

## **“It’s a jungle out there. You need to stick together”: Anti-institutionalism, Alcohol and Performed Masculinities among Polish Homeless Men in London**

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### **Introduction**

One of the unintended consequences of the European Union expansion in 2004 and 2007, which granted the citizens of New Member States the freedom of movement and employment across the EU triggering large scale migratory flows (Black, Engbersen, Okólski, Panfřru 2010; Home Office 2009), has been the rise of migrants’ homelessness in numerous Western European cities. In particular, London has seen a dramatic increase in rough sleeping among EU migrants most notably from Poland. Homeless services agencies’ statistics (Homeless Link 2006, 2008, 2010, CLG 2008), media reports (Ramesh 2010), increased government funding for reconnection projects (Thames Reach 2010) and intensification of forced removal practices undertaken by British immigration police (UKBA) all point to an emergence of a serious social problem. The fact that one in four London rough sleepers is now from A8 EU<sup>1</sup> states (Homeless Link 2010), and in some Day Centres in the capital half or more clients are from these countries (Garapich 2010), with a striking dominance of Polish nationals, begs an explanation as to why this is occurring. This article aims at answering that question taking an anthropological perspective looking at how individuals experiencing extreme exclusion negotiate and make sense of structural conditions and how a deeper understanding of these culturally significant meaning making practices performed on the streets of London shapes the interaction between migrants, groups they form and institutions of civil society and the state.

By looking at the relationship between structural constraints faced by homeless Polish migrants and their own perceptions of the social world this article also offers

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<sup>1</sup> A8 is the term denoting 8 states that entered the EU in 2004 (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia). Romania and Bulgaria entered the EU in 2007 and collectively new member states are referred to as A10.

an explanation on the perpetuation of the state of exclusion these individuals face. As I will show, focusing just on structural and economic determinants not only offers a simplistic and one-dimensional picture, but it also fails to give an explanation on why their particular lifestyles are perpetuated over long periods of time. An anthropological approach to the functions, roles and cultural meanings of homelessness, performance of group bonds, masculinities, alcohol consumption, perception of the state and dominant society as presented by homeless migrants with whom I 'hung around', reveals that structurally rejected people with particular backgrounds form strong ties despite (or because of) a hostile, exclusionary and hegemonic social environment of the neoliberal order. These practices may be seen as falling within anti-structural performances as understood by Victor Turner and they serve dual purposes – strengthening the notion of 'us', seen as an egalitarian, intimate group of men, and distancing from the hierarchical order of the neoliberal city. Two conclusions are drawn from this analysis, an empirical one and a theoretical one.

In the case of the former, taking both structural and cultural factors into account, the levels of homelessness among that group are likely going to rise, at least in London. In the case of the latter, the set of cultural forms of behavior and social practices described in academic literature as the *homo sovieticus* syndrome characterized by 'beat the system, bend the rules' mentality, disrespect for law, low work ethic and so on, (Wedel 1986, Sztompka 2000, Morawska 1998, Tischner 2005) and presented as a mental 'hang over' from communist period or 'cultural lag' (Sztompka 200: 451) - is not a static residue of the past. It is dynamically learned and acquired in an unequal power-relationship setting of modern capitalist relations. This set of norms and values proves also not only valuable and resourceful in highly individualized, neoliberal and capitalistic society, but may in fact be reinforced being a productive – socially and culturally - counter-reaction and resistance to the neoliberal order of social life in the global city.

## **Background**

Statistical data indicates that in London over the last six years there has been an increase in the number of rough sleepers from Eastern Europe and those with problematic alcohol consumption and street drinking. Homeless Link, a national organisation for agencies working with rough sleepers, state in their 2010 report that: "In recent years, our members have reported an increase in demand on their services from Eastern European clients and other migrant groups, many of whom have limited or no access to welfare support and as a result find themselves homeless and without basic resources" (Homeless Link 2010: 4). According to Homeless Link, in 2006 the percentage of A10 nationals among those sleeping rough stood at 15%, whilst in 2008 this had jumped to 25%. At the local level the numbers can be even more striking, as during the time frame of this study, numerous Day Centres or agencies reported that around half of their client group comes from Eastern Europe, and in some cases Eastern Europeans comprised up to 80% of their clients.

In identifying the reasons behind such rise in the numbers of rough sleepers, most of agencies working with the homeless point to structural exclusion of A8 migrants from some provisions of the social security system stemming from transition arrangements imposed on citizens of A8 states in 2004 (Fitzpatrick *et al* 2009). Broadly speaking, migrants gain access to welfare assistance only when they have registered on the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) and can show evidence of 12 months uninterrupted employment. For a homeless A8 migrant this means being unable to access emergency accommodation because temporary shelters are available only to those entitled to Housing Benefit. Exclusion from welfare extends also to health service as migrants cannot access rehabilitation programmes for alcohol addiction, further entrenching this destitute position. This state of affairs reduces avenues of immediate assistance a homeless migrant can access, and as one service provider bluntly remarks: “[I]here is simply less for them out there” (Garapich 2010: 46). Coupled with the fact that in general migrants from A8 states occupy positions within London’s secondary labour market, with all the inherent features of uncertainty, low pay and lack of employment rights (Sassen 2001, Wills, *et al*, 2010), and that there has been traditionally high numbers of homeless in London due to its high rental prices and lack of availability of social housing (Fitzpatrick 2000) the structural conditions seem to explain the rise in numbers and why this particular section of migrant population is prone to finding themselves in destitution, without accommodation and eventually rough-sleeping. In British government reports this confluence of limitations is explicitly recognized, as the Audit Commission states: “The few [migrant workers] who fail to find accommodation or work, or are made redundant, or become victims of domestic violence and leave their homes, may not be entitled to Housing Benefit. Because hostels often depend on this, they may not be able to accept such people [and these] individuals can drift into squatting, rough sleeping and street drinking” (Audit Commission, 2007: 24).

Scholars generally agree that the combination of individual and structural factors determines the routes into, and time spent, rough sleeping. In a scholarly overview of issues related to homelessness policy in the UK, this typology is applied to A8 migrants rather rigidly and arbitrarily. The authors remark that among the homeless population of migrants from Accession States, two types of individuals can be distinguished (Fitzpatrick, Qullgars, & Pleace 2009: 81). According to this study, the first came with pre-existing conditions, with a troubled history of institutional confinement, prison, unemployment, homelessness and most importantly substance abuse. The second is composed of people, who have descended into poverty and subsequent substance abuse after migrating to Britain, and their descent into homelessness is linked more to the structural factors resulting from their precarious position in the labour market. Due to loss of work, economic downturn or personal circumstances they run into difficulties, cannot pay rent, are unable to find work and end up sleeping rough.

In general, this view is shared by people working in agencies for homeless people and reflects attempts to determine the best ways to assist homeless migrants, and

address their special needs. Specifically, there is a tendency to pick up the issue of overt, public, and visibly destructive alcohol consumption as the underlying or contributing reason behind homelessness and persistence in engaging in street culture. The pressure group Alcohol Policy UK notes that: “An increasing number of authorities are becoming aware of migrant workers from A8 countries who have not successfully found employment and are engaging in street population activities including street drinking, rough sleeping, begging and associated Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) and low level crime. These individuals, like existing street populations, are vulnerable to a range of threats including ill health, exploitation, crime and often have histories of alcohol problems, homelessness or mental health issues” (Alcohol Policy 2008).

This dual typology has some shortcomings. First, it obscures the dynamic of becoming homeless and fails to perceive homelessness as a process rather than a state (Tosi, Torri 2005, May 2000, Fitzpatrick 2000) and assumes a neat division between individuals who for some periods of time are actively engaged in street culture and rough sleeping. Second, it fails to recognize the roles and functions of alcohol consumption, and the cultural meanings related to masculinity which define the nature of bonds between homeless men; this failure results in an inability to explain why the people in question continue to live their lives as homeless for years, and why the numbers keep swelling and why both types co-exist together to the extent that it becomes artificial and rather arbitrary to distinguish two types on the ground. In other words by not taking into account individual meanings making practices and attitudes, norms and values of people in question, we end up with a simplistic and superficial notion of people passively responding to structural changes and experiencing powerlessness without active dissent, manipulation of cultural meanings and some form of contestation. In other words, it fails to acknowledge the importance of cultural factors in individual lives.

Following Clifford Geertz’s understanding of culture, I argue that we should view individuals as attempting to interpret and make sense of social situations in order to act (Geertz 1973). Therefore, any study of homeless needs to see how these men<sup>2</sup> make sense of the above mentioned structural exclusionary forces they do not have control over, and, how this affects their agency, including engagement with social services. Capturing this understanding offers a culturally sensitive explanation of some hidden dynamics of homelessness among migrants, and this analysis also may provide a context to develop innovative social policies that improve service delivery and quality for the homeless in London. Simply looking at that group as a collection of victims of structural exclusion or destructive substance abuse habits reifies and objectifies factors which are very fluid, subjective and negotiated in the complex relationship between individuals, groups and networks they form and institutions with which they deal. This clear cut dichotomy between people affected by the structural

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<sup>2</sup> The study this article is based on research carried out among Polish men in London; for further details see section on the methodology

conditions and psychological preconditions fails to recognize the interplay between structure and agency (Giddens, 1991) and how peoples' adaptation to unfavourable conditions may influence structures of domination and exclusion, and how their resistance is being produced (Scott 1990; Gupta and Ferguson 1992) and performed. As anthropologists have constantly shown, the process of interaction between the structure and agency is deeply immersed in particular performance and human action. In the case of homeless men, resistance to particular structural conditions is performed through a variety of culturally significant practices constructing individuals within an anti-structural realm of *communitas* where formal hierarchies of statuses and role do not hold (Turner 1992, 1974). In his writings, Turner refers to various types of *communitas* and in this paper I draw on his distinction between the normative, ideological and existential *communitas* (Turner 1969: 132), with existential *communitas* providing the most useful and fitting for the context of describing a brief, transient and mundane perception of togetherness. However, as I will demonstrate through the data from my study, the importance of the sense of 'us' for homeless men, means that there is a significant normative component in how participants in this study operate in anti-structure, understanding their actions as a form of permanent resistance rather than a transient feeling of togetherness.

## Methodology and data

This article is based on a study funded by the Southlands Methodists Centre at Roehampton University and carried out in London between autumn 2009 and summer 2010. Over these months, participant observation and life story interviews were the main tools of data gathering. The interviewees were selected from two categories of people. The first consisted of Day Centre users, most of them homeless, or in some cases residing in shelters, or squat dwellers. Fieldwork was carried out in thirteen Day Centres/service providers/organisations across London, or places where Soup Kitchens were organised. Specifically for this study, in order to facilitate entry into the group and gain trust, I spent approximately one day per week for seven months in one of the Methodist-run Day Centres acting as a translator and mentor to some of the Centre's clients. In addition, informal, conversations were conducted with around 20 individuals, most of whom were approached while drinking in public spaces, such as parks, high streets or in front of churches. These drinking meetings were a separate fieldwork experience more akin to spontaneous focus group discussion than interviews.

The second group consisted of members of a Polish-speaking AA group, which meets on a weekly basis in several Polish Churches in London. Although data gathered during these meetings didn't refer directly to the experiences of homelessness, it offered nevertheless an additional perspective on cultural significance of alcohol consumption. In addition, twelve interviews were carried out with people directly involved in service provision and work with Eastern European migrants in various agencies across London. These were individuals who anonymously talked at

length about the difficulties, challenges and their perceptions of their Eastern European clients. This combination of sources – in-depth interviews, AA meetings, observation of open-air drinking session among street drinkers, following homeless daily routine, casual conversations with Day Centres users, interviews with staff – offered a multi-layered and rich source of data on social and cultural factors behind problematic alcohol consumption and associated problems with homelessness. These methods focused on gathering an actor-centred perspective on how people, who experience destitution, homelessness and addiction, articulate and perform their position, how they contest and resist dominant structures of power, form social relationships and survive in a global city.

The majority of respondents were Polish (27 from total of 35) and male; this article focuses on that group (in total 24 men). Almost all (22) of the respondents were from working class or rural backgrounds, born in small to medium towns in Poland and had poor command of English and left education at the age of 16 or 19. They were mainly in their late 30s and 40s with several individuals in their 50s and three in their 20s. The interviewees demonstrated a high variety of accommodation arrangements and to call them simply ‘homeless’ may be sometimes misleading as their accommodation status was in constant flux. They have been either rough sleeping, living in a temporary shelter provided by various religious organisations in London, in churches, living in squats, garages, parking lots, building sites where they had casual employment, sleeping in friends’ place, sleeping in night buses or in tents around the capital’s parks – during the course of the study, some individuals actually moved from one type of dwelling to another several times.

Crucially, their pre migration history as well as their employment and housing trajectory in Britain was quite uniform and confirms findings of previous surveys on homeless and destitute Eastern European migrants (Homeless Link 2006, 2008; Broadway 2007; Mills, Knight, Green 2007; Garapich 2007). Most have been the victims of high unemployment in their towns of origin, were unsuccessful businessmen unable to pay off their debts, workers of large state owned industries made redundant or long-term unemployed. In a few cases they were people with a considerable amount of time spent in Polish criminal justice system. Overall, they were all individuals for whom the economic transition in Poland triggered by the fall of the communist system in 1989 brought a sudden degradation of status, poverty, insecurity and unemployment, an experience shared by quite a significant section of Polish society (Rakowski, 2009, Stenning 2005, Ziółkowski 2001, Buchowski 2001, Dunn 2001).

Most of interviewees have been working in the UK for some time and their decline into homelessness followed a fairly similar trajectory. They had been laid off without compensation, lost jobs in the construction industry due to the end of their (formal or informal) contracts, were thrown out by their landlords, and/or had been victims of unscrupulous employers and gangmasters extorting money and documents. This employment history may have been formally documented or in the underground economy, but overwhelmingly these people were economically active immediately

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after arrival into the UK sometimes for years. In a few important instances, the interviewees were also economically active during this study, although this was mainly casual: cash-in-hand work or self organised labour (scrap collecting being the main source).

Finally, all respondents (except the AA participants) were active heavy drinkers at the time of the study; several individuals were self-admitted alcoholics and in three cases – during this study – were admitted into hospitals after being found unconscious on the street after suffering an alcoholic seizure. At least four respondents were engaged in heavy drinking of antiseptic liquid stolen from hospitals, which obviously presents a serious health hazard. Almost all respondents from the homeless group had a history of broken personal and family relationships: they were divorced or separated, not seeing their children for a long time, or in court disputes with their respective spouses over property in Poland.

### **Being ‘outside the system’ and its consequences**

In order to put migrants’ views in broader context of socio-economic change in Poland I’ll start with an analysis of their general perception of the social world in UK and Poland. In this regard, the views of homeless migrants do not differ from general attitudes of Polish migrants who are documented in other studies (Eade, Drinkwater, Garapich 2007; Burrell 2009, Svasek 2009, White 2011). The participants’ perceptions of social changes in Poland matches also perfectly the views expressed by other groups whose position dramatically deteriorated after the collapse of communism in 1989 (Buchowski 2001, Rakowski 2009). The dominant theme of these narratives is that of loss, raise of drastic social inequalities and sense of being excluded from benefits of the transition to market economy. Basically, these people would agree with Zygmunt Bauman’s statement that *the social forces which led to the downfall of the communist power ... [were] not those that [would] eventually benefit from the construction of the new system* (Bauman 1994: 33). Their worldview represents a society sharply divided between the small clique of people holding power and vast population suffering a sharp decline in general standard of life. These narratives frequently refer to the generalized notion of ‘they’, ‘the thieves in the government’, ‘them’, ‘politicians’ who have ripped the benefits, ‘robbed the nation’ while the ordinary people bore the costs of transition.

This radically polarized view depicts in broad strokes a social world divided into a small elite circle which did not change substantially after the end of the communist system (or in fact was often populated by former members of the communist nomenclature; see Staniszkis 2000) on one side and a vast amount of those at the bottom on the other. There is no place for the middle class or for any nuanced view of various pros and cons of the transition – the forces beyond their control but having distinct human face (‘them’, ‘communists’, ‘politicians’, ‘they’) are in direct confrontation and engage in a state of hostility with ‘the people’, the ‘ordinary Poles’, ‘normal folk’, ‘working class’, ‘us’, ‘the poor’. This is not a new narrative and the distinction between the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’ dates well before the collapse of

communism. Scholars have treated this narrative as part of the every-day resistance to communist rule (Wedel 1986) as well as to the rule of occupying powers during the partition period in 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in the inherit tensions between the rational legal-administrative authority of the Polish state and its cultural legitimacy within Polish society (Ziółkowski 2001, Nowak 1979).

One of crucial aspects of narratives of homeless men was that the abovementioned polarization is extended and re-applied to new, different circumstances but with similar outcomes. In general, respondents understand the structural constraints on accessing the British welfare state system, its labour market and they often discuss these barriers amongst themselves and with the agency staff. These discussions are marked by a deep sense of injustice and unfairness, entrenching their perception that ‘they aren’t wanted’ and essentially, the British authorities would like to physically get rid of them. In consequence, the labour market, the economy, the welfare state and social assistance in Britain in their view becomes a part of the generalized ‘system’, which along with the structures of exclusion in Poland discriminates against them and keeps them in their state of destitution and poverty. Most often, homeless migrants see the actions of the British state as geared towards physical removal, not accommodating to their needs – the latter not being far from the truth considering increased attention given to homeless A8 citizens from UK immigration enforcements. This perception extends to the system of help as well - despite the dedication of workers in Day Centres. They too became part of the alien world against which the homeless must struggle.

The duplication of two perceptions of exclusion – both in the context of Poland and Britain - results in respondents’ worldviews dominated by a sense of mistrust, angst, fear and being confronted with forces they cannot control. The traditional anti-institutionalism, reinforced by a sense of exclusion during the transition period is relived and reinforced in the UK, and produces a strengthened perception that ‘the system’, the economy, the authorities, police, market forces and so on, form a highly hostile and inhumane mix about which one needs to be aware and one needs to defend oneself against – otherwise – as one respondent said: “you’ll get screwed, no freedom, no work, no respect; they will get you”. The ‘system’ for most of respondents encompasses market forces in Poland and UK and the same process responsible for their degradation in Poland is also responsible for their state of destitution in London as illustrated in this quote: “I lost my job in Poland, it was a good job, around the mining industry; they sold it to the French, it went bust... so I came here and it was ok at first, but then again, the employer fired us, same attitude, same way of treating people...”

In some cases this attitude is given political articulation, as in the words of this migrant from Poland, who after years of working as a carpenter decided to stop working altogether and lives on the streets of London, usually camping in parks: “A human being doesn’t count these days; Poles and others that sleep on the street and drink aren’t just lazy – it is simply helplessness, no resources, no help.... The system

is sick. Politicians and bankers just lie and fuck us – why then we should play this game?”

In numerous accounts of homeless migrants during this study, the ‘system’ out there, extends to the formal world of established norms of operation on the labour market – the formalities related to tax, work, employment law, social benefits, accommodation, rules of capitalist relations, certificates, formal qualifications, CVs, interviews – all this was treated with a deep suspicion and unease. This respondent for instance reflects on the complexities of applying for benefits in order to get a place in a shelter: “...it is so complicated, really all that stuff is overwhelming, I don’t trust it... Poles are on the streets because they do not know how to function in all this; they don’t know the law, the system. It is easier to drink than to ask...” Similar attitudes were frequently voiced during numerous occasions while I assisted in filling out forms for various agencies – Job Centres, employment agencies, support organisations etc. The formal side of the ‘system’ with paperwork being its embodiment frequently provoked hostile, cynical and distanced reactions like this one: “what’s this for? This is useless, just for them [staff of the day centre] to do something; all this is fucked up, what does it [filling up the form] do?”. The sense of powerlessness in the face of bureaucratic rules often resulted in cynical comments on the work of the agencies staff evoking a view that the social services in fact ‘need’ homeless in order to justify their existence, as this respondent notes: “They just count us to get their grants from the government; they need us here, living like this otherwise they wouldn’t have a job to do...”

On a cultural level then, the experience of structural exclusion reproduces and reinforces tested means of adaptation to threatening situations and revitalizes a worldview that basically sees the social divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This world is one in which we find constant exploitation and dominance of the powerful over the weak, especially if the former use the tools related to modern forms of knowledge – ability to understand institutions, understanding of formal labour market, usage of self-presentation skills, filling out complex forms, read and comprehend complex instructions, IT skills, comprehension of how law works etc. Moreover, the perception is that these tools of modern life are used but also created by those in control and power – including those that are supposed to help the migrants. In this view, the nature of modern welfare systems becomes part of a wider hostile system of exclusion and stigma.

The language of life under post-communist Poland in the eyes of destitute working class Poles and of life in London streets is thus similar; it is a language of struggle, war, suffering, mistrust, suspicion towards the state and its institutions and survival in dire circumstances against an alien and incomprehensible world of the new neoliberal order where the few rich, the powerful elites have total control. This is the symbolic meaning of the homeless men’s narratives, which describe life on the streets as a ‘jungle’, ‘war’, ‘fight’, ‘struggle’. “It is a jungle out there... it’s dangerous... you need to stick together” – as one of the men said. Almost all respondents eagerly engaged in describing stories depicting violence, theft, intimidation, extortion, modern

day slavery, beatings, even killing. These stories are synchronized in their meaning with an overall perception of the outside world as hostile, ruthless and full of dangers and unpredictability. As we'll see in next section, the fault line is also synchronized with the line dividing the 'formal' with 'informal' (i.e., dividing the institutionalized world of labour, capitalism, anonymity, rationalism and bureaucracy from the social, intimate and trusted realm of 'true' human relationships).

### **Alcohol consumption and masculinity**

Obviously, life under such Manichean black and white worldview would seem psychologically difficult to bear. Hence, I argue that these meanings do not carry much power on their own; their force lies in the practical application in the life on the street and relationship with other meanings related to gender and group bonding. Thus the power of social construction of these dichotomies dividing the social realm between 'us' and 'the system' lies in its direct effect on individuals' social networks and survival skills. The direct outcome of this polarized view is a clear creation of the 'us' that is, of the group of people sharing similar fate, background, norms and values (culture in brief) in harsh conditions. In the complex world of the urban jungle, capitalist market and unequal welfare provisions, where anyone can be a threat and the system is dehumanised, the value of honest, personal, face-to-face based, egalitarian and trustworthy human relationships increases. The construction of the 'system' as essentially alien, renders intimate relationship and a sense of camaraderie more significant and emotionally valid; both perspectives exist in a mutual functional relationship. The fear and uncertainty towards the complex and incomprehensible world of the capitalist labour market and the global city on one side and family breakdown, poverty, rough sleeping, lack of resources on the other pushes homeless migrants to seek simpler, tested, known means of finding trust, friendship and companionship. In the process of positive feedback once they do find it – however brief it may be since strong bonds often turn into mutual violence – the isolation from the system increases.

Intimate relationships in the context of lack of social stability – housing, work, social network, family – need to be reaffirmed, experienced and performed and this functional relationship between group formation and isolation from institutions makes that group particularly prone to alcohol abuse. One of the primary functions of alcohol intake noted by anthropologists is its role as a social bonding mechanism and symbolic marker of intimacy. People establish the terms of their relationships and emotional bonding through collectively consuming alcohol (SIRC 1998, see also Mandelbaum 1965, Douglas 2002). Among the Day Centres and homeless services' users interviewed, noted that the dominant pattern of drinking is social and communal, where typically a group of three to ten people meet in a park, street corner, in a back alley, church stairs, or a parking lot, and consume, mainly the most affordable drink – cider, or when funds permit, vodka, and rarely with food. In most cases the alcohol is drunk from one cup or directly from the bottle – increasing the

symbolic closeness of drinking session participants. Sharing resources is a moral obligation and solitary drinking strongly condemned (although it does occur). Alcohol consumption, as a way of creating bonds between people, becomes paramount in light of the fact that almost all people interviewed at the centres live apart from their families, wives and children. Almost all interviewees have a history of separation as a result of their migratory experiences (or the other way round: some migrated as a result of family breakdown), and their urge to seek companionship in drink can be interpreted as a desire to rebuild a broken sense of belonging and community. In brief, this is a mechanism to simultaneously cope with solitude and lack of companionship and deal emotionally with the sense of isolation and hostility experienced from the generalized 'system'. The frequently recorded expression of 'the jungle out there' and the consequent need to stick together in the face of that 'jungle' embodies this perception. In this narrative, alcohol literally becomes the means people 'stick' together, the social glue which keeps a group together transgressing notions of fear and threat from strangers – a drinking companion becomes briefly a 'human' due to co-participation in drinking with all its attached norms and values. For instance, one respondent states, "Sometimes when we drink, there are people you don't know or know vaguely but you drink with them, so they are somewhat part of a group; and then when one guy falls, there must be someone who takes care of him, you can't leave him there even if you don't know him...".

In the following remark, the only positive function of alcohol intake according to the respondent is the fact that it is a social activity, offering a brief moment of relief from 'this bloody town' which basically means the whole outside world: "I drink to kill time, to be with mates, to forget that I'm in this bloody town, that I don't have a job, family, house..."

Group drinking sessions – planned events taking place usually in public places – are most often an occasion to reaffirm and demonstrate affective friendships and relationships formed out of common fate and situation – sharing the same social space as a homeless person in London. For example, during drinking sessions a constant topic of conversations is the fate of mutual friends and drinking companions: where they are at the moment, how are they, where they drink, if they have a job, where they sleep, whether they have been recently arrested or hospitalized, what are their plans. Discussants often emphasize the need to keep track of each other "because people die out there, you need to stick together," as one participant told me. This information seems to be of primary importance hence the dominant presence in conversations. It is important to add that such stories about others are told and retold (with some stories regularly resurfacing), which *builds* a sense of group and shared experience.

These bond-making mechanisms are worth emphasizing, and it is safe to say that these groups can form closely-knit, however ephemeral, communities with emphasis on norms of reciprocity and rules of conduct (for instance: "never leave your drinking companion unconscious" – as I was repeatedly reminded). The closeness is borne out of mutual interests and the pursuit of collective action, as happens when group

resources are pooled, information shared, plans coordinated and detailed knowledge of their lives circulated. These bonds are also established and reproduced through symbolic action emphasizing collective fate which at the same time has strong egalitarian features perceived by a sense of equally sharing the same position as homeless, destitute people who are somewhat “outside” of the normal world, “outside” the hostile system that rejected them – they belong to the “anti-structure” which imposes certain egalitarian obligations. As one man stresses: “Yes, we are a group here; look all friends here we drink from one cup, we talk and drink because we are all equal, all the same; somewhat separate from the world out there...” Or as in one other participant said: “You need to stick together; it doesn’t always work but to survive here you need to stick...”

Crucially, service providers often recognize that these people form tight groups, which support themselves and can be quite resourceful; in this way outsiders also reinforce communities. This service provider, for example, notes, “The Poles stick together and they form little communities, very cohesive; they are always together, in two, fives, sixes...this gives them support, but it isn’t the right kind of support. It is destructive support... everybody share the same misery, they know they have a common problem; they haven’t got any money, they haven’t got a job so they stick together and look out for each other. So if they’re begging, if they’re stealing one party will look out and cover.”

Group bonds among the homeless – however short lived, since in-fights and violence are quite common – are strengthened since communal alcohol consumption also reinforces the perception of ‘being outside the system’. The performance of drinking reinforces the boundary dividing the close and intimate ‘us’ and hostile ‘system’. Here, the wider and more historically embedded cultural meanings of alcohol consumption have to be taken into account particularly relating to links between collective consumption of alcohol and power relations between the state and society.

Anthropologists generally distinguish between societies with overall positive beliefs and expectancies about alcohol (variously defined as non-Temperance, ‘wet’ or ‘integrated’ drinking cultures) and those whose beliefs are more negative, inconsistent and ambivalent (defined as ‘ambivalent’, ‘Nordic’ drinking cultures), and on this score a few points need to be made (SIRC 1998). Historically, in Eastern Europe, as in the case of Poland, drinking has been strongly associated with its rural cultural context where serfs and peasants engaged in frequent and excessive drinking bouts and drinking was predominantly a male activity, marking the transition into adulthood (Zielinski, Moskalewicz, 1995: 220). But drinking also had a distinct political aspect since perceived dependency on alcohol of large section of population was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century constructed by the socialist, nationalist and temperance movements as the way in which the oppressed classes or nations were controlled by the dominant classes and/or foreign occupiers. The history of the state’s monopoly over spirit production – both in pre-socialist and socialist periods – meant that there has long been a strong tension between individuals and communities’ patterns of culturally

significant drinking behaviour and constant attempts by states and elites to control consumption, production and meanings constructed around alcohol.

For example, socialist states have often elevated the drinking of its population into a national problem with massive campaigns and educational programmes to reduce consumption and associated problems – usually with no success. The widespread existence of a black market economy in alcohol in Poland (production, smuggling and sale), meant that alcohol consumption in itself – due to state attempts at control - has been elevated to a political act and seen as an aspect of citizens' freedom and a form of civil disobedience. Polish anthropologist Roch Sulima, who writes about anti-systemic potentials in alcohol consumption, has discussed this theme in detail. In his ethnographic accounts of Polish labourers drinking in state factories at work, he describes this social action as producing a thrill of 'stolen time' - a perception by workers in state-owned industries that they manage to steal the employers' time and enter – via alcohol intoxication – into a different spatial and temporal dimension, thus resisting and contesting the power relations in socialist Poland (Sulima 2000).

Taking a broader theoretical perspective, the notions of anti-structure and performed *communitas* as described by Victor Turner (Turner 1974) enlighten this uneasy relationship between alcohol, society, power and individuality. In this view, Polish homeless men in 21<sup>st</sup> century London use collective alcohol consumption in public to enter into intimate human relationships of existential *communitas*, rejecting or breaking from the structural, rational and hierarchical nature of modern society. Men in this study most often drink in public in defiance of public order rules prohibiting alcohol consumption in places like streets, parks, and church stairs. At the same time they make a clear claim to the space they occupy through their performance. They invest quite a lot of energy to remain in public space despite the odds, and employ careful strategies to outmanoeuvre various authorities' actions (by organizing look-outs, elaborate ways of hiding the drink, identifying places not frequented by police, striking a friendly relationship with the officers) in order to perform this particular claim to public space. Thus, it isn't the intoxication *per se*, but the public intoxication in groups that makes drinking an anti-structural act infused with deep seated cultural meanings, as well as sense of ownership of space and defiance of the omnipresent structures of power. As Turner notes, the performative feature of *communitas* depends on direct experience of an alternative realm, the 'sacred time' where statuses and roles are suspended and a group shares a sense of sameness (Turner 1974, 1992). But as mentioned earlier, it is impossible to escape a conclusion that for these homeless, *communitas* – as a sense of common fate, humanity and togetherness - had also a strong normative and political significance as it explains and makes emotionally acceptable migrants' position of powerlessness and exclusion in the modern city. Alcohol intake in public between several Polish men with fairly similar backgrounds should thus be seen as a symbolic meeting point of several cultural meanings and experiences of exclusion – people feel the sense of solidarity and *communitas* and reinforce the boundary between them and the world outside

simultaneously. Alcohol consumption, as the antithesis of productive work in a mechanistic society, becomes a statement - a culturally significant act of defiance that serve mutually reinforcing functions – strengthening the bonds between men and giving meaningful explanation for their current position by erecting and entrenching a boundary between the ‘us’ and the hostile ‘them’, the ‘system’.

And unsurprisingly, mainly men perform these social practices. In fact, it is a rarity to find a female being part of these groups, and sometimes men in discussions of the gendered nature of their groups stress that women are not welcome in these circles, that women bring potential friction and tensions, especially in squats. Thus, the strength and significance of these practices relate to the relationship between bond making activities, alcohol intake, survival, and perception of gender and masculinities. As scholars such as Zielinski (1995) note, one of the most important cultural aspects of drinking is its direct association with manhood and socially constructed role man plays in societies migrants come from. In case of Poland, it has been noted by previous studies that alcohol initiation traditionally is a purely manly affair and especially in rural areas it is one of the most powerful symbolic ways a man asserts his role in society. The close association of masculinity and alcohol is linked with the public display of drinking and its social acceptance - a drunken man on the streets provokes radically different reactions than a drunken woman, as Zielinski notes: “drunkenness on the part of a woman is not acceptable, and a woman who drinks alone in public may be regarded a prostitute” (Zielinski 1995: 230). This tendency obviously is a generalized one and rapid changes in Polish society had their impact also on the diversification of drinking patterns, but as far as female members of the AA groups were concerned, this traditional view still holds (for more detail see Garapich 2010: 39-40).

Since groups of homeless in this study were formed almost uniquely of men in their 30s to 50s it is crucial to look at this aspect in more detail as it offers important insights and interpretations of their actions. As noted, respondents’ attitude towards drinking linked strongly to their need of creating social bonds, but these were mainly bonds between men. The way they talked about drinking had a distinct flavour of masculine pride in the amount drank, the type of drink they ingested and colourfully described behaviour they exhibited while intoxicated. Whenever drink was mentioned, it was usually as something men simply had to do, otherwise they would be regarded as socially inadequate and not complete, thus not fulfilling their social roles, their manhood could be subject to doubting, jokes and ridicule usually with homosexual connotations. Crucially, asked about alcohol initiation, interviewees emphasized the role of the army as the place where ‘men were made’ and large, prolonged alcohol consumption sessions were practiced as a form of rite of passage into adulthood:

“I began to drink in the army; at home there wasn’t any drink; my parents were strict on that, they didn’t drink at all. The problem began in the army; in the army you have to drink, drink is part and parcel of being a recruit. You have to drink but why? I don’t know, where army begins, logic ends; this is part of bullying and ways to control the younger ones.”

*Michał P. Garapich*

“In the army men had to drink it is normal; you are out there, no family just others like you...”

The association of the homo-social structure of the army, the group of men and the drink is further emphasized when the accounts and casual talk about the life in the streets of London described above are recalled. As noted earlier, a very common reference is to frame street life in the language of struggle, war and constant threat of violence. Group drinking discussions are full of stories about the realities of the life on the streets as it was a war-like situation, with death, injury, blood spilled and violence experienced on regular basis. Here again drink potentially bonds people together in that struggle and makes them almost a brother-in-arms group:

“It is a fight, struggle, it’s a war here [among the homeless]... people die on the street and you have to be really careful with whom you talk; that’s why it is so important to have friends. But in order to have them, you need to have a drink sometimes or just buy one for the guys who may help you.”

Others make the comparison with reference to the male-centred companionship and drinking as an obvious outcome of this:

“But here I just drink like in the army... it is the same stuff really... you drink because everyone around you drinks...and here it is like camping a bit...”

As the quotes above demonstrate, these narratives have a double function aimed at achieving a similar effect: they increase the sense of threat from outside, which simultaneously increases the need for trusted relationships and companionship among members of the drinking group. At the same time these bonds have a more practical gain. Through collective drinking people can also get necessary information about resources vital to the homeless – for example squats, places with free food, odd jobs, quality of service in Day Centres or an information about a group drinking session that takes place nearby. From an anthropological perspective this masculine discourse of war and struggle on the streets of London has additional functions: first, it gives meaning to the everyday survival of a homeless person with drinking problem and gives meaning to the omnipresent sense of insecurity and unpredictability; second, it reinforces a bond between men who share similar fate; third, it lifts person’s self-esteem as someone who ‘knows the tricks’ of life on the streets.

The third aspect is crucial for homeless men with whom I spoke. This listing of self-esteem parallels the overall stereotype of Polish migrants represented as hard working, resourceful, smart and street-wise. The narrative of struggle on the street is evoked not only to describe the hostile world out there, but also to show how the individual overcomes that hostility and despite all the odds, makes it. So evoking the hardship is aimed at presenting how successfully the interviewee did overcome it. The pride in ‘making it’ despite all provides a sense of pride in ‘beating the system’ and a source of self esteem which for a person in a position of structural powerlessness, is of crucial importance. The system is equated with dominant power, so all a humble individual can do to ascertain his agency (and consequently humanity) is to dodge it

and cheat it in small, mundane ways; a strategy well known from other studies of resistance by subordinate groups (Scott 1990; de Certeau 1984).

To recapitulate the argument: in face of structural exclusion stemming from both the welfare regimes, neoliberal restructurisation in Poland and current position on the secondary labour market in global city, homeless Polish migrants form highly functional (in economic but also social terms) groups of people that reproduce and reaffirm egalitarian bonds between men through symbolic means associated with collective alcohol consumption, value put upon 'informal', 'beat the system' attitudes and norms drawing on anti-institutional world view, tested in previous historical times. The relationship between cultural meanings associated with masculinities, alcohol consumption, economic sustainability of living on the streets (through petty theft, scrap collecting, begging and finding things) and dichotomised anti-institutional worldview is a dialectical one. This means that no one factor may be treated as dominant; it is rather a combination of all which strengthen the bonds between these men, giving them means to long term social and economic sustainability to survive on the streets – which in some cases, means years and years of rough sleeping or living in precarious conditions. This set of attitudes explains also the stubbornness and unwillingness to engage with social services – something the service providers interviewed for this study frequently noted, highlighting the 'passiveness' of migrants and their disengagement. As this NGO worker notes, "self-reliance [means for them] that they don't need your help, 'I'm on my own' kind of stuff. And that's how they survived. And this is a very strong mentality... They rely at the same time on who they know on their networks; this is how they survived in Poland and this is how they survived here... they don't want to get engaged in bureaucracy, they don't care... They don't want to make themselves visible as well; 'the state needs not to see you' - that's why they like to stay out of the system, staying invisible is the best course of action."

In other words, homeless Poles respond actively to their situation of powerlessness by reinforcing and re-enacting tested means of survival in the face of dominant power – be it a hostile communist regime, inequalities of the transition era, or exclusionary practices of the British welfare state. The socially constructed meanings of masculinities, anti-institutionalism, value of egalitarian bonds between a group of men consuming alcohol in public, and pride in 'beating the system' attitude, and resulting resourcefulness explain why these people remain in their current state for years. This combination of factors also helps explain why the numbers of homeless Poles have swollen in London in the last few years and in the context of the economic crisis is likely to continue rising. For a marginalised group that seem to have little to lose, the 'beat the system' attitude brings some slight balance to the unequal relationships between labour and capital.

An important point needs to be made here. This isn't to argue that the homeless fully 'choose' their lifestyles and romanticize their plight as an anti-conformist act, something that researchers on homelessness rightly warn against (Fitzpatrick 2000, Oliwa-Ciesielska 2006). It is simply an anthropological explanation of how people defend, explain, and make sense of the structural constraints and barriers they face.

On a daily basis, having to deal and contain forces beyond ones' control – the economy, legal framework, systems of help provision, unfamiliar/foreign contexts, state policies – individuals with little cultural capital and limited resources need to retain some degree of self-autonomy and agency in order to keep some basic levels of self-esteem. Explaining the world as essentially alien is a self-defence mechanism that helps people in such groups to feel that they still have some control over their lives. Engaging in some activities that are 'theirs' – like group drinking, squat finding, scrap collecting, stealing, shoplifting - and surviving for years on the streets of London – and being proud about it - is another part of that strategy. This isn't easy. People that took part in this study were often suffering from poor health, chronic alcohol-related illnesses, depression, and bruises from fights and often hunger. However, the argument made here is that how people explain and rationalise their life and situation has to be regarded as a response, contestation and negotiation of the structural barriers migrants face. Again, this anthropological interpretive explanation, ought not to be seen as arguing that the people who are homeless and engage in street drinking, have deliberately chosen this as their lifestyle. It is to demonstrate how people try to make sense of what is happening to them and why and how the powerless try to carve some level of cultural autonomy into their lives.

### **Conclusion: *Homo sovieticus* revisited**

The set of norms and values that emphasize the moral worth of anti-institutionalism, 'beat the system' attitudes, hostility towards rational capitalistic organisation of labour has been often described in the literature and popular commentary as essentially a 'hang over' from the communist times (Sztompka 2000). The accepted and widespread applauded strategies of bending the formal rules and hostility towards the law and the state which characterized life under communism in Poland, became an undesirable obstacle on the road to modernisation project in Poland and Eastern Europe more generally. Embodied in the notion of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome numerous social scientists in the 1990s rushed to describe what went wrong during the transition period and why it may be so. Piotr Sztompka, for instance, writes about the 'cultural lag', 'civilizational incompetence' (Sztompka 1993) or 'socialist mentality' which impedes vast numbers of Poles from internalizing the dominant values of modernisation and neoliberal project – individualism, creativity within market rules, rational planning, meritocracy and hard work ethic (Sztompka 1993, 2000). The 'bend the rules' and 'beat the system' attitudes of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome, in his view are the cultural residues of a system that promoted passiveness, anti-institutional attitudes, disrespect for law, excessive egalitarianism and suspicion towards individual wealth (Sztompka 2000; see also Wedel 1986). For Sztompka, then, this mindset needs to be eradicated sooner rather than later, if Polish society is to follow the Western model on the path to modernisation.

This perspective has been criticized, most notably by Michał Buchowski, who describes it as anti-sociological, a-historical, elitist and laden with ideological

undertones. Buchowski identifies the tendency of Polish elites and distinguished sociologists, such as Sztompka, to construct the socialist mentality ascribed to particular sections of citizenry leads to essentializing and stigmatizing the lower classes, who are more often than not, the poor or the rural class; in effect this intellectual manoeuvre reframes the East-West boundary from being a geographical one to a cultural one, and divides post-communist societies from within, which is a classical case of occidental orientalism. The identification of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome with particular, sections of Polish society constructs the 'other' in close proximity. "Otherness is dissected from an exotic content and brought home, thus displaced primitives can be found on our doorstep [...] and they place them in local pockets of poverty and rural areas. In any case, the spatially exotic other has been resurrected as the sociologically stigmatized brother" (Buchowski 2006: 476) where in the eyes of the elites those "demoralized, corrupted and orphaned victims not of current practices but of the past, have to learn new standards, change their mentality in order to join the progressive part of humanity. If they cannot do it, they remain 'Easterners and should indict themselves for being alienated. Any failure is ascribed to their "oriental nature"' (Buchowski 2006: 475).

As Buchowski notes, sources of classifications and the production of meaning among various groups of Polish society, stretches back several generations and often show strong continuities, and needs thus be seen in a Braudelian *longue duree* perspective. Furthermore, these perceptions should be viewed not just as symptoms of problems with social and cultural change but as known and tested strategies of survival in the face of uncertain future and contestation of power relations. Buchowski states, in reference to a Polish rural class faced with the post-1989 change, that "what appears to scholars as systemic transformation, for rural people it is just a link in the chain of history" (Buchowski, 2004: 174).

In a similar way, I argue that for homeless Poles, their current situation makes sense and is made socially acceptable through the use of tested and known categories evoked to explain the realities of the neoliberal global city. By this I mean its inequalities, chaos, unpredictability, uneven access to welfare, and subordinate position vis-a-vis various forms of authority, repressive practices of the state and revanchist attitudes of urban planners towards homelessness (May 2000). The role of egalitarian relations symbolized in war-like references emphasizing the value of bonds between men sharing the same social position and showing resourcefulness in 'beating the system', is not just a reaction to adverse conditions, but a legitimate cultural response that offers a coherent, deeply significant and historically meaningful world view divided into the *gemeinschaft* of personal, face-to-face relationships of drinking companions and *gesellschaft* of the hostile, dehumanised, modern and complex world 'out there'. In consequence, the reinforcement of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome with all its moral validation of various forms of 'bending the rules' and promotion of activities on the borders of the law or explicit acceptance of illicit behaviour (such as petty theft, forging of papers, having numerous IDs or aliases, lying to authorities, lying on CVs, various forms of social mimesis and so on) has to be put in the context of

modern capitalist social relations and seen as a defence mechanism, a creative adaptation to the neoliberal project producing inequalities rather than a passive residue, a ‘cultural lag’ inadaptable to modern conditions. In fact, as Ewa Morawska notes in her analysis of the income seeking Poles to Berlin in early 90s, numerous features of the so called *homo sovieticus* syndrome may be seen as perfectly compatible with the neoliberal, de-centralized, flexible, network-oriented capitalist labour market. As she writes, “capitalism based on transnational, decentralized, flexible production of consumer services in areas/sectors of the economy unregulated by legal-institutional frameworks renders some features of the accustomed homo-sovieticus syndrome into effective strategies of economic action in the new situation” (Morawska 1998).

Looking at homeless Poles’ discourses and meaning-making practices, I propose to take this point further and argue that the specific position of the homeless migrant from a post-communist society in a global city renders the set of norms and values referred to as the “*homo-sovieticus* syndrome” effective not only economically but also socially and culturally as these sets of cultural practices present a way with which subordinate groups retain a level of autonomy, self-esteem and relative power in dealing with service providers, the state authorities and the wider public. In short, the frequent boastings by my interviewees’ of the ability to survive despite the odds, their ability to cheat the authorities, avoid deportations, dodge the UKBA (between April and December 2010 UKBA stepped up ‘administrative removals’ of A8 rough sleepers from certain central London boroughs), find food, clothes, money, shelter and ‘get by’ despite the ‘war’ where they were often targeted, points to the importance that these activities have for individuals on both social and cultural levels. These practices serve to reinforce both the masculine notions of pride, self-esteem, resourcefulness, as well as symbolic value of egalitarian and communitarian notions of fairness, justice and equality. Through their radical rejection of the institutional ‘system’, homeless Poles remain in a known, tested, and familiar territory of homosocial environment where trust, friendships, mutual help and reciprocity have a stronger and emotionally – at least relatively – fulfilling role.

Where my argument differs from Morawska and also Sztompka’s perception of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome is that these attitudes and cultural reactions are learned and developed in the process of gradual social and economic decline into poverty. Thus, these sets are not a feature that exists in isolation from the general social and economic environment – it is a learned, adopted and used set of strategies in response to structural subordination and position of powerlessness. This explains why the two ‘types’ of homeless (the ones with ‘pre-conditions’ and ones without) become hard to distinguish from one another on the ground, and the dual typology base used by some scholars, becomes rather arbitrary.

Again, this isn’t to romanticize or politicize the lifestyles these people lead – they are all too well aware of the dysfunctional, hazardous and dangerous aspects of rough sleeping and drinking. They themselves critically reflect upon the value of friendships cemented by alcohol consumption, as one philosophically remarked: “Vodka connects and divides people at the same time. It makes them come together to break

that bond later....” Friendships, brief experiences of *communitas* and relations observed among the homeless were punctuated by frequent in-fights, mutual accusations of thefts, aggression and outbursts of rage especially while intoxicated; the bonds between men were made of both care as well as aggression. But it has to be noted that the violent conflicts were sometimes a sign of strength of bonds these people share, as animosities were usually forgotten and men involved were friends again in few days time. Crucially, my observations show that arguments most often broke because an individual had high moral expectations about other group member behaviour, expectations borne out of the above-mentioned dichotomy between the trusted circle of friends and the ‘system’ out there. Nevertheless, when pressed, interviewees had little doubt that they lead a very risky and unhealthy lifestyle. The average life expectancy for a rough sleeper in London is 42 years and there is no denying that these people do sometimes try to improve their situation – by looking for work, occasionally quitting drinking and exiting their friendship networks, thus recognizing the destructive influences which they may have collectively had on them, and so forth. To be honest, however, in the course of this study these instances were a rarity (or constituted a break in rough sleeping rather than a conscious decision to end it altogether) and it became clear to me at the end of the study, that although it is relatively easy for Polish migrants to become homeless – due to above mentioned structural constraints and general precarious social position they are in, it becomes much harder to cease to be homeless because of much deeper, more subtle and culturally specific factors. This means that any social service provision for homeless in the coming years will have to be particularly open minded as structural inclusion doesn’t necessary mean inclusion on social and cultural levels.

The compatibility and cultural functionality of the many features of the so called *homo sovieticus* syndrome in the world of the modern capitalist global city raise some crucial questions not only about the nature of social relations in post-communist societies such as Poland but also about the wider aspects of migration from A8 countries to Western Europe and the impact of migration on social relations. The way homeless men survive, function and adapt by ascribing meanings to their condition and making sense of their position of powerlessness in the global city also raises fundamental questions on the nature of contemporary capitalism. If norms and values regarded by the elites as antithetical to modernisation are in fact an integral and functional part of the capitalist relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> global city, if they consist of the necessary arsenal of social and cultural tools for survival of the modern proletariat, then we may be keen to revisit again an old Marxian argument that capitalism carries with itself the seeds of its own destruction.

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