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Themed Issue: Gendered, spatial and temporal approaches to Polish intra-European migration

Guest Editors: Marta Bivand Erdal and Louise Ryan

Over a decade since Poland's EU accession to the European Union, this themed issue explores the intersections of gendered, with temporal and spatial approaches, to Polish intra-European migration. In particular, these articles contribute new understandings of how gender identities and gender relations are shaped through the migration process. As Doreen Massey has famously argued, 'The construction of gender relations is strongly implicated in the debate over the conceptualization of place' (Massey, 1994: 7).

While the transnational lens (Basch et al, 1992) has shown the importance of migrants' long distance ties, the papers in this themed issue contribute to understanding how migrants navigate their lives in local places. The articles in this collection clearly indicate how the economic, cultural and political specificities of particular places shape opportunities for local encounters and belongings.

Whilst the academic study of Polish intra-European migration, especially to the UK context, but also more generally, has burgeoned (see e.g. Black et al 2010; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2018; Ryan et al, 2016; White 2016), we argue there is a need for further attention, first, to the particular roles of cities as settlement sites for migrants and second, to the evolving gender identities and relations among Polish migrants (Bell and Pustułka, 2017). The contribution of this themed issue, is on the one hand bringing out these two themes based on the cases of Polish female and male migrants, across cities in five European countries (Germany, Norway, the UK, Italy and Spain). On the other hand, this themed issue, based on the case of contemporary intra-European Polish migration, contributes to the growing body of work at the intersection of migration studies and feminist geography (Gilmartin, 2008).

It does so, by focusing on the sphere of everyday life (Ho, 2011), and thereby highlighting the salience – differently for individuals, across the life-course – of transnational ties and of the origin context in shaping approaches to both settlement and to gender relations. The diversity of approaches and attitudes among Polish migrants analysed in the articles in this themed issue, also testify to the importance of class, and of economic circumstance at a given moment, which in a migration context do not always align as one (Van Hear, 2014). Thus the roles of structures and opportunities in both settlement contexts, and contexts of origin, or previous migration, continue to play a role.

The five articles in this issue focus on varied and distinct urban sites: Berlin/ Munich, Oslo/Bergen, Belfast, Bologna and Barcelona. The fact that most of these sites begin with the letter 'B' is entirely coincidental. While there has been extensive research on Polish migrants in cities such as London (see for example Datta & Brickell, 2009; Ryan, 2010; 2018, Ryan et al, 2016), this themed issue presents a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of Polish women and men across a range of different cities. In so doing, these papers address key questions concerning implications of the specific structures and opportunities of localities where Polish migrants settle for their gendered everyday life experiences.

Focusing on the in-place experiences of migrants, this themed issue draws on the work of feminist geographers such as Gill Valentine (2008). Gender relations and dynamics are significant to processes of migrant adaptation within particular cities. As Valentine notes, while cities may be understood as 'spaces of encounter' (2008:331), these spaces are not free of 'history, material conditions and power' (2008: 333). Thus, the ways in which migrants navigate their new locations are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by gendered, classed and racialised power dynamics enacted in and through those spaces. By examining the experiences of Polish migrants across various city spaces in different national contexts, the articles in this themed issue consider how migrants may adopt particular strategies to negotiate these specific 'spaces of encounter'.

Despite initial assumptions of temporariness and transience, in the immediate aftermath of Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, researchers such as Louise Ryan quickly began to observe patterns of 'extending the stay' and family reunion in cities like London (Ryan et al, 2009). The work of Marta Bivand Erdal (2013) has also highlighted the complexity and dynamism of migration intentions and patterns of integration. In recent years, we both have continued to study and theorise these processes. Ryan, using visual methods and social network mapping, has coined the term 'differentiated embedding' (2018) to understand dynamic relationality and multi-dimensional belonging in local contexts. In a recent paper, Erdal writing with Bygnes (2017) has introduced the concept of 'grounded lives' where dignity is central and ongoing mobility is less prominent.

The papers in this collection contribute to that growing body of work by examining how Polish migrants form new relationships in cities such as Barcelona and Belfast. Within the superdiverse context of Barcelona, Polish women negotiate their identity and positionality through encounters with a range of different ethnic groups. Alina Rzepnikowska uses the concept of conviviality to critically explore these encounters as gendered and racialised experiences in specific spatial contexts. In Belfast, Polish migrants also negotiate their identity through the complex socio-political environment of Northern Ireland's troubled history. Markieta Domecka and Justyna Bell demonstrate how the place of arrival enters migrants' world of everyday life, sometimes in unexpected ways.

The gendering of social encounters is especially apparent in the case of Polish men working in construction in Norway. Drawing on ethnographic data collected among Polish migrants in the Norwegian cities Oslo and Bergen, Marta Bivand Erdal and Marek Pawlak analyse migrants' gender relations and identities by considering them as intertwined with conceptualisations of place and time.

The contributors also consider how different education systems, child care opportunities, or labour markets, in local places of settlement, impact on the everyday lives of Polish female and male migrants. The ways in which migrants negotiate local specificities of work/life balance are discussed in detail through the case study of Berlin and Munich. Agata Lisiak and Magdalena Nowicka analyse the temporal aspects of migrants' experience by disentangling different understandings of time in various urban contexts. In so doing, they explore how Polish women who were socialized in the former Soviet bloc, came of age during the rapid

economic and social changes of the 1990s, and now live in the “former West”, make sense of different notions of time in their work/life balance.

The spatial distance – and the cost and ease of travel to Poland – are other characteristics of the local places in which migrants settle, through which the scope, nature and intensity of transnational ties may be explored (Erdal and Lewicki 2016). How do gendered dimensions of Polish migration intersect with spatial distance or cost of travel within Europe, and how does this affect transnational ties, or connect with other structural factors in particular localities?

Spatialities of Polish migrants’ everyday lives across different settlement cities in Europe are explored in the articles in this themed issue, with the inherent backdrop in many cases, of, on the one hand, an everyday life very much lived ‘here’ in a settlement city, and on the other hand, an everyday life-world, that also includes a ‘there’, often the location of significant others. Such observations about the relevance of transnational social fields for understanding contemporary Polish intra-European migration, echo insights from a decade of research (see, for example, Ryan et al, 2009). Meanwhile, we argue there is scope for further sophistication in analysing the qualities, as well as the felt opportunities and challenges, which this socio-spatial configuration of life takes on in migrants’ lives.

Through empirical studies from destinations across Europe, this themed issue explores the ways in which structural features of local context affect migrants’ lives and how and when these become gendered processes. By analysing how the labour market and welfare regimes, housing availability and prices, language, education and childcare organization, and the distance from Poland and cost of travel, as structural features of local places, affect migrants’ gendered everyday lives, all the authors draw out the spatial and local ‘embedding’ (Ryan, 2018) of contemporary Polish migration.

Spatialities in the everyday lives of the Polish migrants whose experiences and reflections are analysed in the five articles in the themed issue, reflect banal questions of materiality involving getting objects from A to B, where distance matters (Burrell 2017), to the balancing of frequency of travel to Poland, due to the cost of airfares, albeit relatively cheap (Burrell 2011). Following earlier work on proximity and distance in relation to migrants’ lives (Bisell 2013; Ryan et al, 2015; Erdal and Lewicki 2016), we propose that spatialities of migrants’ everyday lives are usefully approached in terms of three types of ontologies of proximity: that of connections (including virtual connections), that of exposure, and that of imaginaries. All three types of ontologies of proximity are reflected in the analyses in articles in this themed issue and have differing bearings on the gendered identities and relations which evolve.

A temporal approach to Polish migration allows for a comparative perspective, more than a decade on, exploring the implications of the passage of time for Polish migrants, with regard to their migration projects, and their gendered everyday lives, embedding in local places in settlement countries. The paper on older Polish migrants in Bologna especially considers the role of time through the life course as people age and retire in the destination society. Weronika Kloc-Nowak critically engages with the theoretical framework of ‘lifestyle

migration' and discusses its applicability to labour migrants from Central-Eastern Europe settling in Mediterranean countries.

Changing reflections on migration projects, as a result of experiences gained over time, are explored through analysis of migrants' life histories and narratives, emphasizing the ways in which these are or are not gendered. Among temporal questions is the omniscient idea of return: should I stay or should I go? Migrants navigate and manage this, emotionally in their own lives, and with regard to significant others, in multiple local places in countries of settlement and origin, and beyond (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Erdal 2014; Ryan, 2018). Gender relations and dynamics are significant in these processes.

The articles brought together in this themed issue shine a light on a range of diverse cities beyond more widely researched migrant destinations such as London. In so doing, they widen the scope of migration scholarship offering new insights on everyday life in diverse places. Together, these papers demonstrate that, while the subject matter of Polish migration has been extensively researched, there is still more to be learned. Indeed, the evolving context of Brexit offers opportunities for new research to contribute further to our understanding of migratory experiences in dynamic socio-structural contexts.

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