are now over 2 million Polish nationals living abroad, chiefly young and educated people. In the light of the drop in the birth rate and in the number of working age Poles, which means growing public spending on health care and pensions in the future, it is necessary to ask whether the scale of contemporary migration from Poland should not be seen as alarming. Many Polish demographers and sociologists indicate that the lack of a family-friendly policy or an immigration policy aimed at filling vacancies in the job market as well as population decline in cities and rural areas might lead to a demographic crisis and a collapse in the social security system. The ten-