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MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG POLISH PEOPLE LIVING IN THE UK

INTRODUCTION

“Some of the world’s residents are on the move, for the rest it is the world itself that refuses to stand still”

(Bauman, 2000:58)

Since the declaration of a common European market in 1968 the idea of free movement in European space has been a mainstay on the European Union agenda. Over the past 40 years barriers to mobility have steadily eroded so that more and more goods, services, people and ideas flow across the porous borders of Europe in a continually expanding and shifting space. Mobility is encouraged and vigorously promoted by the EU through its communications and the programmes and projects it funds. From the designation of 2006 as the European Year of Workers’ mobility, the 2010 ‘Youth on the Move’ Initiative to smaller sub-regional projects such as the ‘Mobile Citizen Service’ in the Rhineland, Germany¹, the EU extols the virtues of mobility and protects it as a ‘social right’ for all European citizens. Despite this, there is little evidence of a ‘culture of mobility’ in Europe with only 10% of European citizens having engaged in intra-EU mobility at some point in their lives (European Commission, 2010). So why is mobility so important in Europe?

It is often assumed that geographical mobility leads to upward ‘social mobility’. Even the metaphors we use in everyday life denote mobility as progress – to move forward, to be dynamic, to be a high flyer. In political discourse it is declared that improving opportunities for geographical mobility among European citizens can contribute to prosperity and a higher standard of living, whilst at the same time reducing inequalities and combating poverty in a ‘rapidly changing labour market’ (European Commission, 2008). Yet, the positive valuation of mobility should not be overstated. For all those who experience the hope and optimism

¹ See link for details of Mobile Citizen Service - <http://www.epractice.eu/en/news/332720>

of new opportunities within a more mobile and ‘shrinking’ world, there are those who are constrained and confined by a lack of rights and access to resources in an increasingly complex and uncertain world, whose experience is perceptively un-free and immobile (Skeggs, 2004; Stenning, 2005; Anderson et al., 2006). In this paper I will unpack theories of mobility and discuss particular forms of EU mobility within the context of Polish migration.

THE MEANING OF MOBILITY

“Mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, as modernity, sit side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance. Mobility, then, is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before. And yet mobility itself, and what it means, remains unspecified. It is a kind of blank space that stands as an alternative to place, boundedness, foundations, and stability”

(Cresswell, 2006:2)

Rather than attempt a full definition of mobility² I will reflect instead on some of the theoretical trajectories that have contributed to the omnipotence of ‘mobility’ as a positive valuation in contemporary discourse. As Cresswell (2006) notes ‘mobility’ is represented in myriad ways, it can be chaotic and undetermined but it is always embodied and inherently related to time and space. We move through time and space - our movement is shaped by them, but we are also active in the ‘production of time and space’ and it is because of this agentic capacity that mere ‘movement’ becomes ‘mobility’ (Cresswell, 2006). Literature in the social sciences has long theorised the social production of time and space whereby they are not understood as absolute but rather relative to a social context of meaning and power and, as Cresswell (2006) notes, mobility is part of this process of social production and reproduction. The vast increase in travel through more affordable transportation in an era of automobility and aeromobility, the rise of information technologies and increase in speed of communications are all processes that have ‘revolutionize(d) the objective qualities of space and time’ (Harvey, 1990:240). Some have argued that technological advancements in transportation and communications have caused the ‘death of distance’ (Cairncross, 2001) or ‘time-space compression’ as conditions of a postmodern era (Harvey, 1990). Bauman talks of the ‘acceleration of modern life’ that has changed the relationship between space and time. He argues that we are in an age of ‘liquid modernity’ where power

² Research on mobilities spans from human migration to transport studies to corporeal mobilities, for a comprehensive summary see Cresswell (2006)

has become 'exterritorial', unbounded by space where traditional, sedentary practices are fast being overtaken by nomadic lifestyles³.

Theories of mobility and migration have burgeoned over the past 20 years and some have championed the emergence of a 'new mobilities paradigm' or a 'mobility turn' in the social sciences (Shellar and Urry, 2006). It is argued that contemporary theories and discourse has moved beyond sedentarism and notions of vertical or social mobility to a new 'horizontal' mobility, a space of networks and fluidity rather than fixed space and time (Urry, 2000; Castells, 2000). Cresswell (2006) argues that 'as the world has appeared to be more mobile, so thinking about the world has become nomad thought' where mobility is seen as implicit to our understanding of the world. Sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and cultural theorists have broken with sedentary traditions to develop theories on mobility as anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist and anti-representational (Cresswell, 2006; Said, 1994; Deleuze and Guattari, 1986; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). This has contributed to a shift in discourse from understanding space and society as bounded, territorialised categories based on the formation and development of the nation state to a globalised, unbounded and de-territorialised space based on global, supra-national or transnational networks, processes and structures (Castells, 2000; Held et al, 1999; Sassen, 2002).

To mitigate against the placelessness and rootlessness of grand narratives on mobility, theory has developed to interrogate the local-global nexus and maintain the importance of place. Within the 'new mobilities paradigm' the idea of 'moorings' or 'dwellings' point to the continued significance of the local (Hannam et al., 2006; Urry and Shellar, 2000). Massey (1993) maintains that mobility is always 'located and materialised' and subject to uneven 'power geometries', so that not all mobile 'subjects' are positioned in the same way (Ahmed, 2004). Some say mobile populations are not 'free flowing' actors who are unbounded and de-territorialised, instead they are involved in a set of specific social relations that operate around and because of them (Anderson, 2000). For example, transnational migrants are not only determined by the historical legacy of coloniser and colonised, core and periphery but are involved in a more textured portrait of migration and the power relations that operate across space (Mahler, 1998). How social relations operate in space has been the focus of many studies on migrant transnationalism, diaspora and citizenship (Basch et al., 1994; Ong, 1999); as well as those devoted to migrant subjectivities (Blunt, 2005; McDowell, 2005) and the materiality of migrant lives (Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Rabikowska and Burrell, 2010).

³ See Deleuze and Guattari (1986) for a discussion of nomadology

Thus, history and place matter. Cresswell (2010) theorises ‘constellations of mobility’ as ‘historically and geographically specific formations of movements’ – those situated and contextualised by place and time rather than unfixed and fluid. The opportunity for mobility of people all around the globe is linked to this historical context of socio-economics, politics and culture within which differential access to mobility is positioned (Morokvasic, 2004). Feminist critiques of mobilities research have interrogated the way in which some of the studies on mobility are formed from particular gendered and classed (male and middle class) subjectivities arguing that they fail to interrogate the complex intersections of gender and class in the debate on mobility (Adkins, 2004; McDowell, 2006). Skeggs (2004) asserts that ‘mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship’ (p.49), therefore it is important to recognise the particular conditions and discourses within which mobility and immobility are represented, constructed and lived out.

POLISH MOBILITY IN THE EU

The EU operates as a supra-national body politic, tasked with regulating and monitoring the power of national governments in Europe and protecting the rights of individual citizens to move freely and live equitably in this shifting landscape. Mobility is represented through the discourse and praxis of the EU as an emancipatory ‘social right’ for EU citizens. In theory, this means the removal of barriers to mobility and widening access to resources for mobility, since it is now considered ‘free’. Economic forecasters extol the virtue of mobility for the welfare of individuals (Bonin et al., 2008), while official discourse offers a limitless menu of the benefits and opportunities for intra-EU mobility. Mobility is one of the key pillars in the Europe 2020 Strategy and a cross cutting theme in policy relating to education, employment and welfare and is reported to play a key role in strengthening the infrastructure of labour markets and ‘as an instrument for more effectively anticipating the effects of economic restructuring’ (European Commission, 2006). In the Action Plan for Skills and Mobility communicated by the European Commission in 2002, three priorities are reported: expanding occupational mobility and skills development; improving information and transparency of job opportunities; and facilitating geographical mobility. Such policies and programmes have been implemented to respond to calls for enhancing ‘workers’ mobility in the EU and are linked unequivocally to the economy. Rarely are cultural meanings of mobility referenced in EU policy, suggesting that official understandings are motivated by wider macro-economic concerns rather than the everyday experiences of EU citizens. Moreover, the extent to which these ‘enhanced’ opportunities for mobility in the EU are acknowledged and enacted by young Polish people is yet to be fully examined.

It is widely regarded that Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 contributed dramatically to the increase in geographical mobility of Poles in the EU (Drinkwater et al., 2006; Grabowska-Lusinska and Okolski, 2008; Fihel and Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Through the removal of borders Poles were able to travel freely throughout Europe without a visa and opportunities for work in another member state held the promise of economic gain and upward social mobility. The UK has been the major destination country for Poles since it offered full access to the labour market and has been viewed as less difficult to negotiate due to widespread knowledge of the English language. It is estimated that by the end of 2007 690,000 Polish citizens were living in the UK, compared with 150,000 at the end of 2004 and 24,000 in 2002 (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk, 2009). EU membership generated a significant increase in the scale of Polish migration to the UK but it was not the beginning of this trend since Polish migration to the UK is not new (Burrell, 2009; Iglicka, 2001; Sword et al., 1989). Geographical mobility has been a feature of modern day Poland in line with key political events - from the exiled populations produced through partitioning by Prussia, Austria and Russia, the 'za chlebem' immigrants of the 19th and 20th Century to the forced migrations of the Second World War and the post-War Polish diaspora; the short-term, circular, often clandestine and highly restricted migrations of the communist period (Iglicka, 2001) to the rise in mobility among Poles following the end of Communism in 1989 (Wallace, 2002) and, most dramatically, upon accession to the European Union in 2004 (Burrell, 2009).

In the period following EU accession, Poland has seen the continuation of many post-wall migratory patterns, such as seasonal 'shuttle migration' (Drinkwater et al, 2006). Moreover, White (2010) argues that the migration histories of certain localities has in some places contributed to a culture of migration where young people feel 'socialised into migration' and expect to engage in some form of geographical mobility. This implies that the personal histories of mobility in particular locales or particular families may also have a bearing on the future migratory patterns of younger generations. It is these historical patterns of migration that have generated the proliferation of informal transnational networks of mobile populations (Iglicka, 2001; Morokvasic, 2004). Some have argued that the intensification of these migratory patterns and networks have developed into a more formal migration industry between Poland and the UK (Garapich, 2008). The continuation of migratory patterns demonstrate that strategies for mobility have been developing over a significant period of time, across generations and across the shifting, uncertain borders of Europe. Thus, the question remains as to how far the perceived gains of mobility are the effects of EU accession rather than that of pre-accession mobile experiences, or inter-generational experiences.

Burrell (2009) sees 2004 as a 'watershed moment in history' for Polish mobility, especially relating to the UK but contends that despite the increase in opportunities for mobility some remain on the margins:

"Not all Europeans are 'free movers', not all countries are allowing free settlement, and EU membership still excludes as much as includes" (Burrell, 2009:6)

The EU process of accession by condition ('conditionality') places new member states in an intermediate and indeterminate position, subject to restriction and specification reinforcing their status as secondary, as if they are 'catching up' on the impermeable road towards a better and more viable economic, social and political model. These structural inequalities are at the core of the everyday realities of mobile people lived out through 'constrained choice' and 'reduced access' to resources (Stenning, 2005). The migration strategies of some young Poles living and working in the EU frequently involve de-skilling or 'brain wasting' with many graduates working in low skill, low wage work (Drinkwater et al., 2006; Fihel and Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Many of them are involved in informal work practices often resulting in temporality, lack of rights and insecurity (Anderson, 2000), demonstrating that the reality of lived migrant experience is often different from the EU promise of opportunity in a borderless world. Mobile populations remain in 'state of transition and renegotiation' (Castles and Millar, 2003) compelled to adapt to economic and social changes and negotiate the complex processes of national and EU regulated intra-European migration. As the EU has opened its borders to extend opportunity to some stringent regulations on mobility remain to enforce compliance and shape the spatial distribution of labour within it (cf. Massey, 1979). This is further repudiated by the lack of opportunities for those outside the Schengen borders, whereby the experience for many post-socialist states who have not been accepted into the project of integration is one of exclusion and subordination (Burrell, 2009).

However, as Bruff (2007) argues 'migrants are not variables, but active agents that help to shape political, social and economic outcomes' (Bruff, 2007:1) and there have been well documented examples of the agency of pre-accession undocumented migrants who were sophisticated in their use and development of the informal networks and irregular channels of migration in Europe (Duvell, 2006). Movements calling for the rights of migrants have emerged out of such networks and whether or not there are legal frameworks acknowledging their status or denying their rights, migrants 'learn to cope despite the state, not because of it' (Castles, 2004:860).

THE MOBILITY OF YOUTH

In EU discourse, mobility is viewed as a solution to unlatching the potential of young people in particular - a generation perceived to be at risk due to declining numbers and increased global competition. This has implications for the mobility of older people and whether the targeting of young people leads to fewer opportunities for older people. For example, the 'Youth on the Move' initiative began in 2010 to increase mobility among those aged between 15 and 35 in order to minimise the effects of the crisis on young people. Programmes such as 'Socrates', 'Leonardo Di Vinci' and 'Youth for Europe' have been developed to encourage young EU citizens to engage in transnational exchanges for lifelong learning, vocational training and voluntary activities. Frameworks and toolkits have been created to encourage the harmonisation of processes among EU states and address the relationship between spatial and social mobility for all EU citizens of working age, such as the European Qualifications Framework and EUROPASS, the European Job Mobility Action Plan and the EURES programme. This includes older 'workers' but again stresses the economic imperative of intra-EU mobility, which excludes those unable to work for health reasons, a category within which older people more frequently fall.

While the co-ordination of educational and work-related frameworks in the EU can simplify the process of accessing jobs for some people across Europe, the level of awareness of this service among young people and how far this encourages geographical and social mobility is unknown. A socio-demographic profile of Polish migrants in the UK since EU enlargement shows that 72% of Polish nationals living in the UK are aged between 20 and 29 years old (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Looking at the aspirations for mobility among young people, 58% of 18-19 year old Poles living in Poland stated that if they were offered an opportunity to work abroad they would consider it (CBOS, 2009 as cited in White, 2010). This suggests that the idea of mobility is becoming more widely accepted as a lifestyle choice for young people. However, there are a large number of Poles, young and older, who do not choose mobility, and many for whom both mobility and immobility is a 'fate' rather than a 'choice' (cf. Bauman, 2004). In reality, 85% of Poles have never lived abroad and 88% have not been to school or university abroad⁴. Being geographically mobile across the EU is not the norm in Poland and despite media portrayals representing a flood of Polish workers entering the UK the reality is a lot more nuanced and complex. The experiences of mobile people are highly differentiated so it is fundamental to discussions on mobility to ask whether 'we are all really in the same boat' (Fabricant, 1998).

⁴ Eurobarometer (2010) 377

THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY

“In this world it is important to understand that mobility is more than about just getting from A to B. It is about the contested world of meaning and power. It is about mobilities rubbing up against each other and causing friction. It is about a new hierarchy based on the ways we move and the meanings these movements have been given”.

(Cresswell, 2006:265)

Some politicians and policy experts use the phrase ‘mobility poor’ as a mark of those who are doing less well, whether blamed on idleness or as victims of a system (Cresswell, 2006). The assumption that mobility is a social right available to all Europeans, whether or not they choose to harness it, is interwoven in the discourse I have been challenging throughout this paper. It is based on understanding the world as no longer bounded by traditional, sedentarist, territorialised practices but rather as fluid, flexible, classless, cosmopolitan and mobile where traditional social ties and collective social arrangements have been eroded and the ‘individual’ is an agent with the capacity to choose and interpret reflexively their own social position (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The most damaging consequence of this ontology is its denial of history and failure to recognise that pre-existing socio-economic, political and cultural structures and practices play a key role in shaping the life chances of individuals. There is a ‘politics of mobility’ that is defined by sets of specific social relations and their productive and reproductive capacities (Cresswell, 2010). Varying degrees of choice, necessity and compulsion lead to different kinds of mobile livelihoods (or not) among young Polish people and the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and nationality are all complicit in these experiences.

State power is integral to the politics of mobility as it regulates a moral tone for contemporary understandings of good and bad mobility. Deleuze and Guatarri (1986) assert that ‘the State never ceases to decompose, recompose and transform movement, or to regulate speed’ (as cited in Urry 2000:196). While the flow of capital and goods is encouraged, the free movement of people is subject to regulation through monitoring and surveillance. Moreover, across Europe mobile populations are viewed by States with varying degrees of acceptance from a ‘kinetic’ elite who exercise ‘transnational corporate choice’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004) to engage in unsustainable mobility which is seemingly encouraged through rewards for air miles; to Roma populations, and the forced migration of refugees and asylum seekers whose mobility is highly constrained and discouraged despite

often being compelled⁵. The positioning of mobile ‘subjects’ in this way occurs at national, supra-national or transnational level to regulate mobile practices and reproduce hierarchies of mobility.

Social relations operate at different levels influencing the values and decisions of individuals, their aspirations for and experiences of mobility. The politics of mobility plays a role in the outcome of mobility decisions as well as in the process of mobility decisions by setting a moral tone for good and bad understandings of mobility and ascribing who can and cannot be involved. The subjectivities of individuals who engage in migration are based on a mix of ascribed, inherited and invented values within which the classic binary of structure and agency intersect. Micro level research into the individual narratives of mobility and mobile lives is an important method to understand the values and aspirations of those engaged in mobile livelihoods, their distinct socio-spatial practices and the materiality of everyday mobility. The following section takes case study examples from a recent study on the mobile experiences of young Polish people in the UK.

NARRATIVES OF MOBILITY

In 2010 I conducted over 30 biographical-narrative interviews in and around Edinburgh, Krakow and Katowice with young Polish people aged between 18 and 35. The narratives display a diverse range of rich and textured biographies of young Polish people who have experienced migration to the UK or Ireland, some of whom have returned to Poland. They shared with me their thoughts on geographical and social mobility and the following section offers a range of interpretations on mobility. Within the narratives preconception, expectation and memory are explored to understand how values shape experience and experience shapes values. It is hoped that this approach will feed into other research on the motivations and intersections of Polish migration to the UK (Cooke et al., 2010; McDowell, 2008) through a deeper look at how mobility is imagined and enacted by young Polish people. Just as mobility is represented by the governing structures of contemporary society, it is also imagined by individuals in myriad ways – as necessity, as freedom, as escape, as independence, as choice, as change, as difference. The discourse on mobility and the social relations that operate in the family, the local, the national, supra-national and global perspective all contribute to personal understandings of mobility and intersect to form a unique imagination of mobility.

⁵ A recent example of this is the French government’s expulsion of Roma populations from France, most of whom incidentally are from Central and Eastern Europe

PRECONCEPTIONS OF A MOBILE LIFE

Poland's accession to the EU undeniably changed the nature of mobility for many young people and improved access to mobility for many who had previously not imagined leaving Poland. However, as discussed previously, the mobility of Polish nationals has an historic trajectory and it is important to recognise that the aspiration for mobility is influenced by more than just the physical removal of borders. Many of my interviewees recalled memories of migration prior to 2004, whether as individuals or families. Some people's parents and grandparents had been emigrants themselves; others had other family members living abroad. Personal histories of mobility gave an inherent self-confidence to Joanna who moved to Edinburgh in 2006 but has had many previous experiences of migration having lived in London, San Francisco and Finland. Also, Joanna's mother lived in the USA during the 1970s before getting married and settling in Poland to bring up her children. Her mother's emigration left a positive 'impression' of mobility on Joanna, and a less positive impression of being 'stuck at home'.

"My mum got stuck at home after she got married and this was their life. So there was that kind of impression on me, I'd kind of like to be more free than my parents, it was awful I think for them not to be able to do what they wanted." (Joanna, age 31, Edinburgh)

Joanna's perception of mobility is associated with her mother's pre-marriage experiences of mobility to the US and conversely immobility is bound to the experience of her parents being tied to home and a fixed place. Her aspiration to be 'more free' than her parents has led to a life of continual movement from place to place in order to experience the world and 'work more internationally'. This idea of perpetual mobility as a lifestyle choice echoes Morokvasic's (2004) research on the circular patterns of migration in Poland as 'settled within mobility'.

Contrary to this, mobility was conceptualised as a 'newly acquired freedom' by those without prior access to mobility (Łukasz, age 28, Edinburgh). Many reflected on the barriers to mobility during the communist era and felt that their parents had shaped their aspirations in reaction to those barriers – exploration, travel and education were commonly held inter-generational values.

"Education was the door for better life but they didn't know what it was... they never had this opportunity to go somewhere... if you wanted just to have a normal life and family it was good to...tame your aspirations" (Dorota, age 31, Edinburgh).

Maria moved to Edinburgh in 2005 and had previously lived and worked in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sri Lanka since leaving her parental home after University. She views parental encouragement as habitual and contributing to a feeling of confidence in travel.

“Your parents are always repeating ‘you are so lucky you have this passport and you can go wherever you want’ and if you hear this through your youth and have this passport and can go and see all your friends going somewhere, if I stay at home I would feel a bit like I didn’t use the opportunity given.” (Maria, age 31, Edinburgh).

However, the idea of mobility as freedom and opportunity was complicated by an additional layer of grandparents who encouraged the nurturing of family and community bonds over values of mobility and the aspiration for foreign travel. Many people had strong inter-generational relationships with grandparents due to their presence in the family home during childhood and the traditional structures of care in the household⁶. As a result the values of mobility and independence from the family home were counterbalanced in many cases by a sense of family responsibility, a duty of care for ageing parents and elderly relatives and a longing for home. Kasia works in a residential care home in Edinburgh and compares the different structures of care in UK and Poland.

“I’m assuming that as soon as [my parents] retire they’re going to need help and I’m planning to help them. It’s normal in Poland. That’s the big difference for me and my work makes it possible to see in that in...[UK]...children aren’t so involved with their parents’ care” (Kasia, age 28, Edinburgh).

The duty of care for relatives was a commonly held value among young Poles, particularly young women. The expectation of family, community, church and country were cited as factors that instilled an implicit sense of family responsibility upon them. This was not viewed as an explicit obligation and few felt compelled to return to their family but rather would consider it a personal choice. This tension between the individual aspiration for a mobile life and the collective expectations of family and community in Poland has been a recurring feature of modern Polish migration. For example, in Mary Erdmans (1992) work on Polish migration to Chicago in the 1980s, she explores how emigration from Poland was ‘constructed as a moral issue’ and for some Poles, particularly activists of Solidarnosc, to leave Poland was viewed as betrayal by the political elites involved with the trade union

⁶ See Stenning (2010) for a discussion of care structures in Polish family life

and democratic opposition movement. In the narratives of post-accession migrants in Edinburgh, mobility is perceived less as a political desertion but rather a renege of family duty. While it is clear that mobility is viewed as a youthful enterprise, an opportunity not to be missed and an aspirational value, for many the importance of family networks serves to balance the desire for perpetual geographical mobility.

EXPECTATIONS OF A NORMAL LIFE

In their research on the discourses of a ‘normal life’ among post-accession migrants from Poland living in the UK, Galasińska and Kozłowska (2009) argue that geographical mobility is frequently equated with seeking ‘normalcy’ in Polish (online) narratives of migration. Their assertion is that migrants view the UK as a place to achieve a ‘normal life’ as opposed to Poland. Similarly, in studies on post-communist transformation the aspiration for ‘normality’ is read as a rejection of the uncertainties and challenges of a transitory political climate and ‘re-constructed’ in association with the ‘solid ordinary comforts of northern Europe’ (Rausing, 2002 as cited in Galasińska and Kozłowska, 2009, p.87). From the research I conducted in Edinburgh it was in fact the expectations of ‘normal’ life in Poland that were a catalyst for emigration. Some expressed aspirations beyond what they considered to be a ‘traditional’ or ‘typical’ life in Poland and saw geographical mobility as the alternative.

“I was looking to change something. I wasn’t quite ready to do the other part of Polish traditional typical life which is finish Uni, find yourself a boy, get a house and all the marriage stuff... In Poland to be honest, it would have been my only alternative” (Maria, Edinburgh, age 31)

Here, mobility is viewed as an alternative to a traditional life in Poland – rather than settling down and getting married, mobility is perceived as something individual, different and emancipatory. For some of those living in Edinburgh, particularly graduates and those who described themselves as ‘cultural migrants’, mobility was perceived as a break from normal life, a search for difference and a celebration of uncertainty, echoing ‘cosmopolitan’ theories of migration. Tomek moved to London in 2001 for a short-term working holiday and is now living in Edinburgh and working as an architect. He describes a ‘need for movement’ and discovery of new places and people. For Tomek mobility is geographical – he sees the physical move away from Poland as offering tangible benefits in terms of its experiential effects – meeting new people, working in a ‘different’ place, seeing a new environment. He is less concerned with occupational mobility of this move

since he feels that if he had stayed in Poland he would be working at the same level and earning an equivalent wage.

*“I know Poland, it’s time to go somewhere else, Poland will wait for me”
(Tomek, age 30, Edinburgh)*

For others the mobility is less about cosmopolitanism and more about the search for a fairer chance. Narratives of disillusionment portrayed Poland as a place in which people experience limited opportunities, repressive and bureaucratic social structures and difficult, work-oriented everyday lives. For many, these factors are seen as directing a move away from home whereby the opportunities for upward social mobility lay outside of national borders. In many of the narratives people talked of life as a ‘struggle’ in Poland, compared to an ‘easier’ life in Scotland. Some felt that the hierarchies of work in Poland meant that personal contacts were still an important factor in being successful and thus unfair work practices were common. Ania moved to Edinburgh from Warsaw in 2007:

“Before I had decided to come here I made some attempts to change the job – you know like more exciting or more fulfilling for me but I felt it like impossible. I don’t know, they call it like a glass ceiling or something, I couldn’t jump, like, up” (Ania, aged 34, Edinburgh).

Representations of a highly competitive work environment, lack of work/life balance and limited options for sociability, of ‘people furiously struggling for jobs and competing’ were commonly held by those living in Edinburgh (Lukasz, age 29, Edinburgh). Dawid returned to Poland after working in the UK for 6 months. He believes his migration experience in UK and previously in Canada offered an alternative vision of what his life could be like ‘somewhere else’.

*“People here [in Poland] are quite...you know the expression ‘ratrace’, I think it’s kind of a big competition... I don’t really want to stay here...I want to start life somewhere else, in a country where it is more economically stable.”
(Dawid, aged 29, Krakow).*

Fihel and Kaczmarczyk (2009) have explored the link between the availability of jobs in a local area and the propensity to migrate arguing that an over-supply of graduates is causing the out-migration of Poles from certain locales. Often, negative expressions about Poland came from those who grew up in particular locales, which were seen to be in structural decline and areas of high unemployment. Konrad grew up in Radom but has lived in Warsaw and Edinburgh since then in

an attempt to leave a city he perceives as ‘dying’. He now lives in Edinburgh, he runs a small business and says he has no aspiration to return to Poland.

“There’s nothing going on at all. At 6pm the city is dying and no-one is on the streets. I would say right now all the young people moved out from that city... no jobs... it’s a hole on the map. There is opportunities of work in the supermarkets, all the big companies closed and moved out somewhere else” (Konrad, Edinburgh)

While the socio-economics of local labour markets and the expectations of a life of ‘struggle’ played a key role in influencing motives for geographical mobility, many people narrated their motives for migration to the UK as non-economic, remarking that they are not ‘the typical migrant’. The social and cultural gains viewed as integral to mobility were central to their biography. Helena moved to the UK in 2006 from Łódź in order to move away from the family home and ‘lose [her] inhibitions’

“I never thought of coming here just to earn money. I wanted to make a home, my own home...my vision of Poland is...if you’re trapped in a job you never get enough money, you never get enough time to do stuff that you love to do. It’s only work” (Helena, age 28, Edinburgh)

The independence gained through her experience of mobility is a significant step for Helena – she does not imagine returning to Poland as it is, for her, associated with dependence on family structures and a life dominated by work. She too views mobility as an alternative life.

IMAGINING RETURN

In general, most people felt that geographical mobility in some way leads to a chance to improve their lives, in economic, social and cultural terms, but this was most often conceptualised as a move away from Poland and towards something else. Thus, many people living in Edinburgh imagined a return to Poland as a ‘backwards step’ leading to downward social mobility, not only in terms of economics but also cultural issues, such as having independence from family structures and renting or owning their own flat. Olga came to Scotland in 2005 with her partner, Paweł, with the intention of working for a short time in order to save for their wedding. They have been living in Kirkcaldy ever since and working in a range of low wage work and more recently higher waged work. Now, Paweł works as a mechanic, Olga works in a recruitment agency and they own a flat in Kirkcaldy.

“We could go to Poland and do the student life but being realistic I have seen the opportunities here and I can compare them with the ones in Poland and if I would go to Poland I would never have what I have here” (Olga, aged 25, Kirkcaldy)

Dorota moved to Edinburgh in 2005 to move closer to her Spanish partner. She feels a move back to Poland would be a step backwards because she thinks her work experience in the UK could not be easily transferred to the Polish labour market and she feels a sense of pride prevents her from returning to Poland and starting a career path from ‘zero’:

“I don’t want to go back and start from zero. I can go to any other country and start from zero but I’m not going to my own country to start from zero” (Dorota, aged 31, Edinburgh).

These narratives reflect the feeling of uncertainty felt by many who had made conclusions about the lack of labour market opportunities in the Poland compared to the UK. Many of these conclusions were based on memories of a deteriorating economic climate, restrictive work practices and an insecure political system. Some lacked the social networks in Poland to develop knowledge of potential opportunities and some were cynical about state efforts to encourage return. However, not everyone felt that a move back to Poland would signal downward mobility. Some felt that the economic prospects in Poland are on the rise. Particularly among those who had returned many felt that although in real terms the wages are lower than in the UK the opportunities for personal and professional development do exist and are getting better. Emilia moved back to her home town, Bytom, in 2009 after living in Edinburgh for one year while finishing her studies. She now lives with her parents and works in Katowice as an accountant. She sees this stage in her life as a transition from studying to work, viewing more ‘sensible’ opportunities for graduates in her home town of Katowice than in the more competitive city of Krakow or abroad.

“It’s getting better. Maybe the jobs aren’t...for people who don’t have much experience the jobs aren’t very attractive but if you want to find a job, they are there” (Emilia, aged 25, Katowice).

Weronika moved back to Krakow in 2009 after spending 3 years living in Dublin with her boyfriend. He remains in Dublin while she has returned to ‘try’ to make a life in Poland for them both.

“I always wanted to come back – I missed my life, my family here and I still have lots of friends here...I’ve worked in Ireland, in the States, in Spain but I’ve never worked in Poland so how can I say there is nothing to do in Poland when I never tried. So that’s why I came back – to try” (Weronika, aged 25, Krakow)

Weronika reflected that she always planned to come back and her optimism upon return signals a sense of relief and happiness at being close to family and friends. This initial feeling of optimism or ‘urlop pomigracyjny’ is remarked to be a common emotion during the first stages of return migration (Centrum Doradztwa Strategicznego, 2010). For some, this optimism shifts at a later stage towards anxiety and stress due to the practical issues of finding work or starting up a business or family, particularly if the return was unplanned or individuals are ill-prepared for the re-integration into the Polish labour market, and wider society. For Weronika though, the move back to Poland was a perceived success, expressed most emphatically through her desire for closer proximity to family and friends.

DISCUSSING EU MOBILITY

Poland’s accession to the EU was viewed by most as providing more opportunities for Poles to engage in geographical mobility with greater ‘ease’ and most people were in agreement that this led to a number of significant and unique benefits.

“We can move to another country and when I think of going to another country I think of an opportunity to develop yourself, your skills and not only connected with foreign languages but also with some very precious experience that you wouldn’t be able to get while moving from one city to another within Poland” (Emilia, age 25, Katowice).

Emilia contends that the EU affords more opportunities to individuals to be mobile, and her perception is that exploiting this mobility through foreign travel is a wholly positive experience. Overwhelmingly the young people I spoke with were optimistic about Poland’s accession to the EU, both in terms of the opportunity for geographical and social mobility – through fewer limitations for working and living abroad, and through the improvements in living standards and economic prosperity of Poland.

“The EU gave Poles lots of opportunities I think and that was a very positive change and I guess that’s also why the economic[al] situation improved” (Bartek, age 33, Krakow)

This optimism was balanced with reproach by some who perceived the EU as a negative force responsible for a decline in the social fabric of Poland due to a growth in consumerism, competitiveness and greed. Nostalgic reflections on the ‘lack of options’ available during communist times somehow making life ‘simpler’ were backed up with the denigration of the over stimulating yet addictive public culture of consumption that was observed, by some, in contemporary Polish society. Some lamented the wider injustices of contemporary society through nostalgic reflections on life during socialism.

“We were trapped to be the same and people didn’t like it, but everybody had the same flat which is good because at the end of the day you had a flat, you had your own family – ok one orange per family per year but you still had the orange and just now you have families who have five oranges and the other ones who will never get one – and apparently now it’s better?” (Olga, age 25, Kirkcaldy)

Some expressed critiques of mobility itself. Although positive about her personal migration experience in Edinburgh, Maria reflects on the nature of perpetual mobility in the EU.

“Mobility gives you a lot but takes a lot for you. The whole chances of going to every country and seeing everything – It de-roots you...this freedom of choices is making that, ‘I’m not happy here, I’ll move; I’m not happy here, I’ll ...you didn’t have choice in Poland...in the block of flats – that’s your neighbour you have no choice, you don’t move because you can’t move because there’s no moving ideas in your head, so you had to deal with what you had and make the best out of it. I learnt to have the choice of moving, in Britain for travelling but I have to say, every time I moved I am losing something” (Maria, age 31, Edinburgh)

Echoes of post-communist nostalgia (Todorova and Gille, 2010) reflect here a paradox of mobility – while the promise of geographical mobility is ‘a newly acquired freedom’ in many ways, the obligation to choose is often overwhelming (Rose, 1998). Making sense of the choices for mobility in the context of seeking a better and happier life is the key challenge for Maria and for her there is some merit in staying in one place – there is a sense of gaining more through staying put and working through the everyday struggles.

Mobility was viewed as a rite of passage among young Polish people and many felt worried about the decline in work opportunities in an increasingly

competitive labour market within which there is no shortage of qualified mobile people. Dorota felt that geographical mobility has become so common among young people in the EU that it makes little difference to social mobility.

“Most people have experiences abroad working or doing different things so you’re really nobody special cos there’s so many like you that can do the job – it’s kind of scary... sometimes this mobility is a bit pointless...why the need to travel, you know – it doesn’t work for everybody I guess” (Dorota, age 31, Edinburgh)

Geographical mobility has the potential to maximise opportunity for economic and social benefit for some but, as discussed, the degree of social mobility experienced by many people living and working across EU borders is often impeded by lack of rights and restricted access to resources and information (Stenning, 2005). For many the realities of deskilling and under-employment, of insecure and temporary housing, language challenges and the wider ramifications of distance from family led to a less positive reading of geographical mobility. Wanda moved to Edinburgh from Białystok in 2005 with her partner, Grzegorz, and two of their eight children. Although she sees opportunities to make enough money ‘for a life’ in Scotland she feels the competition for jobs is becoming fiercer and those, like herself, without good English language skills are struggling most. The opportunities for social mobility in Wanda’s circumstances have been highly constrained by the experience of precarious work, resulting in below minimum wage earnings and lack of representation at work. Grzegorz is unable to work since he had a serious accident at work (in Edinburgh). Wanda is now the sole earner on a part-time low wage, which she feels has implications for the future mobility prospects of her children. However, she maintains that despite this it is ‘not possible’ to return to Poland because ‘if people find a job here, it’s a simple job on minimum wages and there is enough wages for a life, but not in Poland’ (Wanda, age 35, Edinburgh). For Wanda and Grzegorz emigration was viewed as necessary for a better life and any underlying longing for a return home was suppressed with a belief in the lack of choice in that decision, particularly in relation to advancing the opportunities for their 8 children, five of whom are studying or working in Poland and three at school in Scotland.

Some of those who had returned to Poland expressed reservations about the possibility of making a life permanently in the UK expressing the ‘threats’ associated with EU mobility.

“It’s a big opportunity but on the other hand it’s also some threat because the people who either have no opportunities here in Poland...are going there

and doing hard jobs and in my opinion they have no life there...Maybe here they have less money but they will be with their families” (Szymon, age 33, Krakow)

The sacrifice of family was viewed by many, particularly those who had returned to Poland, as a key challenge associated with EU mobility. In a recent Eurobarometer survey⁷ (2010) it was reported that the majority of Europeans think moving countries is good for European integration, but only one third think it is good for families. The idea of family as antithetic to geographical mobility implies that a mobile livelihood is still perceived by most Europeans to be a non-stable, anti-local phenomenon. It goes against the idea of fluid and hyper-mobile lives, opting instead for the family as a source of security and comfort. However, returning to the previous example of Wanda and Grzegorz, their experience of mobility is bound to the notion of family, providing for and advancing the opportunities for their own family through mobility since they perceive the alternative, sedentary life in Poland as fruitless. The importance of family within the context of mobility was central to many narratives, particularly the assertion that friends and community networks were in many ways taking the role of family. Whether real or imagined, family, friendships and community networks are a source of stability in the context of mobile livelihoods too (Pahl, 2000), echoing notions of transnational communities and transnational families (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999), and the idea that family and mobility are not mutually exclusive categories.

Mobility has been presented throughout this section as opportunity and as threat. Many people see it as both, suggesting that mobile livelihoods can be viewed as a mark of progress and extending choice, whilst simultaneously dislocating from the known, the expected and the secure. Mobility involves risk, uncertainty and choice in varying degrees. In many of the narratives freedom of choice is conceptualised through the discourse of the changing nature of post-socialism – from the repressive structures of state socialism where choice was not an option to a free European space with abundant opportunities to choose a mobile life, or alternatively from a simple and equitable life under socialism to a complicated, uncertain and transient existence under neo-liberalism. This is an incomplete reading of post-socialist transformation in Poland yet features, often nostalgically, in the memories and explanations of personal migration histories. Mobility did not suddenly occur as an idea or an opportunity in 2004. The experience of mobility (and immobility) before 2004 – whether on family holidays, individual

⁷ Eurobarometer 337

travel experiences, seasonal work or transnational business – shapes subsequent experiences and influences decisions for mobility. Burawoy and Verdery (1999) claim that ‘the past frames the present, imbuing it with distinctive meaning’, so in studying the paths of mobile people it is important to understand these historical trajectories of their migration journeys. Through the lens of a hyper global mobility, these meanings are often lost and the choices and decisions of migrants themselves are often ignored. A more nuanced and contextual analysis is needed to understand the motivations, aspirations and experiences of young Polish people from their household boundaries, to their notion of the Polish state, the UK state and the EU.

CONCLUSION

The discourse on mobility has developed over the past century towards a more general agreement of the idea that we live in a mobile world. In the social sciences, metaphors of the nomad, the vagabond, of flux and liquidity are ever present in literature describing the mobile world (Berman, 1988; Bauman, 2000; Deleuze and Guattari, 1986) and as we have seen new academic work on mobilities has reinvigorated the subject (Urry and Sheller, 2000; Cresswell, 2006). It is clear that technological developments and political conditions have contributed to more mobility for more people in the Twenty First Century, yet it is confounded by pre-existing and new hierarchies of power that require some to remain immobile. As Urry (2000) maintains ‘social inequalities are often spatial, resulting from hugely uneven forms of access to, or the effects of, various kinds of mobility’ (Urry, 2000:195).

Drawing from the narratives, EU mobility represents a beacon for those who see limited opportunities for work and ‘a life’ in Poland and for many moving forward is a move abroad. Mobility is perceived as the enterprise of youth and an alternative to a traditional, sedentary existence, but also as a search for a fairer chance. Family, community, church and country continue to influence migration strategies including that of return and the desire for geographical mobility is counterbalanced by home and family commitments which are often located and rooted in a specific place surrounded by specific people. The opportunity to be mobile in Europe, and in the world, is of symbolic importance to young people, transpiring from past or inter-generational experience and values, but the material inequalities of de-skilling, ‘brain waste’ and precarious work are just some examples of the uncertain transitions of both emigration and return. Perpetual mobility is less appealing then, if de-rooting from one place leads to a backwards step in another. For many, the risks outweigh the opportunities.

Youth affords choice and wealth affords more choice. The economic rationale of EU mobility targets working-age young people while older people, particularly those of non-working age, are assumed to be content to stay in one place. Though it is undeniable that EU accession has enabled many more Poles to live and work abroad, the differential access to resources for mobility and the discursive construct of good and bad mobility continues to reinforce stark inequalities among young and older Poles. Balancing individual stories with a discursive reading of the ‘politics of mobility’ (Cresswell, 2010) is therefore integral to uncovering the way in which underlying processes and structures ascribe and shape values for mobility among young Polish people.

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