

Migrant Workers in the U.K in the Wake of Brexit: Storks, Hamsters and Human Beings

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The wave of the Polish return migration from the UK immediately before and after Brexit is noticeable both in absolute numbers and in the subjective perception of the Polish community in Britain. Popular understanding of this phenomenon, also based on the justifications given by the returners, most often refers to ethnicity, family ties, traditions, and cultural issues.

Albeit, considering the scale of Polish migration to the UK (about one million) deeper analyse of that phenomenon considers an important contribution to understanding both the current condition of the Eastern-European economy and the true meaning of crisis and transformation of the capitalist system, of which global labour migrations constitute a driving force.

Strategies or impulses?

The classical study of migrations likes clear divisions, like into 'storks', i.e. seasonal workers, 'seekers' roaming between various national labour markets,

'hamsters' working to obtain the assumed level of capital (both financial and human one) allowing them to return to the country and permanent emigrants, consistently uninterested in returning to their former homeland (Małkosa, 2018, p. 143). Although, the current situation of the global market strongly hinders such clear categorisations.

Moreover, such analysis is not facilitated by the attitude of the surveyed ones. If we were to rely solely on the explanations of the returnees, we would be dealing with a mix of nostalgia, awakened / restored hopes and aspirations, and/or an accumulation of negative emotions related to emigration, prompting immigrants to act. It would therefore be a complex of issues relating to ethnicity and family ties, tradition and culture. Some researchers, however, question such explanations, trying to reach the socio-economic basis for changing the earlier decision to permanently leave the old countries (Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy, 2015; Cross, 2021).

It is also worth to investigate the socio-economic explanation of these decisions change about the permanent immigration. Immigrants who have lived in the UK for several years now are going to come back, emphasising '*sudden impulse*' as the reason for their decisions, which led them to post thousands of photos of '*the last coffee before return way to Poland*' on social media. The massiveness of this phenomenon, however, indicates a different motivation than just an '*impulse*'.

Outclassing and back again

Previous research on the East-European emigration to the UK confirms that a significant proportion of newcomers taking up employment in the British labour market felt outclassed in relation to their previous position in their home countries (Johnston, Khattab i Manley, 2015, pp. 197-199, 201-204). Considering economy as a whole, that means ignoring the potential and tangible losses, e.g. in unearned taxes and undermined growth (Platt, 2021, p. 11).

Also in the realities of the UK education system, ethnic minority representatives choose university more often than the native British youth, but it is much more difficult for them to find a job as graduates, and they are also underrepresented in the apprenticeship (Blundell et al., 2021, p. 13).

It is estimated that in the pre-pandemic period, not using the skills of minority representatives according to the qualifications, costed the UK budget up to £8 billion a year (Šestanović, Qureshi and Khawaja, 2021, pp. 3, 13). There are doubts whether these objective inequalities and contradictions affect the state of class consciousness of Polish workers in the UK, but an analogous reaction with the opposite direction can be noticed.

Professional advancement in the British labour system created new corporate ties, evolving to the new class identification, which favoured the return to the old countries in the position of the comprador managerial / expert group. Both of these factors should be examined: the denial of one's own position within the globalised working class, which is sometimes associated with ethnic or racial prejudices, and the ease of identifying with higher class positions DESPITE real ethnic and cultural barriers.

Liberal uncertainty

Migration studies often focus on the situation of the labour-supplying (sending) countries and carry out a comparative analysis with the host (destination) countries to confirm economic basis of the decision to emigrate (Małkosa, 2018, pp. 142-143).

Paradoxically, analysing return emigration, non-economic and cultural considerations are emphasised, as well as rationality/optimality of choice is assumed, understood mostly as achieving a level of accumulation that allows active participation in the capitalist market of the home country (Dustmann and Weiss, 2007, p. 250; Dustmann, Fadlon and Weiss, 2010, p. 7; Wahba, 2021, p. 6).

Variability of decisions is considered a natural and immanent feature of the current global labour market, in line with assumptions of '*liquidity*', '*deliberate indeterminacy*' and '*intentional unpredictability*' (Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska, 2019, p. 104). The weakness of this approach is its discontinuity (distinguishing national economies in a globalist reality) and inconsistency (mixing the material conditions and the level of

consciousness). Recognising return migration as a class-conditioned process is therefore an important research gap.

Not-White-Enough, but still not aware...

Of course, the importance of racism and xenophobia should not be underestimated. Negative and even hostile attitude of the White British is often experienced by immigrants in the UK, including those coming from Eastern Europe, stigmatised as ‘*not white enough*’ (Manley, Khattab and Johnston, 2019, pp. 926-927; Rzepnikowska, 2019, pp. 63-64). However intersectionality approach and superdiversity concept prescribe a broader analysis, considering the factors of class, gender, age and health condition (Brynin, Longhi and Zwysen, 2019; Vertovec, 2007).

What should be examined are not only subjective feelings of intolerance and alienation, but also the objectivised level of inequality and exploitation in the British labour market. In fact, as Lukács (1988) has convincingly explained, class affiliation does not have to be self-conscious, but depends solely on our attitude to the means of production.

The dialectic distinction between *Klasse an sich* and *Klasse für sich*, a class in itself and a class for itself, questions one of the basic assumptions of liberal, or in fact post-humanist, hegemony – namely, the priority of self-identification, eliminating not only the essence of being a worker (also the migrant one), but even being a human being. In turn, consciousness while consistent with the objective facts is, in fact, the beginning of organisation, which is an indispensable condition for moving from the position of objects guided by misunderstood ‘*impulses*’ – to the subjectivity, even within the extremely dehumanized modernity.

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