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The Myth of 'Weak Ties' and the Ghost of the Polish Peasant: Informal Networks of Polish Post-Transition Migrants in the UK and Germany

Małgorzata Irek

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Abstract

The vast majority of Polish migrants in the UK and Germany have a very low opinion about their own group solidarity in these countries. They claim that the ties between Poles abroad are almost non-existent, as opposed to strong ties established by such 'others' like Jews and Italians. This opinion is reflected in the interviews and surveys done by the sociologists, who see these 'weak ties' as an explanation of the rapid integration of Poles into receiving societies as well as their upward mobility. This paper challenges these conclusions. It is based on longitudinal anthropological fieldwork in both Germany and the UK since 1987, as well as on Polish history. The paper challenges the notion of the weak ties amongst Poles by establishing the plurality, omnipresence and instrumental effectiveness of their informal networks. It also questions the utility of sociological methods and concepts for the analysis of raw human agency, such as informal networks.

Keywords

Author

Małgorzata Irek, COMPAS Research Associate

The case of Polish migrants in the UK and Germany seems to be a crowning example of the 'strength of weak ties' as described by Granovetter (1973). The vast majority of Polish migrants in these countries have a very low opinion on their co-ethnics, openly declare mistrust towards each other, complain about the lack of ethnic solidarity and claim that the ties between Poles abroad are almost non-existent, as opposed to the strong ties established by such 'others' as Jews, Italians, Indians or Turks. This opinion is reflected in the interviews and surveys done by social scientists, who generally agree that post-transition Polish migrants do not form a tightly-knit ethnic community, but can be seen as individual actors engaging in the rational pursuit of economic goals (Jordan 2002, Duvell 2004) and distancing themselves from civic organizations, especially those formed by the older 'Polonia'[1] (Garapich 2008a & b, Pietka 2009).

The main characteristics of the Polish non-community described by researchers are a remarkably low level of trust towards co-ethnics, exploitation of each other, a lack of solidarity and ruthless competition, involving cheating, violence and reporting each other's informal activities to the police (Jordan 2002, Duvell 2004, Eade et al. 2006, Triandafillydou 2006, Pietka 2009, Burrell 2009). It seems that the objectivity of this observation is beyond doubt: it has been verified by several teams of scholars working independently of each other in different places and in different periods of time. The only thing they had in common was classical migration theory, with the same method of formal interviews and the same analytical concepts.

On the other hand, even before the accession of Poland to the EU, researchers noticed that quite a substantial number of Poles were able to secure for themselves legal employment outside the ethnic market, to open their own businesses or to obtain more up-market jobs in informal employment. In this context 'weak ties' could be seen as a main factor explaining the rapid integration of Poles into the receiving societies, as well their upward mobility (Jordan 2002, Duvell 2004). In line with Granovetter's thesis, it would seem logical that since Poles could not rely on the group solidarity and help of other Poles, instead of staying closed in a ghetto of the ethnic market, they were forced to explore other channels of information and alternative possibilities, thus profiting from the weak ties. But then, if Polish migrants really have weak ties with their co-ethnics, how can one explain the existence of the numerous, dynamic and very effective informal networks (Irek 1998, Ryan et al. 2008, White and Ryan 2008, White 2010), knowing that the principal mechanisms which make informal networks work at all are trust and solidarity, which, as it happens, are the main attributes of strong ties?

Based on my longitudinal anthropological fieldwork in both countries conducted between 1987 and today, I explain this paradox, challenging both the notion of weak ties among Poles, the

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[1] Although the word generally means people of Polish origin living abroad, in Polish studies it is used to refer to Polish communities formed abroad. Discussed in Znaniecka-Łopata (1976) and Kubiak in Kubiak and Pilch (1976).

applicability of standard research methods and the very analytical concepts used by the social sciences for the study of raw human agency.

Ethnography: the outsider's view

Before my departure from a small town in Poland to West Berlin to start research on the informal networks of European travellers, petty traders, smugglers and illegal workers,[2] I consulted Richard, a local expert on the informal trade and a well-known Europe-traveller,[3] He had a private gardening enterprise, which was just a cover for his real income, which came from petty trading across Europe. He told me in detail what goods to take with me so that my travel expenses would 'pay back' and offered valuable advice on all aspects of my journey, including how to bribe customs officers:

> *'Remember, dear, they all take bribes. Germans, Turks or Greeks – them officers, they are all the same, just like our police. You do not get a passport if you don't give them (the police) something. But never do it in public and never overpay! And by all means when you are out there, beware of other Poles! There is no bigger swine in this world than a Pole abroad.'* (Richard, age 46)

In 1987 Poland was still a socialist country, but unlike in the German Democratic Republic there was no ban on travelling – its citizens were allowed to travel to the west, although under certain conditions. While in the abundant literature on migration the main stress is on the visas selectively issued by the host country, it is usually overlooked that Poles had to overcome two hurdles: the first was obtaining a Polish passport; only then could one apply for a visa to a given country, which was the second hurdle. Since the 1980s West Berlin and Vienna were visa-free for tourist visits; the main

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[2] The first observations of informal networks started in 1980 in the GDR/Polish border area. The systematic research on informal networks has been conducted since 1987 in West Germany, en route between different locations in Poland and in Germany, as well as in these locations. For ethical reasons the names of the locations in Poland as well as all identifying information about my informants have been kept confidential. The research method was fieldwork involving participant observation including (amongst other research activities) regular train journeys (up to two weekly) between West Berlin and Poland (six years), as well as car and coach journeys from Poland to Berlin and after 1990 also to the areas of Rhine-Ruhr and Rhine-Main. In the period of eighteen years, over two thousand informal interviews were conducted, plus numerous group discussions. The research in Germany was regularly updated until 2005. The research in the UK started in 1995 and has continued until the present. It has included fieldwork in several towns in England and Scotland, together with regular coach journeys between London and Poland (up to two monthly) until March 2005. From 2006 fieldwork was carried out on discount airlines and at airports, mostly in the London vicinity (with significantly less travel from Manchester, Glasgow, Bristol and Birmingham airports), as well as en route to different destinations in Poland. A similar number of interviews (about 2000) and group discussions were conducted as in Germany.

[3] In socialist Poland, the Europe traveller became an established profession from the 1970s, when freedom to travel was increased. The travellers, officially branded as smugglers and speculators, filled the void created by the failures of the planned economies, due to which a majority of goods were in short supply because of the lack of flexibility and market-oriented distribution. Taking advantage of the price differences and exchange rates in different countries, the Europe travellers re-distributed goods across socialist countries, making a net profit ranging from 5000 to 10,000 percent on each journey (Irek 1998).

difficulty for travellers to these destinations was obtaining a passport issued by the Polish government, represented by local police departments. The passport was the property of the government (until December 1987 after possible[4] return home a citizen had to give it back to the police). It was at this point that the pre-selection of migrants was made. Unless one was *persona non grata* in Poland and hence was encouraged to leave, to obtain a passport one had to fulfil such conditions as obtaining an invitation from Somebody in the west, and/or placing a lump sum of foreign currency in a bank, as well as an impeccable reputation. These usually had to be supported by some sort of bribe or strong networking skills (Irek 1998).

In the initial stages of fieldwork in former West Berlin, many factors indicated that Richard's opinion was justified: there was no Polish community a newcomer could turn to for help and support. The only official organization one could easily access was the Polish consulate, where, like many migrants interviewed at that time, I was made to feel unwelcome and informed that, since I had not been 'sent' by an official Polish institution but had come on my own initiative, I was on my own, 'but it was for my own good'. Apparently, after one chose to migrate 'behind the back' of Polish institutions (regardless of one's legal status in relation to the German authorities), one could no longer claim their help. With no interest in and no support from the home country, Polish migrants in West Berlin (as distinct from the commuting illegal petty traders and smugglers) were invisible. There was no explicitly Polish restaurant on the western side of the Berlin Wall where one could meet Poles socializing with their co-ethnics (apart from one which claimed a Silesian identity), there was not a single Polish shop (apart from the illegal trading places where the smugglers[5] sold their goods), not a single Polish newspaper or even a bulletin. The few official organizations of Poles in West Berlin were small cliques of established migrants fighting each other, none big enough to represent the Polish minority in the political arena, with all their members complaining about this fact, but not willing to unite. Asked why they did not unite, respondents usually replied that it was impossible because 'those other Poles' were selfish and short-sighted, unwilling to co-operate.

On the basis of initial interviews,[6] and the classification of legal status conducted by both the Polish and German authorities, Polish migrants could be divided into two groups: official and non-

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[4] It was a common practice for somebody trying to migrate from Poland (with the intention of staying in the West for a longer period than allowed by the Polish state or to ask for asylum) to apply for a passport under false pretences, such as an organised coach trip. Interviewees on buses to the UK telling stories of their early migration efforts under socialism usually described how, returning home from such a 'tourist trip', more than half the 'holiday-makers' on the coach were always missing. The record 'holiday' story was when the whole coach 'excursion', including the bus drivers, stayed in the West asking for asylum. The second team of drivers who were sent to recover the coach also stayed in the West.

[5] Interestingly, from the point of view of German law these were not illegal traders: unless they brought in forbidden amounts of cigarettes, usually they were not breaking West German customs regulations. They were smugglers only under Polish law, since they were breaking the state monopoly on international trade, which imposed very small allowances on those few items which could be brought in and out of the country.

[6] The intricate classification system by both sets of authorities was a standard part of a migrant's know-how. To achieve the desired goal a migrant had to consider carefully how to present himself to the bureaucrats, choosing the best survival strategy in case he did not qualify for the status of German *Abstammung* (descent),

official, apparently living in completely separate social spaces. However, 'officialdom' was defined differently by both sides. The formal distinction on the Polish side was between those on a single-visit passport issued exclusively in Poland and the so-called consular passport issued either in Poland or abroad by a Polish consulate for those entitled to permanent or long stay. But as mentioned above, the effective distinction was between those 'sent' by Polish institutions and others, including the families of German citizens, students, former illegal workers with *Duldung*[7], asylum-seekers (who had to give up their Polish passports to the German authorities) and Poles who claimed German roots (*Abstammung*) but informally kept their Polish passports, taking advantage of a loophole in the German regulations regarding re-settlers, under which they were not required to give up their former nationality. The German authorities made a distinction between those with permission to stay (*Duldung* or permission for an unlimited period, as well as temporary visas issued by the German Consulate in Poland) and those without visas who came as tourists but overstayed.[8] Migrants with a German passport, including the family members of Germans and Poles who claimed German roots (even if they could speak only Polish), did not count as Poles any more. Those illegal workers and traders who were commuting and hence did not overstay were not accounted for. None of the authorities knew exactly how many Poles there were in West Berlin. In 1988 the Polish consulate estimated the Polish diaspora at the level of 100,000, not counting illegal workers and the second generation of Poles. At the same time the German authorities estimated this number at 30,000, not counting those with German roots, Polish children born in Germany and illegal workers, whose numbers were estimated at 90,000, counting three illegal migrants for every legal one.

Another initial observation after interviewing Polish migrants with some legal status was that they aimed at a complete and rapid integration into the host society, which they believed ensured their social and economic success and allowed them to avoid possible discrimination by Germans. However, in contrast to the Germanophobia in central Poland, which was connected with WWII, the Polish migrants' fear of discrimination was rooted more in the memory of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*.[9] There was a striking similarity in the behaviour of the 'established Poles' in West Berlin and that of mulattoes in antebellum America, who were white enough to pass for whites. In the American case, 'passing' involved cutting all one's ties with black family members, avoiding close contact with black

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which was granted on the basis of the Wehrmacht list from WWII, called by Poles 'the big computer'. The relevant knowledge included whom to bribe and when, the current bribe rates and the most successful proofs of Germanness and how to fabricate them. It was through bribing and playing up national pride that the supposedly rigid German control system could be manipulated. Very often the street information of other Poles was more accurate than information acquired from a responsible bureaucrat.

[7] *Duldung* (toleration of prolonged stay of a person who should leave the country) was a temporary status given to Poles during Jaruzelski's martial law period.

[8] On the legal status of Polish migrants in Germany and their estimated numbers, see the numerous publications by Norbert Cyrus (e.g. Cyrus 2000).

[9] Bismarck's fight against Catholic Church was connected with an aggressive Germanization policy towards the native population of the Polish territory of Wielkopolska, which after partition of Poland had fallen under Prussian rule (see Zubrzycki 1953, Davies 1982).

people in general, perceiving blackness as shameful and publicly expressing negative views on everything connected with Africa.[10]

In the German case, 'passing' Polish migrants claimed that they had broken all ties with Poland and everything Polish, with a special emphasis on rejecting any guests from 'this country', including family members. They had a negative opinion of Poland and very often seemed to be ashamed of their Polish provenience. They always feared being put in the same category as newly arrived Poles, who usually lacked legal status, and proclaimed their disregard of and strongly negative emotions towards this group. Typical statements were as follows:

> *'I never miss Poland. It is a lost country without any future. People only steal and fight. And most of all, they drink. Polish people are lazy (in Poland). All the industrious ones who wanted to work and achieve something have already migrated.'* (Eva)
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> *'I hate those Polish machos. They treat their women like breeding cows and here they come and walk on our streets. Why don't they shave (faces)? They stink and their clothes are dirty, but they take up the whole pavement, so that you have to step into to the street, they push you and instead of saying "sorry" they look down on you.'* (Kasia)
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> *'All these Polish women dress and behave like sluts. No wonder our Turks think that every Polish woman is a prostitute.'* (Jan)
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> *'We have been working hard for years to achieve what we have. Now they (smugglers) come, with their cars from skip.… All they do is mischief. They throw their rubbish in the street, and they piss in the gates. You cannot walk in the street without hearing their loud quarrels. You hear "kurwa" (the F word) everywhere. And they steal from shops. It is a shame to be a Pole now.'* (Andrzej)

Since the only visible Poles were on the verge of legality at best, in public debates Polishness was usually connected with fishy business like stealing and smuggling and low-status occupations like cleaning and prostitution. In the areas close to the so-called 'Polish markets', where petty traders and smugglers sold their goods illegally, there even appeared notices in shops, with a visible, often hand-written message: 'Poles, stealing is forbidden and will be prosecuted'. This new negative connotation was added to the older stereotype of the 'Polish economy' (*polnische Wirtschaft*) dating back to Bismarck's time, very similar to that represented by Polish jokes in America. In order to cut themselves off from this shameful background, the 'documented' migrants claimed to have nothing whatsoever to do with the undocumented ones. To avoid any coincidental contact in public places they refused to speak Polish, which they often extended to their children, to whom they talked in German, usually broken. Poles 'without papers' (any sort of permission to stay) despised them in

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[10]The problem of passing is discussed in detail in Sollors (1999).

return and mockingly called them '120 percent Germans', a label that was also generally used back in Poland.

The only thing that all groups, sub-groups and cliques agreed on was the claim that Poles did not help each other, unlike, for example, Jews or Italians, who achieved brilliant social success through exploiting ethnic loyalty. There was a widespread understanding in the Polish non-community in Berlin that for a Jew it was enough to go to any Jewish shop in New York to be accepted into the Jewish community and be given all necessary help and support, including a well-paid job, and that Italians in Australia lived together in one house and each year they built a new house for one of the members of the household so that within a few years they all became rich and established. It was a big question why Poles could not have similarly strong ties, but it remained unanswered.

In 1995, when the UK leg of the research started, Poland was no longer a socialist country but was already six years into the transition to capitalism. However, despite major structural differences between West Germany in the late eighties and the UK in the mid-nineties,[11] the situation of the newly arrived Polish migrants was quite similar. Although in some places such as London there were relatively more visible Polish communities formed around Polish clubs of the 'Polonia' comprising the older migrants, usually ex-soldiers and their families,[12] and there were some Polish shops as well as churches offering Polish mass, Poles were difficult to identify and absent from the political scene and media (not to mention the fact that the ethnic products sold in the very few Polish shops did not originate in Poland, but were made in the UK with a fat content complying with local norms, which significantly altered the taste). There were no generally accessible Polish newspapers, neither imported from Poland nor produced by the local diaspora. There also was a similar animosity between the older Polonia migrants, who considered themselves the only 'proper' ones, and all the new immigrants, legal or not. This animosity ran along the lines of the canonical division between 'noble', almost sacred political migration and ordinary, profane and rather shameful economic migration, described by Znaniecki and later by his student Zubrzycki, a soldier-migrant himself (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927, Zubrzycki 1988, Garapich 2005). As in Berlin, the vast majority of the interviewees complained about the lack of ethnic solidarity, especially when they had to pay rent to their Polish landlords. And even though the socialist state did not exist anymore, the attitude of the Polish consulate towards migrants was same: if you were not sent by a Polish institution, you were on your own, and could not even be given a place for your children in the Polish school in London.

Very much as in Germany, Poles in the UK fell into numerous categories, different for each country's officials. On the Polish side the classification system distinguished between those of Polish

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[11] On the comparison from a formal viewpoint, see Cyrus, Duvell and Vogel (2004).
[12] WWII Polish migration to the UK is discussed by Zubrzycki (1988) and more recently by Garapich (2005).

descent but without a Polish passport (due to the policy of the socialist regime[13]), those with a consular Polish passport (issued abroad for those with a permanent address there) and those with an ordinary passport (issued in Poland with a permanent address in Poland being declared), which included tourists, students, and legal and illegal workers alike. And surprisingly, despite the transition, there still was a distinction between those who had been sent by Polish institutions and the rest. For the UK authorities, Poles fell into five major categories: foreign-born with a British passport, foreign-born with the status of permanent resident, migrants with the status of non-permanent residence, semi-official and finally illegal. Tourists were not counted as migrants, but once they overstayed (which they usually did), potentially they fell into the two last categories.[14]

The first category comprised foreign-born British citizens, including Polish-born Britons, mostly WWII soldiers and their families, political fugitives from 1968 and the early Solidarność movement (but not their children, who were British-born citizens) and naturalized foreign-born members of the families of British citizens. The second category comprised Poles without a British passport but with the status of permanent resident (not naturalized spouses and members of the families of British citizens, those who changed their business visa into permanent residence and all those remaining asylum-seekers and fugitives who had not become naturalized citizens). In the third category fell all migrants with temporary residence status (newly migrated families of British citizens, business visa holders, students at a college or university in the UK, Polish university students on seasonal worker's visas and finally officially employed workers with work permits). The fourth and fifth categories, which at that time were usually treated as one,[15] were for those who had no residence status, but had entered the UK on a tourist or student visa for language students. If they took up a legal job, which was possible through a chain of subcontracting job agencies, they were semi-legal (they had entered legally and paid taxes, but once they overstayed they were included in the category of 'entered under false pretences'). If they took up informal employment or used a fraudulent NI card they fell into the illegal category, together with the criminals who often came in on false passports, looking for new opportunities or running away from creditors, prison or 'mafia' vengeance in Poland. Although there was stringent control on the way to UK, with landing cards to be filled in, there was no similar mechanism on the way out, and unlike in Germany, passports were not stamped.[16] Hence, there was no way of determining whether somebody had overstayed unless

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[13] Poland recognized the right of descendants of Polonia to claim Polish citizenship only in 1999. However, there are still no general guidelines regarding who exactly can do so, each case being decided separately by a Polish *wojewoda*.

[14] Again, just like in Germany this was also a street knowledge – even before they entered the UK, Polish migrants had to know exactly in which category to place themselves to suit their purpose best.

[15] The semi-legal status in the UK was noticed much later and it was described as 'semi-compliance' (Anderson and Ruhs 2006).

[16] The differences between the German and British immigration control systems and the economic and social position of informal Polish migrants in the UK and Germany are discussed in Cyrus, Duvell and Vogel (2004) and in Triandafyllidou (2006).

he or she made some mistake, like for example Maria, interviewed on the way back to Poland after being rejected by UK immigration authorities.

> *'I went back all right several times. But this time I was stupid. I kept my old ticket. They were offering a promotion on the bus. Twenty percent off your next ticket if you show the old one. So I had this shit in my purse. I was almost there, in the UK, and they asked if I had the return ticket. I said 'of course' and I gave them this old one. They saw I had overstayed one year!'*

But such mistakes were rather rare, and the majority of people kept overstaying, sometimes for up to four years,[17] and kept returning to UK, claiming to stay three weeks, so that all efforts to control the number of these semi- or illegal migrants resembled the herding of cats. Just as in Germany, all the figures given in the statistics were very rough estimates.[18]

Another similarity was that Poles in different categories claimed not to have any contact with the others and to live in completely different social spaces (Duvell 2004). In the UK an especially deep cleavage was observed between the 'Old Polonia' consisting of political exiles who described themselves as being mostly officers[19] recruited from Polish gentry, and who boasted about their noble provenience, their status being kept high by their own Polish government in exile, versus the economic migrants, who were defined as 'communist' and post-communist opportunists (Garapich 2005, 2008b). Just as in Germany, in the interviews and conversations Old Polonia members considered these newcomers unworthy of being either Poles or UK residents, while the newly arrived migrants accused them of being stuck in a delusional world and extremely unhelpful. Typical opinions were as follows:

> *'We were dying for this country and then we had to live in poverty and to work our arses off. We did not even know whether our families were alive. Them young Poles come here and they want everything on a plate. This is not communism! You have to work hard here.'* (Alfred, Monte Casino veteran)
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> *'I have been trying to register with POSK as a Polish artist for two years. And nothing ever happens. There is nobody one can talk to. They always find a way to put me off, they are simply not interested in new people.'* (Alexandra, painter)

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[17] Of about 2000 interviewed people only thirteen overstayed that long, five people stayed longer than four years including the record one who claimed to have stayed 10 years. At the time when the first interviews were done Poland was five years into transition and the preferred period of staying in the UK without visiting family in Poland was one year, in contrast to the socialist period, when staying ten years and longer was very common, caused by fear of prosecution if one returned home.

[18] On the problems with statistical data, see e.g. Salt (2005).

[19] If this statement were true, this would have been the first army in the world with more officers than soldiers. In fact the bulk of 'Old Polonia' in the UK were ordinary soldiers who had taken up manual jobs after the war.

'Those are a bunch of high nosed lunatics. I never heard they did anything good for us (the new migrants). It is not like Jews, that they support each other. Poles do not care. And besides, those are not even Poles, they are already English.' (Karolina, illegal worker)

These opinions and even words were strikingly similar to what was observed later by other researchers in different parts of the UK, as if it were a standard clichéd response to this type of question.

The perspective of informality: the insider's view

While in both Germany and the UK, as structured by the authorities and researched by formal methods, Poles from differently classified groups lived in apparently separate social spaces that rarely overlapped, the outlook from the perspective of informality was significantly different. Once the formal methods and perspectives had been abandoned and the more horizontal perspective of open-ended informal networks adopted, it became possible to appreciate fully the reality of social existence without segmentation into separate social spaces. Seen from this perspective, Polish migrants in these countries were a part of the wider, unifying 'quasi-structure' that cut across such divisions as age, sex, profession, class, religion, ethnicity or the administrative boundaries of the nation. This 'quasi-structure' is formed of the endless chains of informal social networks,[20] which, despite the lack of a repeatable pattern (Hart 1985), organise social space hidden from the control of the state.

Thus, as distinct from the relationships described in the formal models, the links between people engaged in an informal network (nodes) need not be characterised by repeatability, permanency or measurability. They can have a 'fluid' rather than stable character, their nature may be differentiated[21] and vary over time, and they can also vary in scope, intensity and complexity. A given link may instantly become less intensive or inactive, it may suddenly change its content from, for example, transactional to emotional, and it may change from reciprocal to unilateral or the other way round, depending on the actor's emotions and personal judgement, for there is no rule and no mandate to informal networks. Since the relationships between nodes are non-prescribed and not sanctioned by institutions, the functioning of the extensive chains of networks is based entirely on what we define as trust. In contrast to the legal sanctions that protect the proper functioning of

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[20] This is a concept of an open-ended network, different from the network defined as 'a specific set of linkages among a definite set of persons' (Mitchell 1969: 3). Informal networks are here understood as open-ended sets of ego-centred relationships, hidden from state control and 'created and negotiated by people in the process of trying to work and manage the system' (Boissevain 1968, Kadushin 2004).

[21] They can be purely transactional, purely emotional or a mixture of both, they can be defined by kinship, friendship, love, sex, sympathy or common interest, they can be one-sided or reciprocal (mutual), they can be democratic (horizontal) or based on patronage (vertical).

formal structures, which are strictly defined and are usually delayed, the sanctions in the informal space are not defined and can range from no sanction at all to beating and even killing, verbal abuse, shaming or exclusion; also, their effect is usually immediate.

An informal network of an individual person can easily stretch in geographical space over several continents (Irek 1998). Therefore, during my fieldwork it came as no surprise that some travellers (semi-legal migrants) interviewed on the discount buses between London and Poland appeared to be part of the same ethnic networks I had researched earlier in Germany. The post-transition informal migrants to the UK, as distinct from the socialist period, when it was a Polish state bureaucrat who chose which citizens were entitled to travel to the west, were not pre-selected elites, but ordinary people who either happened to have direct or indirect connections to the west, had responded to press advertisements by established migrants or had travelled without any previous connections or the UK invitation which was required to enter the country until accession to the EU. Very often the migrants to UK had previous illegal work experience in Germany or were the children of illegal migrants to Germany (which explains the popularity of familiar German chains like Lidl and Aldi among Poles in the UK). In some cases a single individual's personal networks stretched from Poland through Berlin to London and then to cities in Australia, Canada or South Africa, the favourite destinations of Polish asylum-seekers in the late seventies and early eighties. Even before Polish accession to the EU, Polish networks referred to as 'our people' (*nasi*) stretched across the whole globe and could arrange for anything, from sending half a pig freshly slaughtered in a village in Poland to a wedding in London suburb, an 'almost legal' job in hotel (illegal employment through a chain of legal agencies) or a 'plastic card' (false NI), later known as a 'blue card', to a 'visa-free' visit in the USA. Of course everything was available for a payment or some reciprocal favour, which could be delayed.

In the course of fieldwork with participant observation, it became evident that in practice the members of the formally separate groups of Polish migrants were living in a common social space, which, moreover, was not limited to their respective countries of residence. Both in the UK and Germany, the representatives of the Old Polonia, the more recent political refugees and the officials sent by Polish institutions, were linked by informal networks of a transactional nature and were actively (and consciously) profiting from them, although being reluctant to admit it. Such behaviour is typical in research into informal activities (Pahl 1984, Hart 1985, Gutmann 1985, Berndt et al. 1993, Irek 1998), whose very success depends on secrecy. Therefore it is not possible to obtain insider's information on informal activities by formal methods, including formal interviews or questionnaires, and to do so in a short time. The researcher has to follow the classic principles of painstakingly slow and meticulous participant observation and to invest considerable amounts of time and energy in winning the trust of the actors. In this particular case the researcher cannot use third parties, such as interpreters, but has to do the research in person, for informants are usually perfectly aware that any

recorded information and any third party present at the interview could theoretically be used against them in a court.

An informal approach including longitudinal fieldwork with participant observation is usually not possible due to funding limitations, as well as to bureaucratic restrictions dressed up as ethical concerns. Not only is a researcher as a rule forbidden from participating in 'semi-legal' activities, he or she is also required to obtain the written consent of informants. In effect, the bulk of research on Polish networks has been done in short-time studies, without sufficient participant observation which would allow effective penetration of the informal milieu and, with very few exceptions (White 2010, Burrell 2009), it has been carried out on the basis of remarkably, not to say dramatically small samples. Also, the requirements of funding bodies are pushing research of informal social phenomena towards state policies and creating a major logical problem by forcing scholars to discuss the informal from the perspective of the formal – a futile exercise in itself, since formality defies informality (Henry 1993) – as well as demanding quantitative data (Sciortino 2004) and the use of formal methods of research, instead of qualitative data and the informal methods that are appropriate for this type of phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, by 1990 in Germany and by 2004 in the UK the formal requirement to obtain a passport and then a visa for the respective country was an invitation from somebody with a permanent address in the West, which could be an institution, a relative, a mere acquaintance or a completely alien person who simply sold an invitation.[22] Until the late Seventies, when the next wave of Polish migrants with residence status appeared, the 'somebody' was usually a member of Old Polonia, who in return for the invitation expected some favours, including bringing in (smuggling from Poland) Polish food and liquor, ethnic products and printed matter. Very often the relative or acquaintance from Poland was expected to do some manual jobs for the British cousin (in person or to arrange for somebody else from Poland to do it) and to invite the Westerner and his family for a holiday to Poland. The Old Polonia member, on the other hand, was expected to find odd jobs for his guest, obviously in the informal economy, which he or she usually did.[23]

A typical example is here Pan Jasiu, an ex-soldier from the Anders Army. I met him through Pani Helena, a Polish lady in her seventies, who had travelled on her own for twenty hours

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[22] Initially the Polish authorities did not verify the identity of the inviting person. Until the mid-eighties it was enough to fill in a form at a Polish consulate and pay a fee (14 DM in West Berlin) to obtain an invitation for a Pole of one's choice. Therefore it often happened that the name and address of the person issuing the invitation were fake, such as Samuel Coleridge, London, 11 Downing Street in London or Thomas Mann, Kurfuerstendamm 53, Berlin.

[23] Although the focus of the present article is on post-transition migration, it has to embrace earlier phenomena which contributed to the status quo at the start of the research. Moreover, the changes to formal status did not necessarily correspond to the expected changes in the informal sphere, so there has been a remarkable historical continuity to the informal networks.

by bus from central Poland to London to catch a bus connection to a small town in the north of the UK. Pan Jasiu was a disabled widower and needed somebody to take care of him, so through his personal networks in Poland he found Pani Helena, procured an invitation and paid for her travel costs. In return she was to bring him from Poland a small quantity of items of 'purely sentimental value', such as cigarettes, vodka, moonlighter making machinery, Polish sausage (kielbasa), dried mushrooms and five good sized pictures of the Polish Pope. Together with the small quantity of items which she planned to sell profitably herself, including twelve crystal glasses with a matching carafe, silver spoons, vodka, pure spirit, the cheapest cigarettes, eight linen tablecloths and napkin sets, as well as Pani Helena's few personal belongings, the luggage amounted to two oversized suitcases and three massive handbags. While handling her luggage, Pani Helena got all the help she needed from complete strangers, Poles whom she met on the bus – this included finding her new bus at the connecting station(for she spoke no English), unloading the luggage and carrying it to the new bus stand. Pan Jasiu did not pay in cash, but in return for housekeeping and personal care by Pani Helena he found 'well-paid jobs' in agriculture for her closest family and agreed to lodge them for free in a shed by his bungalow. The employer, a British farmer called Elton, happened to be an old acquaintance of Pan Jasiu's deceased wife's family, who formerly officially employed French students as seasonal workers, but complained about their high demands and bad work and was eager to employ cheaper, illegal Poles. Pan Jasiu had procured eleven invitations for Pani Helena's 'closest family from a village', which included her two granddaughters with a boyfriend each and seven other people Pani Helena had never known or seen before. Elton was paying the workers through Pan Jasiu, who let Pani Helena take some of their earnings for herself as her salary. Both the workers and Pani Helena multiplied their earnings by buying on sale in discount shops food items, cosmetics and second-hand clothes desired in Poland, which they expected to sell in Poland with at least 300% profit. (fieldwork in Northern UK, Summer 1995)

A significant proportion of the hierarchically structured networks of illegal workers had a link to a 'founding father' from Old Polonia, who need not necessarily have been aware how far his networks extended. Also, by the time the research started, the representatives of Old Polonia had grown old and were keen to have cheaper, off-the-books ethnic services and to let out rooms to new Polish migrants, both for company and for additional (and not necessarily reported) income. Choosing a Polish person over a British person guaranteed the secrecy of the deal, while choosing a Pole over any other ethnicity was an indication of trust in one's own ethnic group.

    While the WWII Polonia in the UK were not always aware of the scope of the network chains they initiated, the members of Polish institutions posted abroad (the 'sent ones'), political

refugees from socialism and the spouses of native citizens were consciously building elaborate, hierarchically structured networks, taking full advantage of their documented position in Germany and the UK alike. Until the transformation, the average salary in Poland varied in different periods between 10 and 50 US dollars, so prices were correspondingly low, which, regardless of the official exchange rate (which was different from the black market rate), gave every foreign currency enormous buying power. Moreover, in Poland there was always a high demand caused by shortages of such 'luxury' items as soap, deodorants, tights, underwear, coffee, tea and even toilet paper (Irek 1998). The 'sent ones' were able to maximize the profitability of their temporary migration (with net profits from 'private trading' boosted to 3000% on one journey to Poland), while the established migrants used informal networks to better their economic and social status in the host countries. Starting from the trade in invitations, cigarettes, vodka, ethnic goods such as crystal vases, amber and furs brought (the word 'brought' was used instead of 'smuggled') from Poland, through trade in lodging and illegal work places – none would have been possible without the participation of the established groups mentioned above, who had the means and know-how needed to anchor long chains of informal relationships of a transactional nature.

As with any other ethnic migrant group in the UK and elsewhere, the informal networks were particularly useful for the self-employed and small enterprises, giving them a competitive edge on the capitalist market. The political refugees from socialism of the late Seventies and early Eighties, having acquired formal status, could put their entrepreneurial skills to good use by employing cheap Polish labour mostly in building, hospitality, agriculture and domestic services. For those Polish migrants in the UK and Germany alike who were not employing other Poles on a regular basis, Polish builders, cleaners and car mechanics were the first choice for occasional informal services, not only for financial reasons, but also because they were trusted to do better work. In the UK, Polish doctors (even if they were technically British and their Polishness consisted in a Polish-sounding name and a few words in broken Polish) were trusted and preferred to British ones, which after accession gave rise to a private Polish health industry in this country.

A good example of a highly skilled professional using the power of informal networks is Beata, a senior medical consultant. She came to work in the UK through a government agency, tempted by a competitively high salary and fed up with her work in a Polish clinic. Her English was quite good, she had British friends at work and she could fly to visit her family in Poland on regular basis. As she was an atheist and as her taste in food was international, she decided not to seek any contact with Poles, mostly for the sake of learning the English language and culture. 'If I wanted to be with Poles I would have stayed in Poland', she said. However, after about three months she found that she needed somebody to help her move into her new house, to move the furniture around and to do some plumbing and

decorating jobs. She called her parents back in Poland, who knew somebody whose acquaintance, Tadeusz, was actually in the same town as Beata. He appeared to be very helpful with the move and recommended to her a good Polish cleaning woman, Asia, as well as good and cheap Polish mechanic for Beata's car. Asia knew a Polish bus driver, so whenever Beata needed to send something quickly to her family in Poland, she could send it by bus, giving the driver a small tip. In return for favours, Beata was asked to supply Polish medicine to all her Polish acquaintances in the UK, for they did not trust British doctors. (Fieldwork in Southern England, 2007)

A very common pattern consisted of a migrant who, having gained some status in the new country, subcontracted his jobs to the newcomers, thus instituting a typical patron-client relationship, like, for example, Krystyna, the head of a network of cleaning women in Berlin. She provided them with invitations, paid for the first journey (later deducted from the first payment), and provided them with work and lodging and, most importantly, assistance in solving problems. She claimed:

'For my people I have always demanded good payment. But therefore I always had to choose them carefully and then to guarantee for them. Besides, they have all lived in my flat and all this for 300DM monthly.'[24]

A very similar pattern was discovered later in London. An example of typical relationship was one described by Olga, a former cleaning woman married to a British citizen (an unemployed ex-engineer on the dole) I met on the bus from Poland to UK:

'I could also rot all days on the sofa, doing nothing, but I would rather kill myself! I needed to go out, so I took up a cleaning job with a very nice lady. Then she recommended me further, and when I had several jobs I took a cousin from Poland to help me. Now I have my own agency of Polish cleaning women, nurses and au pair girls. (…) But don't you think I am getting all that money for old rope! Four pounds is a good wage for a Polish woman and a horrible responsibility for myself. (…) The landladies give me all the keys, and if anything went wrong I would be fully responsible for that. For example, now I had to go all the way to (a town in central Poland), to retrieve the keys one stupid girl forgot to give back. They are good workers, those Poles, but they do not know what responsibility is. When they don't like something they may just go back to Poland and leave a job just like that, without any warning whatsoever!'

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[24] Quoted in Irek (1998, p. 73).

Unlike in West Berlin, where a one-off lump sum or *Abstand* of 300 DM per job or a monthly payment (deducted from 1600 DM earnings on several jobs) was standard, the informal London model was based on registered agencies' procedures, and the patron's cut was usually 50-60% of earnings deducted weekly, creating a substantial source of income for established Poles, which was sometimes combined with income from renting. Both in Germany and in the UK migrants without status (over-stayers) could not rent officially, so the informal letting market flourished and informal networks were the main way of accessing it. The rent on the informal market was usually double the rent on the formal market, so in both countries alike the rooms were usually shared by two to eight people, often 'hot bedding'.

However, until Poland's accession to the EU, only a small proportion of migrants rented directly from co-ethnics or worked for them. The ratio of informal to formal was significantly greater than the three to one estimated by the German authorities, so there were not enough migrants with the status of residents to accommodate all the informal migrants, nor to provide jobs for them. Informal networks therefore extended beyond this single ethnicity to incorporate other migrant groups. In Germany these were mostly former Yugoslav and Turkish migrants, while in the UK they were Indians and Pakistanis (often grouped under one label as *Indianie*, who after accession were sneeringly called *Pociapani* or *Ciapaci* (spotted), Turks, Albanians and Nigerians. In the informal hierarchy, the rule was that those with the longest legal status (the well-established) were at the top, followed by those with freshly acquired legal status, all of them exploiting those without legal status, including their own co-ethnics, whether these were Indians, Pakistanis, Turks, Russians, Nigerians or Poles. In the informal world of neither country (UK or Germany) was there any evidence of a 'perfect' ethnic solidarity within the migrant groups, and Poles, with their 'weak ties', were no different from those described as having 'strong ties'.

Thus, while Poles without legal status were complaining about being economically and sexually exploited by other Poles, they had equal or more serious complaints against other ethnicities: in Germany there were accusations of sexual harassment against Turks, former Yugoslavs and Italians, and in the UK similar accusations against Pakistanis and Turks. There were cases of rape or blackmail where sexual services were a condition of obtaining work or lodging. In Germany, Turks and Arabs became notorious for taking any opportunity to withhold Polish migrant's payments, while in the UK the most common complaint of that nature was directed against Pakistanis and Nigerians. No such complaints were known to exist against ethnic Germans or Britons, hence every informal migrant aspired to gain access to the 'natives' networks. While it is true that Polish landlords usually exploited their co- ethnics, they still were not at the bottom end of the range, for they usually accommodated four people in one room (with eight as the maximum) and water, electricity and at least a mattress on the floor were standard rather than the exception. Other ethnicities offered much lower standards for Polish tenants, with the record-holders being Pakistanis in one London

suburb, two years before accession, accommodating up to eighty people in a barn without water or electricity, on the bare floor, paid up-front, and then deducting £60 a week from the workers' earnings.

Participant observation of Polish 'nests' (houses of multiple occupancy) in the UK revealed that their residents were developing intense and lasting ties of mutual support, even though they were not related at all. This stands in sharp contrast to alleged observations dating from Znaniecki's times that Polish migrants do not have any social life outside the family (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927), as repeated subsequently by contemporary sociologists claiming that, if Poles have any strong ties, these are concentrated exclusively within the nuclear family, whereas weak ties occur in relations with other co-ethnics. Indeed, the co-residents in the 'nests' shared information about jobs, helped each other in arranging documents (including obtaining false documents such as a forklift operator's or welding license), accompanied each other in the search for jobs, recommended each other for jobs, shared medicines, food (and drink) in hard times and invited each other to important celebrations such as weddings and anniversaries. It was difficult to see by what definition one could call their relationships 'weak ties'.

The spirit of mutual support was not unique to the UK – it was observed on numerous occasions earlier in Germany. In the streets of West Berlin attended by Polish petty traders, it was enough to cry for help in Polish ('they're beating a Pole', or 'they're raping a Polish woman') immediately to have around one a group of strong Polish men ready to face the enemy. On the train to Berlin (descriptively called 'the Smuggler') there was a sense of brotherhood among Polish petty traders and smugglers, who cooperated with each other in hiding their cargo from the German and Polish customs. People shared each other's goods (when somebody had less than the tolerated amount, he or she would take someone else's surplus goods), helping to disguise them and to distract the customs, delivering false testimonies to the police and customs officers on each other's behalf, exchanging advice on how to smuggle best and sharing food and drink. There was a similar situation on the buses from Poland to the UK. People helped one another conceal each other's goods and exchanged practical information on how to cross the border (what to say to HM Customs), how to get a NI number without permission to stay or how to find a job. It was not unusual for somebody travelling completely '*w ciemno*' (without an invitation from 'somebody abroad')[25] to obtain an invitation on the bus or to be offered a job and accommodation by a complete stranger when the only links between the two people were Polish ethnicity and the informal nature of the relationship.

During my longitudinal fieldwork with participant observation, it became clear that it was not possible to find an answer to the question of why Poles had such weak ties because in fact Poles have

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[25] From 1989 an individual tourist did not need an invitation from 'somebody' from the west to obtain a passport, but until accession it was still needed to get into the UK. For an ethnographic description of the ways of getting to know the 'somebody,' see White (2010).

strong ties with their co-ethnics, extending beyond the nuclear family and comparable to ties within any other ethnic group with a strong religious tradition. Yet the question remained why those Poles who were interviewed by myself and other researchers declared their mistrust towards their co-ethnics and complained of the lack of ethnic solidarity. An explanation for this question could lie in the limitations of the very research method: as many researchers of informal activities have observed, what actors claimed in interviews need not necessarily be true (Pahl 1984, Williams and Windebank 1998). Very often it is a bold lie arising out of the fear of being discovered by the authorities (Gutmann 1985) or aimed at achieving a desired reaction from the interviewer (Girtler 1991). In this particular case, however, the situation is more complicated – actors actually believed that their statements reflected social reality.

Cultural Misunderstanding

It appears that the myth of weak ties is the effect of a major misunderstanding, resulting from the clash of two cultures and respective life-styles: that of a socialist society and then of a post-socialist society very much bound by the Catholic tradition, with that of developed capitalism in more developed countries. Those who decided to migrate with the intention of staying assumed a Western life-style, while the 'guests' from Poland (who in fact were petty traders or aspiring illegal workers exploiting their status as guests) expected traditional Polish hospitality from them going far beyond what was acceptable in the West, not to mention the host's ability to deliver. Polish society under socialism preserved many traditional features such as the widely extended family, the moral obligation of mutual help, as well as extreme, almost religious hospitality extended even towards strangers, in accordance with the saying that 'the guest brings God into your home'. This cannot be said of modern and secularized Western capitalist societies, such as the UK, where the family consists of parents and children at the most, so one has no moral obligations towards the nephew of the husband of one's wife's sister, and modern hospitality does not oblige the host to let in an unlimited number of unexpected guests at any time of the day and night,[26] to feed them the best food stored for that occasion in a hidden cupboard so that the members of the household cannot eat it themselves, and to sleep on the floor while the guests take the most comfortable beds in the house.

Thus, for example the, common 'betrayal of Polishness' story told by Poles (Richard) returning from the West after visiting a Pole abroad (Swine), perhaps some acquaintance of a friend's family member, is that they had to phone him first and ask if they could pop in, then wait for him for

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[26] Hospitality is at the core of Polish ethnicity and was epitomized in a popular creation legend, telling of King Popiel, who broke the sacred law of hospitality by expelling two unexpected guests who had come to his son's rite of passage (symbolic hair cutting at the age of 7). It was the simple craftsman Piast who invited the strangers in and made one of them his son's godfather. As a punishment the inhospitable king was eaten by mice, while the simple but hospitable man had his son crowned as the people's ruler. This is the oldest Polish legend recorded, quoted in the first Polish Chronicle (Gall Anonim 2003).

hours in the sleet and snow until he eventually came back home from work, and, as if that were not enough, subsequently they were not given any food apart from coffee and cookies, and the host did not even ask them to stay overnight or offer them any help whatsoever in trying to sell their smuggled goods or in getting an illegal job.

The Swine, on the other hand, would come up with quite a different story. He[27] would tell how he had had his house invaded day after day by Polish people, some of them complete strangers, who kept turning up unexpectedly, asked to stay overnight and then stayed for weeks, ate him out of house and home, demanded new favours every day, expecting him to quit his job and devote himself to them as his guests, and to find a buyer for the smuggled cigarettes or a lucrative but easy job for them and their friends, and would tell that the unwanted guests were staying for longer periods or were reluctant to leave at all, and became deeply offended and even aggressive when they were asked to do so. Then he would say that Richard is a cheat and disgrace to the Polish nation, for he would not even give the Swine a single cigarette, nor do any reciprocal favour for hospitality, nor offer to wash up after eating. Instead, Richard would just wait to be served and entertained at all times. Finally, the Swine would admit that, having been visited by about five Richards within two months, he decided to break any contact with Poles apart from the nuclear family (which, as already noted, is a far larger unit than the family in the West).

The gravest accusation is against the exploitative nature of patron-client relations in the Polish networks. The frequently asked questions are:

> *'Why Poles do not help each other but seek to exploit their own country people?'* (Jan, in Berlin)
> *'Why can't we stick with each other like Jews or those Indians and Turks?'* (Krzysiek, in a London suburb)

The answer lies in a difference between capitalist and socialist viewpoints and moralities. The transformation did not change the whole of Polish society in an instant, nor did it erase socialistic thinking. Polish migrants who helped perpetuate the myth were brought up in a socialist ethos, where the state provided for the citizen's every need (everybody had a constitutional right to work and to be given the best education and healthcare), competition was regarded as a breach of worker's comradeship, and the private sector was frowned upon (though tolerated). What in socialism was defined as speculation and blunt exploitation, in capitalism is called entrepreneurship.

So, in capitalist terminology, the patrons in the informal networks can be described as job superiors: agents, businessmen and foremen. The difference in labelling is arbitrary and depends on the authorities' willingness to grant some activities legal status. Such a change of labels for informal

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[27] This person, as well as Richard, the informal migrant, could be of either sex, however, for reasons of the better readability of the text, in the following section the pronoun 'he' is used rather than 'she/he'.

economic activities could be observed with the change of regulations in Poland during its transition to capitalism: as soon as the state monopoly in trade was abolished, many former smugglers, illegal workers and employers could legally register their enterprises, becoming in an instant respectable businessmen (while preserving the same structure of their enterprises). What under socialism was labelled the 'exploitation of comrades' suddenly became 'providing jobs for people'. With the change in the legal status of Poles in the UK after accession, the same shift could be observed: the former patrons changed their names to agents, although technically they still did the same work and lived off other migrants. But then, living off others' work is the basic principle of a capitalist economy, and Polish migrants' sensitivity to the problem of exploitation seems to be their response to a systemic clash between the two types of society, for capitalist work relations do abuse the socialist sense of justice.

One aspect of 'Richard's complex' is thus connected to the very act of migration and can be explained by the frustration arising from the clash of cultures, which results in a strong sense of the profanation of traditional customs, accompanied by simultaneous clash of social systems resulting in the sense of injustice that is felt while living at the bottom of capitalist society (in itself an unwelcoming and competitive place). This frustration was channelled onto one's co-ethnics, while idealizing the 'others'. However, the other part of this syndrome has ethnic origins and is connected to the negative auto-stereotype that is deeply rooted in Polish history, extending to all Poles, whether at home or abroad, and very much resembling the Sambo stereotype of American blacks. The traces of this auto-stereotype can be found in Thomas and Znaniecki's seminal work *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927), showing a lazy, envious, superstitious, drunkard and wife-beater, undereducated to the point of utter stupidity, a chronic thief and liar completely incapable of civic governance, let alone self-reliance.

In the case of Poles, this stereotype, which developed into a complex, was shaped by the country's turbulent history: Poland had been colonized for about two hundred years (including the Nazi occupation of WWII and the Soviet occupation thereafter), and although the fight for independence was in the best interests of the Polish elites, that was not necessarily the case for the peasants, who were often criticized by the elites for their selfishness and lack of patriotism. Moreover, fuelling any negative auto-stereotypes was always in the best interests of the invaders: making Poles believe they were envious, selfish and backward facilitated the oldest excuse of the colonizers, namely that the natives were incapable of self-government and hence needed protection from themselves.

Analytical concepts versus human agency

The case discussed here of the 'weak ties' that can as easily be described as strong ties shows the inadequacy of current analytical concepts, even the most recent of which were developed before the

communications revolution of recent years. With many borders removed and the boom in cheap flights, even so-called ordinary people, Bourdieu's *les gens modestes*' (Bourdieu 1984) can easily travel long distances. With cheap phones and the introduction of e-facilities like teleconferencing, Skype, Facebook or Twitter, there is no obstacle to their virtual communication. In effect, the basic principle of the unity of space, time and action that underlies the classic theory of society no longer applies, for one can be virtually present in several places at one time. Therefore, standard criteria of social network analysis, namely the distance between people and the frequency of contact, can no longer be credible indicators of the strength of a network. This calls for an equally dramatic change in the theoretical approach to social networks. The time has come to review the usefulness of old concepts and perhaps to introduce some linguistic discipline that would enable a clear description of the changed social environment. Among many classical concepts that need revision are those of 'weak ties', 'trust' and 'cultural capital', all commonly used in studies of migration.

For a start, the very definition of 'weak ties' by Granovetter was fuzzy and misleading, being based on 'a rough intuitive recognition' (Granovetter 1973: 1361) of what is weak and what is strong and on numerous theoretical assumptions involving general quantifiers which may not occur in reality (such as that only the weak ties are bridges and can be links outside a group; that there is a symmetry in every triad of people linked by strong relationships; and that strong ties must overlap), and it contained a linguistic paradox by which the 'strong ties' alias 'effective ties', as opposed to the 'weak ties' alias 'extended ties', are not effective in gaining access to information (and better jobs). According to this logic effective = not effective. To add to the confusion, the concept of strong versus weak ties is commonly used by others to describe the internal cohesion and solidarity of a given group, adding further general quantifiers, which instantly creates a major theoretical problem whenever a single case of non-compliance to the rule is found. Another problem is that, although in the case of transnational migration we usually describe 'ethnic networks' where the links are formed on the basis of belonging to the same ethnicity rather than actual physical contact, we are still bound by the 'proximity' criterion of the 'close contacts', which does not help to provide a clear image. Although we speak of 'imagined' communities (Anderson 1983) rather than physical ones, we still employ the same theoretical concepts for both.

The case discussed here of post-transition Polish migrants also questions the very foundations of quantitative sociology, namely the assumption of the 'measurability' of social phenomena such as trust. By demonstrating that people were declaring their lack of trust of their co-ethnics while simultaneously pariticpating in informal networks, putting their and their families well-being and freedom in the hands of complete strangers based solely on the fact that they were members of the same ethnic group, the question is raised of whether we can put a numeric value on something that is not precisely defined by scholars, based on subjective emotion and not understood by the actors themselves. If the initial data are false (the 'trust' wrongly assessed by the actors

themselves, plus the likelihood that the truth is not always revealed to the interviewer), what is the value of the elaborate algorithms based on these data?

Finally, the present case questions the usefulness of the very idea of 'cultural capital' as applied to migration research. While one cannot argue against the applicability of Bourdieu's concept of the dynamics of internal migration in a model capitalist society before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the assessment of 'cultural capital' clearly becomes more problematic where large-scale international migration between the capitalist and socialist systems is concerned. As used by migration researchers, this concept is a tool for the hierarchical classification of the receiving society into higher and lower categories, with the category of the 'unskilled undocumented migrant without language' at the very bottom of social ladder. In this logic a default equation mark is created between the 'unskilled undocumented migrant' and the lowest possible level of cultural capital. The point is that, in the case of the recent migration from post-socialist countries, the proverbial 'unskilled undocumented[28] migrant' not only has significantly greater cultural capital than is automatically ascribed to him, there is also no class consciousness written into his social competence that would make him remain in his place in the system's ranking.

First of all, from the viewpoint of contemporary linguistics, this migrant[29] does not have 'poor language skills', for he already knows a language – his own – which he was forced to learn to a high standard (including a detailed knowledge of grammar) at a Polish school, and depending on his age he usually possesses some rudimentary knowledge of Russian, German or English, which he is usually ashamed to admit. Then, from the viewpoint of education standards, although classified by the bureaucratic categories as unskilled, his 'low level' of education is comparable to having ten GCSEs, very often also with an education comparable to obtaining three A levels, including one in pure mathematics, and it will include a considerable knowledge of history, biology, physics and geography – obligatory subjects in the Polish curriculum. Even though he might alternatively be a 'simple peasant'[30] without A-levels, apart from his supposedly 'low skills' which include a knowledge of agricultural enterprise, fertilizers and machines, household management, principles of hygiene and epidemiology, gardening, building and general DIY, he would also possess a level of academic knowledge that is obligatory in the educational system in Poland, much deeper and more extensive than the obligatory knowledge acquired in state schools in poor neighbourhoods of the UK. Finally, this person will have been brought up with a socialist concept of social justice and, coming from a classless society, he is

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[28]Although ever since accession Poles have been allowed to work legally in the UK, not all of them do so. A substantial number do not care to spend their money on WRS, while those working in the home care and building sectors prefer to avoid taxes, so they do not register as workers and stay as tourists, therefore technically counting as undocumented. On the thin line between documented and undocumented Polish migrants with respect to their levels of education, see also Duvell 2006.

[29] Again for better readability of the text the pronoun 'he' has been used instead of 'he/she' to signify a person of either gender.

[30] As opposed to a 'self-selected elite' (Jordan 2002) or 'globally mobile elite' (Triandafyllidou 2006).

not bound by the mental ramifications of the class system, which would obstruct his aspirations. So, a person from Poland, even the proverbial 'undocumented, unskilled migrant' with a low level of 'cultural capital' still aspires to good housing and good schools for his children, desires a well-paid job and may become frustrated when he finds he cannot afford an opera ticket.[31]

It is thus due to the systemic differences between capitalist and socialist societies, not to supposedly 'weak ties', that ordinary Polish people who have migrated to the UK and Germany have been able to integrate into the host societies and achieve remarkable upward mobility. The very presence of extensive and effective informal networks indicates anything but weak ties, since the principal rule which makes informal networks work at all is trust and solidarity, and these can occur only when the ties are strong. At the present day, the Polish migrant, legal or not, has nothing to do with the figure of the backward, uneducated victim of circumstances and alcohol, who has been stumbling through the migration literature ever since Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant*, haunting research whenever citizens from poorer countries migrate to richer ones, be it Hispanics in North America, Africans in Southern Europe or Poles in Western Europe.

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[31]A mid-scale study (600 participants) of recent migrants from Central and Eastern Europe confirmed that half of them actively participated in cultural events in the UK (Spencer et al. 2007).

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