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TRANSNATIONAL CONTRACT WORK AND THE REMAKING OF CLASS
AMONG POLISH WORKERS IN CONSTRUCTION AND SHIPYARDS:
BETWEEN COLLECTIVE SUBJUGATION
AND STRATIFIED EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION

Transnational mobility of labour and capital is one of the core developments of late capitalism, which challenges nationally-bounded understandings of class. Class is increasingly made on the move and not in static locations, while different forms of mobility resonate with the making of class in different ways. Poles are the leading European nation moving abroad. Yet, what transnationalization of class means for Polish mobile workforce remains under-explored, despite the overwhelming popularity of Polish migration research. Firstly, many scholars either delegate class to a background of transnational processes or focus on social and economic inequalities instead. Secondly, Polish temporary labour mobilities are often conflated with each other and not enough attention is given to their differential outcomes and power embeddedness. In this article, I look at how transnational mobility is enacted under the employment umbrella of transnational subcontractors and staffing agencies for short-term contracts abroad—what I call “transnational contract work mobility.”¹ Legally speaking, it includes posted (when workers are “sent” abroad) and non-posted (when workers are “brought” from abroad)² forms of contrac-

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¹ In Polish, it could be described as *transnarodowa mobilność kontraktowa* or *zatrudnienie kontraktowe* (Okólski 2004; Kaczmarczyk 2001).

² In Polish, roughly *delegowane* and *niedelegowane* formy zatrudnienia kontraktowego.

tual employment in the European Union. My focus is on Polish mobile workers who work in the construction industry and shipyards, the two sectors in which transnational contract work is expanding exponentially in Europe. I explore how transnational contract work conditions workers' class relations and experiences, with the aim of grasping the collective and individual experience of working and living "on a contract" (or as I refer to this situation "on-site"), and its off-site consequences, i.e. when workers return home.

By conceptually linking class and a particular type of mobility, I wish to shed light on the bottom-up consequences of the transnationalization of capitalism that bridges eastern and western parts of Europe in order to further the discussion on class in transnational migration and Polish sociological and anthropological research. I also argue against the class essentialization of Polish contract work by departing from the form of mobility that does not involve presumptions about workers' class positions—without an aim to study either the lowly-skilled or highly-skilled specifically, or the working or middle class migration stream (binary oppositions the existence of which I am doubtful). I show that what in most research on transnational subcontracting and agency work (see e.g. Wagner 2015; Berntsen 2015; Caro et al. 2015; Friberg 2013; Lillie 2012) appears as a working-class mobility populated by low-skilled and vulnerable Polish migrants—what Garapich (2016: 124) would call a "class exclusionary discursive practice"—emerges on the ground as far more heterogeneous and dynamic, marked by a common transnational subjugation as well as inner class hierarchies and antagonism. This is due not only to the fact that workers' classed experiences are situationally dependent, and differ when workers are abroad and when they return to Poland, but also because workers occupy diversified power positions in their contract workplaces, within the overall exploitative scheme of subcontracting being both the "order-takers" and "order-givers" (Castoriadis, quoted in van Hear 2014) and have a diversity of educational backgrounds which intersect with their workplace position in incongruent ways. The majority of my interlocutors worked on a contract as welders, industrial painters, electricians, steel-fixers and general construction workers, but there were also technicians and engineers; they were rank-and-file employees at the bottom of the employment hierarchy, as well as foremen, team leaders and supervisors.³ What I will show is that transnational subcontracting produces transnationally shifting classed "Others" and fluid class boundaries, and the classed "Others" are not only external to the workers, but also emerge as inner "Others." Too often, as Sherry Ortner (2006: 42–62) points out, research on the "subaltern" avoids examinations of inner hierarchies, while such purification impedes understandings of, and ultimately, transformation of these exploitative relations.

³ Although not all contract workplaces will have all of the hierarchical characteristics mentioned above, I have not encountered a contract where there would be no power divisions.

Although the bulk of ethnographic research on which this article is based was conducted in Scandinavia, the location of my interlocutors as we talked and socialized was important but also somewhat misleading: although most of my interlocutors were in Scandinavia, or because I was interested in their contract mobility to Scandinavia, their experiences almost always included contract work mobility to multiple European (and sometimes non-European) countries. The most popular destinations included Norway, Denmark, Germany, Holland, France and the UK. Several of my interlocutors have already “moved on” from Scandinavia and work in other countries and, therefore, we talked over Skype. This reflects the dynamic and transient nature of contract work mobility and, accordingly, the increasingly shifting and delocalized nature of ethnographic fieldwork.

In the following sections, I will elaborate on the institutional framework that surrounds transnational contract mobility in Europe and its place within Polish labour migration. I will provide my understanding of class in the context of relevant transnational and Polish postsocialist research. This will be followed by a more detailed description of the methodology employed in this work. I will begin my empirical analysis with the story of two transnational contract workers whom I met in 2014, when they worked at a big construction site in Finland. From there, I will proceed to look at workers’ situation through the prism of their collective experience on a contract—the classed “we” in-the-making, as well as conflicts and differences stemming from their individual situatedness on the contract and when they return to Poland. I close this article with a conclusion and recommendation for future research.

TRANSNATIONAL AND POLISH CONTRACT WORK IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Transnational contract work has become an increasingly ubiquitous form of labour mobility in the past two decades. It reflects the proliferation of non-standard forms of employment (Kalleberg 2000; Koch, Fritz 2013; Drahokoupil 2015) and caters to the need for flexible, cheap and skilled workforce in the destination countries. This regards labour-heavy sectors such as construction and shipyards particularly, where much of the work includes short-term projects and still has to be done on-site (Lillie 2012). In the European Union, mobility for contract work is encouraged through the economic and political integration of national labour markets and the creation of various regulatory regime, thanks to which companies can maximize their cost-saving employment strategies within the chains of transnational subcontracting (Berntsen, Lillie 2015; Lillie, Wagner 2015; Wagner 2015). Although precise statistics are missing, research on transnational subcontracting and staffing agencies suggest that since the 2004-eastward enlargement of the EU, most transnational contract workers move from the Eastern to Western parts of Europe, with Polish workers taking the top spot. There are different regulatory

arrangements of transnational subcontracting. In the EU, as Berntsen and Lillie (2015) indicate, a firm can choose whether or not it wants to operate as an agency firm, which recruits workers through its branches abroad but hires them based on local regulations, or whether it uses the Posted Workers Directive and becomes a posting subcontractor or a posting agency which posts its workers abroad and pays them according to destination country rules, but socially insures them in the country of origin. All of the above arrangements have different business value in different countries and in different sectors (for instance, sometimes, it is cheaper to hire locally than through posting, sometimes it is the other way around), but they all operate according to a common logic about the maximizing of profit through supplementing transnational workforce on short-term contracts to client companies and taking advantage of workers' transnational material and affective rooting. In such arrangements, a direct employer provides workers with a legal (in principle) channel to enter foreign labour markets on a temporary basis and supports workers in terms of administrative issues, accommodation and travel as well as constitutes an intermediary between workers and the client company within triangular employment relations. However, it also opens up space for new modalities of power and exploitation (Andrijasevic, Sacchetto 2016; Wise 2013). Accordingly, transnational contract work is associated with social dumping and precariousness as contract workers are usually paid below the national average, work long hours and are expected to be available for work on demand (Lillie, Sippola 2011; Bernaciak 2012; Lillie 2012; Berntsen, Lillie 2015; Andrijasevic, Sacchetto 2016; Wagner 2015; Wise 2013).

For Polish people, contract work mobility has flourished since accession to the EU, speaking from an institutional perspective, largely because Polish companies have gained access to the labour markets of other Member States, while foreign companies can now set up their recruitment branches in Poland. However, contract work mobility already had a well-established history in Poland that dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, when Polish workers went to work on construction sites in the Middle East and Germany through Polish subcontractors (Kaczmarczyk 2001; Stola 2001; Okólski 2004).⁴ Contract work was a privileged type of mobility prior to accession, because it allowed Polish workers to move legally and gave them access to the labour market even without informal networks or language skills. Nowadays its privilege is debatable, given the wider array of possibilities for legal work that are available to Poles in the West. Perhaps the myriad of forms that Polish transnational mobilities takes in the EU is one of the reasons why Polish contract work mobility has not gained more attention in migration and transnational studies.

⁴ Apart from construction workers, a distinct professional group that moved during communism's reign as contract workers were Polish musicians. Their mobility was mediated by the Polish state agency PAGART which had a monopoly over sending Polish artists abroad (Matyska 2015).

Many studies discuss Polish migrant workers, but contract work mobility is not given a second glance. Studies that focus on transnational subcontracting, on the other hand, and especially studies on posted work in social policy and industrial relations research, are attentive to the institutional framework and recognize Polish presence, but are scant in knowledge of Polish context.

Class in the above research is usually implied, rather than being made explicit, for instance by speaking of “manual workers” or exploring the relationship between workers and their employers, and the possibilities for trade unionization (Lillie, Sippola 2011; Danaj, Sippola 2015; Berntsen 2015; Wagner 2014). These studies of labour migrants and transnational labour processes do not make the link to class research a priority (Lillie’s article from 2006 being one exception). Two works related to Polish migration, both excellent in their own right, serve as a good contrasting examples of the trend examined above, namely Garapich’s (2016) work on transnational class among Poles in London, and Berntsen’s (2015) work on agency of temporary labour migrants. Garapich pursues a culturally sophisticated analysis of class and its Polish enactments, but focuses on a wide range of social actors who came to the UK in different ways and for different purposes, making his point of departure place and ethnicity, rather than a particular mode of mobility and employment regime. Bernsten, on the other hand, studied the labour agency of migrant construction workers, Poles included, who came to Netherlands *via* transnational subcontractors and staffing agencies. She provides a rich picture of transnational labour processes from workers’ perspective, but does not delve into the class particularities of her Polish interlocutors, whom she categorized generally as skilled manual workers. My intention in this article is to bridge these two types of perspectives, which also implies thinking about class in both cultural and material terms.

DEBATING CLASS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES

Class has gone through a turbulent period in the last couple of decades. By the middle of the 1990s, class was a close-to-death concept in the social sciences, challenged by processes of individualization, mass consumerism and late capitalist fluidity (Atkinson 2008). In Polish academic and public discourses, class’s contested position was related to the aftermath of the communist period and a desire to get away from Marxism for the sake of building a new capitalist economy (Ost 2015). What happened, however, was that the idea of the death of class has reinvigorated the class debate, rather than ground it to a halt, in both Polish and foreign scholarship. Marxist and Weberian approaches to class as an economic category are now complemented with more culturally-inclined theories, which insist on including gender, ethnicity, race and other culturally idiosyncratic meanings of class (Skeggs 1997, 2004; Bottero 2004; Bradley 1996; Ortner 2003), and draw heavily upon the work of Bourdieu and his

concept of class distinction and the varieties of capital. In Poland, the analytical return of class seems to be a political issue primarily, serving as a way to recognize the power inequalities brought about by the postcommunist turn and acknowledge that structural reasons, rather than individual ones, are responsible for the deteriorating situation of those who “lost out” on the transformation, especially working class members. Their loss is understood both economically, as a material loss related to the disadvantage position at the capitalist labour market, and symbolically, as a loss of prestige (Ost 2015; Janicka, Słomczyński 2014; Mrozowicki 2011; Tittenbrun 2009).

I see class as a useful conceptual tool through which to draw attention to unequal power relations and people’s diversified chances for material well-being and to look for nascent solidarity in potentially disparate locations. Considered from this transnational perspective, class allows the interplay between global capitalist changes and national structural transformations that condition people’s actions to be traced. In transnational subcontracting, issues of employment relations and work uncertainty are, at first glance, the most pronounced, thereby giving a relevance to the Marxist ideas of class as the product of unequal relations to the means of production and capitalist exploitation. This approach also resonates more “naturally” with industrial relations scholar and their focus on labour processes (see e.g. Lillie 2006). On the other hand, my fieldwork indicates that a more nuanced definition is also needed, one which would include workers’ access to multiple resources across borders and the way they define and redefine their situation drawing on the repository of meanings and values they possess (Ortner 2003; Buchowski 2003). Garapich (2016: 161), in his aforementioned ethnography on Poles in London, convincingly argues for the cultural approach, writing that “it is impossible to understand how social class is made and remade outside the cultural meanings dynamically constructed in different context.” He stresses his interlocutors’ ability to “consciously choose, shift and change a particular course” (Garapich 2016: 124) and refuses to close them in any definite class categories.

In my view, thus, class is not something fixed but is a process that happens in the midst of human relationships (Thompson 1966) and is negotiated (Ortner 2003; Skeggs 2004) with reference to multiple national systems, within the material constraints that frame people’s actions, but do not utterly determine it. In this sense, people’s positions in employment power relations matter, but class is also about how these power relations are negotiated, resisted and remade (Ortner 2003). Interrelated with the above, class is a relational experience which means that it is a process that happens to people and with other people (Bottero 2004; Bradley 2014), and involves the interplay of individuality and interdependence. Finally, I recognize that class is not a stand-alone key category of social differentiation, but is gendered and racialized. Intersectional approaches to transnational mobility (Anthias 2012) enter into my study inevitably, given that all of my interlocutors were Polish and male and they of-

ten left their families behind, thereby creating particular male collectivities in which women were almost completely absent.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The article draws on multi-sited fieldwork that was conducted in Scandinavia and Poland between 2014 and 2017.⁵ The study included participant observation, informal conversations and over twenty recorded interviews conducted among Polish contract workers in construction and shipyards as they worked under contract in Scandinavia (in Finland, Denmark and Norway⁶), three interviews were conducted in Poland and three skype interviews were conducted when workers, having already worked in Scandinavia, moved to other countries for contract work (Germany, Scotland and Iceland). I complement it with seven individual interviews and one group conversation conducted with Polish contract workers in Finland in 2008. I draw on group conversations and taped interviews with over fifty workers and their experiences of working for multiple different transnational subcontractors and staffing agencies, both Polish and foreign. I found workers through multiple points of entry, including at airports, in churches, via the internet, workplaces and personal networks. I “hung around” with many workers, participating in weekend get-togethers. I have also remained in touch, through the internet and phone, with several of my interlocutors. Thus, it is a study of a dispersed group of people, conducted in the midst of our mutual comings and goings, in which I was never certain whether the person I met on a given day would be in a given place or in a given country one month or even one week later. This is the type of fieldwork adjusted to the phenomena created “on the move,” in which physical location matters less than the attention paid to “social, cultural and political location” (Gupta, Ferguson 1997: 5) and which increases the importance of serendipitous encounters in different sites in lieu of the long-term immersion (Hannerz 2006). My gender played an ambivalent role in my fieldwork; on the one hand, it facilitated my access, because I was seen (as my interlocutors often told me) as a distraction from the male-dominated world, on the other hand though, some men did not want to talk to me or did not want to stay in touch, for as they said, their wives might become suspicious. This also points to workers’ transnational family embeddedness and emotional vulnerability.

⁵ The research was funded by the Kone Foundation while I was associated with the University of Tampere. The article was concluded during my postdoctoral Marie Curie fellowship at the IMMRC, KU Leuven.

⁶ In Finland, I conducted research in multiple locations, including Tampere, Turku, Rauma, Pori and Lappeenranta throughout 2014–2017. In Denmark, I was on a fieldtrip to Copenhagen in June and November 2017. In Norway, I went for a month-long fieldtrip to Oslo and to the shipyards in the Northern part of the country in August 2016.

I open the next section with the story of Jan and Marek, two workers that I met in 2014, when they worked at a major construction site in Finland. I have chosen to tell their story because it illuminates well the class ambivalences of contract work mobility, while going against the common image of Polish migrant worker. I call Jan and Marek the “odd” couple, with “odd” in parentheses, for reasons which I consider to be class-related and which will become clear by the end of the narrative.

THE “ODD” COUPLE

Jan and Marek worked for the same transnational staffing agency and its customer—the French company which was subcontracted by the Finnish company to manage the construction site in Finland.⁷ I met Jan first. He was standing in front of a small Finnish airport, chatting cordially to another man. I suspected that they had just arrived from Poland and worked for one of the subcontractors at the nearby construction site, so I approached them. Jan was the more talkative of the two, immediately venting his disappointment with his current workplace and was ready to share his experience. As we exchanged contacts, a car arrived. It was Jan’s friend Marek coming to pick him up. Marek got out of the car, interested in the situation. He said he would also be eager to talk and gave me his phone number which was written on the back of his, as he said, company phone. We agreed to meet the following week and they drove off. At this point I knew next to nothing about them, but I was struck by the fact that Marek had a company car for personal use, and a company phone—this was something I had not been accustomed to, given that the Polish contract workers that I met mostly had to share a company car (usually a van) and did not have company phones.

The following week we met for a recorded conversation at Marek’s apartment. The fact that he lived by himself again placed him apart from the crowd, but it also allowed us to talk privately—this would have been impossible at Jan’s place, given that he lived, as most of transnational contract workers do, in shared living quarters. As we talked, I discovered that this was somewhat of a secret meeting: not because they talked to me as a researcher, but because their workmates mostly did not know of their friendship. Marek came on a contract as an engineer, whereas Jan was a welder. Although Marek was not Jan’s boss, he was his superior and controlled the quality of his work. Jan thought that if his Polish crew workmates knew of their friendship, they would have thought he was “smug” and excluded him from the group; *Marek is an engineer and I am a prole* [Marek jest inżynierem, ja jestem robolem]. *So at work we keep distance*, Jan remarked this with a mix of irony and candor.

⁷ All the names are anonymous, while particular workplace sites are left nameless for the sake of increased anonymity.

The two met for the first time on a contract in Sweden, where Marek worked as a welder and Jan as a warehouse assistant. They quickly got along and they rekindled their friendship during a serendipitous encounter on a contract in Finland. They seemed to be on the same wavelength, despite their different occupational standings. During our meeting, they exchanged banter and joined in expressing their frustration about their current workplaces and transnational family affairs. They expressed deep criticism, bordering on hatred, towards their employers—the international staffing agency that hired them and the French company for which they worked indirectly—and shared in the sense of subjugation as a transnational Polish workforce. Marek described their intermediary agency employer, and workforce agencies in general, as “leeches” [*pijawka*], while Jan added that [every] *intermediary is a parasite. It’s a parasite that sucks your blood and takes money that you should get.* They did not have positive feelings towards their principle employer either. Even during our first encounter at the airport, Jan had said that they are “idiots” and then elaborated in a similar vein: *They demand from us, but they do not carry any consequences. Generally, they don’t do anything. It is a mob of mindless idiots, both at the office and on the site. Imagine that: when they go out at nine a.m. to check humidity and then return the device, there is no point for them to go back to work so they disappear for lunch for two hours and only then reappear on the site.* Marek added: *And I have to write a report about a report which I had made. This is how they treat us. The difference between the French and us is that we come to work to work and the French come to work to be present [my *przychodzimy do pracy żeby pracować, oni przychodzą żeby być*].* Furthermore, Jan remarked that although Marek is an engineer, their salaries are very similar. *It’s a pain, he said, that Marek, a qualified engineer educated in Poland, doesn’t get higher salary than me, but he gets less than the French frogs. It really pisses me off.*

The sense of common subjugation was also related to their separation from their loved ones and leading of family lives that were “online” and “intangible” (*nienamacalne*), as Marek put it. After over fifteen years of working abroad, Jan was particularly remorseful about missing on his son growing up, while Marek was still coming to terms with the events of his first marriage. *I had to take a divorce during the current contract. Because my wife cheated on me when I worked on a contract in Russia. She cheated on me,* he said bitterly. Now he had a new fiancé, but the uncertainty of transnational relations remained. When we started talking about Jan’s wife, Marek ironically commented: *When you return to Poland, your neighbor must be very unhappy*—the comment to which Jan laughed quietly, later on hinting that some of this may in fact be true.

Finally, they also bonded over shared intellectual capital. Marek was one of few people at work to know that Jan was a history teacher by education. He discovered this when they met on a contract in Sweden. *When we talked, I could immediately tell he is an intelligent guy, but I didn’t know he is a history graduate. He told me this only later on, when I pressed him—but I saw that he is an intelligent person already by talking to him,* Marek remarked. As Jan said, he undertook his education so

that his Polish workmates—who often only had a secondary graduate degree at most—did not feel “threatened” by it.

Jan found the need to keep up appearances still relevant, even though, as it turned out, he was only going to work in Finland for one more month more: after he returned from holidays he was given a notice of termination. Although Marek was still employed, his situation was not all that different—he got a contract extension for three more months. Jan had mixed feelings about his contract’s termination. On the one hand, he clearly disliked his work environment and knew his contract would be over at some point anyhow. He stressed: *I didn’t come here to work permanently but I came on a contract and I was fully aware that it wouldn’t be forever. [...ja nie przyjechałem tutaj pracować na stałe tylko przyjechałem na kontrakt i miałem pełną świadomość, że kiedyś to się skończy]*. He was also looking forward to spending the summer with his son. On the other hand, he had to re-start his search for another job abroad, which could take time and the outcome was unpredictable.

Jan had sought certifiable manual skills which, he believed, would help him find a new contract. He also had some savings as a back-up if the search took longer than expected. He considered himself wealthy, even with the contract breaks. He had no intention of working in Poland. *I tried many times* he said, *but if I’m supposed to work for 1,500 Zloty and kiss my boss’s ass all the time, no thank you.* Marek also planned to look for another contract after the current one ended. He had a fiancée and wanted to earn for the wedding and an apartment in Poland without getting into a debt. However, his plan was to settle on the Polish labour market at some point. Although similarly to Jan he was very critical of the Polish situation (saying emphatically: *We are the best generation that Poland every had, because we have to manage in shit*), he believed that he could get a satisfactory job in Poland and that the current contract boosted his professional CV. *I worked on the oil rig, it is a cool contract to write in your CV; this one is very good as well. I think, I will get a couple of more certificates and I will find something in Poland, for about 10–12,000 Zloty let’s say.*

THE CONTRACT: ON-SITE

Jan’s and Marek’s story is not the most typical, if one considers the low-educated blue collar workers who occupy the representational image of Polish contracted labour and the Polish construction worker. However, it shows the ways in which contract work can both redefine and reproduce established class identifications and animosities in a transnational space. At the forefront of the story is Jan’s and Marek’s sense of collective subjugation, which is linked to a particular environment of their contract, interplayed with their position at the bottom of both the transnational ethnic hierarchy and in the global division of labour.

My observation and interviews indicate that contract work mobility in both the construction industry and shipyard sector bring about social worlds in

which workers from different walks of life and geographical regions of Poland can meet and create temporary working communities in a foreign environment. Their working, and to a degree intimate, lives are bound by the rules and rhythms set out by direct and indirect employers and constitute the basis for a sense of a collective “we” that cuts across the collar and employment rank. My interlocutors’ situations could be described as economic and affective precariousness: they usually work long hours, their salaries are lower than the local average (although they may correspond to a local minimum), their working contracts are highly unpredictable and they lead virtual family lives. The lawfulness of their employment contracts is not always clear, and their legal situation is not always satisfactory, even if they occupy supervisory positions. For instance, I have interviewed several workers posted to Finland with a Polish company, including regular workers, technicians and a project manager who echoed the common voice of Jan and Marek. They all complained about being posted, rather than being hired on local terms, and disliked the separation from their wives and children; the project manager said that his salary was not much higher than that of regular workers, especially in comparison to the salary discrepancies in Poland. The sense of common subjugation is strengthened when workers are subjected to a common infrastructure of transnational and local living, what workers call *soćjal* (and which could be loosely translated as a social welfare provision). Although this was not the case with Jan and Marek, many of my interlocutors, also from different ranks, had joined accommodation and transportation. In a sense, contract work mobility lowers the level of workers “to the bottom” in a destination country and it is not very surprising that Polish contract workers are defined representationally as vulnerable manual workers in much of the research carried out to date, while engineers and technicians disappear—to the outsider, their mobility can easily project a working class lifestyle and workers’ own ambivalent classed definitions reflect this.

The impression of Polish contract mobility, as defined through working-class deprivation rather than upper-class privilege, is arguably strengthened by the shared gender and Poland as an economically less well-developed country of origin. The classed “Others” in these contexts are direct and indirect employers who set the stage for working and living conditions, as well as workers who are employed permanently by principle contractors and a local labour force. As Jan’s and Marek’s example showed, the Other does not have to be only from the destination country, a “native.” S/he can be a French, German, Italian (as it happened for my interlocutors building a metro in Copenhagen) or a Pole, if one of the employers is Polish or hires Polish immigrant workers to discipline “their own” as foreign labour.

By associating their mobility with the capitalist need for skilled, but a relatively cheap and flexible labour force, my interlocutors would engage in what could be described as “critical transnationalism” (Barber 2004), this recognizes their subjugated position in the global division of labour and exploitation—not

necessarily because of deskilling, but rather because their skills, high and low, seem underappreciated and are economically devalued. Their devaluation—and this is another strand of the workers’ collective narrative that evokes the sense of common Polish subjugation on a contract—comes from the fact that it is difficult to make good money in Poland and everybody, in a sense, has to struggle. The French workers whom Jan and Marek mentioned were also subcontracted from abroad. However, there was a sense that they came to Finland not as cheap labour, but as a privileged labour class who was higher up in the subcontracting chain—and one of the major reasons was that they came from France, with privileged high French salaries and little work pressure. This might have been a stereotyped image, but it echoed the experience of my interlocutors’ from the metro construction site in Copenhagen, which was managed by an Italian principle contractor. Italians also came on a contract from abroad, but their foreign status also differed from the Polish contractors, due to their country of origin and higher position in the subcontracting chain. As one of my interlocutors, a steel fixer with the Polish company, said, *Again it is us, Polish people, who are building the metro, but it is the Italians who will take all the glory.*

THE OTHERS WITHIN

On the other hand, subjugation is not equal and along with the classed Others who are external to the workers, the workers themselves are divided and engage in unequal power relations, largely because contract work upholds the importance of hierarchical division in the workplace *vide* Marx and Weber. Outside of work, the power divisions among the workers appear more or less subtly, with separate living spaces and company perks like cars or telephones being the most extreme sign of class separation I have encountered, but they are particularly visible when it comes to work matters. Workers higher in rank can decide about the working wellbeing and contract length of their subordinates, are less vulnerable to the contract fluctuations and are more secure in the knowledge that they will stay on a given contract until the end. They are also perceived as being closer to the employer than the entry level workers and make gains in terms of pure prestige, because the occupational hierarchies known to workers from Poland survive as a benchmark of power and respectability on a contract. During the communist era, manual workers in Poland gained in economic power and respectability, but they have never matched the prestige of educated intelligentsia (Bartoszek 2005: 71). During the reign of capitalism, their status has further dwindled, to the extent that Buchowski (2006) has described the contemporary situation between Polish elites and the undereducated and poor as “nesting orientalism.” This was reflected in Jan’s pejorative description of himself as *robol* (a prole) and he was not alone in using this term. At the same time, Jan’s example shows that one’s position on a contract is not always a straightforward continu-

ation of their pre-contract position or even matches their education or experience.

In terms of power and prestige, the biggest “losers” on a contract are those with a higher education who work as blue collar workers, experiencing the downgrade of prestige or even having a sense that they should hide their education. The mismatch between education and workplace power regards particularly workers with a humanist education as contract work in technical sectors privileges technical skills, and humanistic education is known to be difficult to translate across borders (Sadjed, Sprung, Kukovetz 2015). Zarycki (2008) argues that Polish social structure bears a mix of class and stratification hierarchy, due to a high value of legitimate cultural capital; at the same time, it becomes clear that if this cultural capital does not get an appropriate articulation at the labour market, it is still a source of distinction recognized by less educated workers, but it does lose much of its value and practical impact as a class power.

However, there is also another aspect to this story, but in a reversal, which concerns people with no occupational skills experiencing an upward occupational mobility on a contract. What gives them the edge on a contract are good English languages skills and social connections. My interlocutors would call such persons so-called supervisors (*pseudokierownik*) or so-called foremen (*pseudomajster*), verbally delegitimizing their power, but at the same time showing their frustration that the power that they had might have been illegitimate, but it was no less real. The reason why English becomes such an asset on a contract, and sometimes overtakes the importance of professional skill, is the nature of contract work, set partially in Polish and partially in a foreign environment. Most of the workers speak English poorly and need an intermediary with the upper echelons. Thus, those who do speak English but are not properly skilled are perceived as the exploiters because they exploit workers’ shortage of language skills which are not considered as crucial to perform given profession and which gain value especially or only when abroad. Thus, for my interlocutors, different occupations continue to carry a particular degree of “class respectability” (Skeggs 1997; Sawyer 2005: 176–181) and formal power, which are continued, upgraded or discontinued on-site.

RETURN TO POLAND: OFF-SITE

The contract work environment abroad has been described above, but what happens when workers go home to Poland and what happens to class off-site? Upon their return (*zjazd*), workers’ situations become at least partially redefined and revalued, and some classed relations become less pronounced and meaningful than others. Workers no longer visibly occupy the bottom of a transnational ethnic hierarchy, the classed Others of principle contractors disappear and what is experienced is a more purely Polish all-around environment, where coworkers are not your roommates or everyday companions and

the class boundaries of the collective “we” that was constructed on a contract partially disappear. However, contract mobility resonates differently for different workers as much on-site, as it does off-site.

In an economic sense, it brings benefits to all of the workers. Contract salaries boost household budgets and even after a single contract—if the contract is well-paid—workers can already acquire the conventional traits of middle-class status such as renovated apartments or cars, and can avoid the economic precarity of credit loans which have boomed in Poland in the last decade. They can also become more respectable through increased consumption. My interlocutors felt that they have quite legitimate reasons to locate themselves in the middle class—which in Poland means having materially more than the average person—because middle class is still arguably very much in-the-making in Poland. This is a sense that both my interlocutors and multiple other research confirm (Garapich 2016; Leszkowicz-Baczyński 2007; Domański 2002). However, those in powerful positions on a contract, especially engineers, highly qualified technicians and supervisors, gain more than others.

For professionals such as Marek, contract mobility can provide a powerful material legitimacy to their middle class status and can open up avenues for better earnings and job positions in Poland by increasing their occupational bargaining power, while the Polish labour market is able to meet their expectations (to at least some degree). Contract work mobility resonates here positively with the effects of Polish post-communist transformation and the privilege of highly-skilled technical occupations—because although Marek disliked his economic situation in Poland, he at least recognized that he can succeed there. Accordingly, for professionals, knowledge and skill gained on a contract are not wasted but can be positively utilized at home; in Bourdieu’s terms, this reflects the conversion of the embodied cultural capital into an economic one.

There are at least two options for workers without higher technical skills: either workers decide to settle on the Polish market with a lower salary, and treat contract work as a transient moment in their occupational careers which fixed emergency holes in their household budget but they keep on doing what they did before, that is continue to work as blue collar workers or (poorly paid) white collar workers, or they focus on earning money abroad and commit to transnationality, rather than national class making in the long run. Workers who commit themselves to contract work mobility and who identify themselves as *kontraktowiec*, as Jan did, are perhaps the best embodiment of the *re-making of class* that contract work entails from the Polish perspective. Although their mobility usually involves blue-collar work, it allows them to challenge the moral and economic connotations of a working class category in Poland. *Kontraktowcy* not only have an incomparably high earnings in relation to regular Polish blue-collar workforce, but they also feel more cosmopolitan and self-assured of their occupational skills and value as workers. Jan, who in his pre-contract life was a teacher, stressed that working in Poland for a low salary

and struggling to make ends meet would be too humiliating for him and he questioned the moral self-worth of any man (because masculinity is a strong aspect of this subjectivity) who agrees to sell their labour so cheaply. Another interlocutor, Wojtek, an electrician, recalled emphatically how his brother-in-law, a construction company owner in Poland, offered him a job in Poland, but who after salary negotiations concluded: *I cannot afford you*. For Wojtek, this was a source of pride and, as I interpret it, a sign of power reversal whereby a Polish employer is not able to exploit Polish labour for the simple reason of not being able to afford it.

At the same time, there is a limit to contract workers' empowerment and class remaking. There are at least three reasons for this. Firstly, contract work mobility entails constant navigation of uncertainty and generates wealth on unstable grounds. Secondly, it is based upon good health, while working physically for long hours tires the body and puts it under everyday risk of physical deterioration. A minor accident is sufficient to bring about a successful transnational career of a blue collar contract worker to a temporary or permanent halt. Finally, the derogatory cultural value ascribed to blue-collar work in Poland is difficult to shed, even if one engages in luxurious consumption. One of piece of evidence for the above is the frequency with which my interlocutors used the term *robol*—a prole—to talk about themselves and about their work in general, while simultaneously talking about being “in the middle” or bourgeois referring to their situation in Poland. Thus, they kept recognizing that their consumption is not “subsumed” by production, as the neoliberal consumer ideology would like us to think (Ngai 2003), but is based on the extraction of the surplus of their labour and this, ultimately, does not allow them to fully overcome the limits of their position in the relations of production.

CONCLUSION

Transnational contract work is the effect of the increased transnationalization of national economies and the proliferation of subcontracting across borders. Given Poland's significant place in the transnational subcontracting chain as a labour sending state in the EU, I have explored the consequences of subcontracting for Polish mobile workforce and have analyzed it in class terms. I stress that class effects of contract work are ambivalent and contradictory, entailing both the reproduction and transformation of established class relations. Transnational subcontracting is strongly associated with the capitalist demand for cheap and flexible labour, generating the according phenomenon of social dumping and precariousness. This resonates with my interlocutors' experiences, as far as they considered themselves to have been exploited and subjugated in the global ethnicized hierarchies of labour in which Poles are synonymous with a skilled and cheap workforce. On the other hand, I indicated that the collective sense of subjugation intersects with unequal power rela-

tions and that the effect of contract work is stratified, granting some workers a greater sense of class (dis)empowerment than others across borders. This is related to the workplace's hierarchical and transnational nature that emerges as an effect of subcontracting in the construction and shipyard industries, in which technical and language skills become privileged, and to the state of the Polish labour market, which is marked by great economic disparity and allows for some professions to have successful careers, but not others. Accordingly, in my study contract work is not a unified experience of the transnational reproduction of the Polish working class, but involves workers from different ranks and professions who enjoy an unequal possibility to renegotiate their class position transnationally. In the discourse of cheap, Polish labour it is easy to representationally obscure such diverse experiences.

Due to multiple references points, class in a transnational space often involves an incongruity of different dimensions of class making, such as occupational power and rank, education and material welfare (Parreñas 2001; Guarnizo 2003; Olwig 2007; Zontini 2010; Marchetti, Venturini 2014; Fresnoza-Flot 2017; Fresnoza-Flot, Shinozaki 2017). In the context of transnational subcontracting, this happens not only because contract work mobility offers workers increased consumption possibilities at home (or as I call it "off-site"), thanks to the economic inequalities between Poland and Western destination countries, but also because class relations on a contract ("on-site")—involve the proliferation of multiple classed Others, under multiple employers, and because contract work can be about both professional degradation (when higher educated workers work below their qualifications) and advancement (when workers continue and enrich their qualifications or occupy position higher than their education). In this article, I took as an empirical point of departure a narrative of two contract workers who befriended each other "on-site," Jan and Marek. For technical professionals such as Marek, contract work helps them to settle on the Polish labour market; for workers like Jan, contract work stimulates desire for increased material welfare and enhances one's self-value as a worker, which is difficult to satisfy locally, thereby producing perpetual mobilities.

But why class? Why not talk about transnational inequalities instead? Class is significant because it draws our attention to the power dynamics that stem from employment relations. It is a reminder that one's position in the relations of the means of production still matter. The reinvigorated debate on the topic of class has led to an increased amount of attention being paid to class's cultural dimension. This is also visible in transnational migration studies, whereby migrants' increased consumption at home is considered to be one of the cultural manifestations of class mobility, despite employment degradation abroad. However, as renowned British class analysts Will Atkinson (2009) and Rosemary Crompton (2010) argue, we cannot lose sight of work and the structural conditions of employment. Transnational subcontracting and the associated contract work mobility are underpinned by distinct employment rela-

tions rooted in particular national spaces, which condition workers' relations with others as well as their ability to accrue given material and professional gains. However, I recognize that workers also have some space to negotiate their class, at the very least through meaning-making and material attempts to escape from or mitigate "closed loops of class reproduction" (Ortner 2003). Transnational reading of class that are sensitive to employment arrangements should not disregard this aspect either. The next step would be to look at the interplay between transnational class making and conditioning at the more organized level, exploring the degree to which the nascent solidarities, such as those created through the collective subjugation and critical transnationalism I have mentioned, might lead to more organized and structurally impactful re-making of class relations. In this endeavour, the recognition of the diversity of class experiences is a key priority.

As a final remark, I would argue that the resurgent debate on class in Poland should take the transnationalization of class seriously. In the era of intense mobility of labour and capital, any nationally-bounded analysis of classed social processes will leave these phenomena underexplored and undertheorized. Furthermore, Polish labour mobilities should not be equated to each other, but rather analyzed from the perspective of their diversified institutional and sociocultural causes and consequences, including their potential for both the production of new class subjectivities and the reification of class hierarchies rooted in the post-communist distribution of power and privilege.

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Abstract

In late capitalism, class is increasingly made on the move, not in static locations, as different forms of mobility resonate with the making of class in different ways. Poles are the leading European nation who move abroad. However, what the transnationalization of class means for the Polish workforce in the context of diversified employment and mobility regimes has remained underexplored to date. In this article transnational mobility is seen as enacted under the employment umbrella of transnational subcontractors and staffing agencies for short-term contracts abroad. The author focuses on Poles who work in the construction industry and shipyards and explores how transnational contract work conditions workers' class relations and experiences, with the aim of grasping the collective and individual experience of working and living "on a contract" and how this affects their situation in Poland. The article shows that what in most research appears as a working-class mobility populated by low-skilled and vulnerable Polish migrants emerges on the ground as far more heterogeneous and dynamic, marked by a common transnational subjugation as well as inner class hierarchies and antagonism. The argumentation draws on a multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Poland in 2014–2017.

Key words: transnational subcontracting, Polish labour mobility, class, late capitalism, Scandinavia