OF ALCOHOL AND MEN – SURVIVAL, MASCULINITIES AND ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISM OF POLISH HOMELESS MEN IN A GLOBAL CITY¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping among migrants from Accession States, most notably from Poland reflected in recent homeless services agencies’ statistics (Homeless Link 2006, 2008, 2010) the media attention (Ramesh 2010), increased local and central government funding for reconnection projects (Thames Reach 2010) and intensification of forced removal practices undertaken by British immigration police (UKBA) is one of the consequences of the opening of the British labour market to 10 Accession states in 2004 and 2007 that has been overlooked for some time. It took a dramatic increase in number of rough sleepers in the last two years for alarm bells to start ringing. The fact that one in four London rough sleepers is now from A8 EU states (Homeless Link 2010), and in some day centres in the capital half or more clients are from A8 countries (Garapich 2010), with a striking dominance of Polish nationals, really begs an explanation as to why this is occurring. With turbulent times ahead in terms of both the economy as well as public spending cuts, conceived and implemented by the British coalition government, the crucial question would thus be: is this a steady cumulative growth which will get worse or just a one-off rise which will eventually level off in time, in similar way as homelessness in London in the mid-80s was dealt with rather successfully (Fitzpatrick 2000) although mechanisms employed then were of an interventionist and aggressive nature designed to ‘remove’ the undesirable people from urban spaces (Cloke, May, Johnsen 2010; May 2000).

This article attempts to answer that question from the perspective of social anthropology, by looking at the relationship between structural constraints faced by homeless Polish migrants and their own perceptions of the social world, their

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meaning-making practices, norms and values, their behavioral patterns – in brief, the cultural factors. 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 and prediction what happens if these constraints and exclusionary policies are removed, and homeless migrants gain the same set of social rights as the rest of British and EU citizens (which in theory will happen in May 2011). An anthropological approach to the functions, roles and cultural meanings of homelessness, group bonds, masculinities, alcohol consumption, perception of the state and dominant society as voiced by homeless migrants I ‘hung around’ with, reveals that structurally rejected, people with particular backgrounds reconstruct communities and form strong ties despite (or because of) a hostile, exclusionary and hegemonic social environment of the neoliberal order. 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 homeless among that group is 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 (Wedel 1986, Sztompka 2000, Morawska 1998) is not a static feature but one that is learned and acquired and proves not only valuable and resourceful in highly individualized, neoliberal and capitalistic society, but may in fact be reinforced under a new set of conditions being a productive – socially and culturally - counter-reaction to the neoliberal ordering of social life in the global city.

2. BACKGROUND AND DATA

Statistical data indicates that over the last six years there has been a steady 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 people who are homeless, 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 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 study this article is based upon, some 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 a dramatic 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. Broadly speaking, migrants gain access to welfare assistance only when they have registered on the WRS (Workers Registration Scheme) and can show evidence of 12 months uninterrupted employment. This state of affairs drastically reduces avenues of immediate assistance a homeless migrant can access, and as one service provider bluntly remarks: *there is simply less for them out there* (Garapich 2010: 46). This is mainly because immediate temporary shelters are available only to those entitled to Housing Benefit. Coupled with the fact that in general migrants from A8 states occupy positions within London’s secondary labour market, with all the inherent, and well described, features of uncertainty, low pay and lack of employment rights (Wills, et al, 2010), 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 it 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). Unlike the indigenous population or migrants from older EU states, these migrants cannot apply for benefits or can do so under strict conditions which people working in black economy - cannot fulfil. Furthermore, given their frequent substance abuse problems, they cannot access rehabilitation programmes for alcohol addiction. Another crucial structural factor which drives people into rough sleeping, is one of housing shortage and the generally recognized fact that London always has had a sizeable homeless population due to its high rental prices and a lack of availability of social housing (Fitzpatrick 2000).

Since scholars in general agree that it is the combination of individual and structural factors that determine the routes into, and time spent rough sleeping, in a scholarly overview of issues related to homelessness policy in the UK, the authors remark that among the homeless population of migrants from Accession States, two types of individuals can be distinguished (Fitzpatrick, Quilgars, & Pleace 2009: 81). According to Fitzpatrick *et al*, 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 bad luck, economic downturn or personal circumstances they run into difficulties, cannot pay rent, lose work and end up sleeping rough.
In general, this view is shared by people working in agencies for homeless and reflects attempts to determine the best ways to assist these individuals, 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. For social policy provision, the main problem with this view is that it obscures the dynamic of becoming homeless and fails to perceive this as a process rather than a state and assumes a neat division between individuals who for some periods of time are actively engaged in street culture and rough sleeping.

As I will demonstrate in the course of this article, there are a number of other problems with this approach, both theoretical and empirical. The failure to recognize the roles and functions of alcohol consumption, and the social significance of masculine related cultural meanings defining the nature of bonds between homeless men, 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 non-sociological notion of people passively responding to structural changes and experiencing powerlessness without active dissent, manipulation and some form of contestation. Following Clifford Geertz’s understanding of culture I argue that we should view individuals as attempting to interpret social situations in order to act (Geertz 1973) hence any study of homeless needs to see how they make sense of the above mentioned structural exclusionary hegemonic forces they do not have control over, and, how this affects their agency. Capturing this understanding, offers a culturally sensitive explanation on what are the hidden dynamics of homelessness populations in London, especially among migrants and also may give an idea for innovative social policies addressed towards them in order to improve service delivery and quality. Simply looking at that group as

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<sup>2</sup> http://www.alcoholpolicy.net/2007/08/the-barka-pilot.html
a victim 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 and institutions they deal with. This distinction 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).

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, I spent considerable time with. The first consisted of Day Centre users, often 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, less structured conversations and talks were conducted with around 20 individuals, who 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 two Polish-speaking AA group, which meets on a weekly basis in the Polish Church in London. Six people from these groups were interviewed. 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 three dimensional and rich source of data on social and cultural factors behind problematic alcohol consumption and associated problems with homelessness. It offers an actor-centred perspective on how people, who experience destitution, homelessness and addiction, articulate and conceptualize their situation, how they contest and resist dominant structures of power, form social relationships and survive in a global city. In brief, these multidimensional sources give an insight in to how migrants experiencing particular problems, view life and society in Britain.
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 and had poor command of English. 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 actual fact, 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 temporary employment, sleeping in friends’ place, sleeping in night buses or in tents around the capital’s many parks – during the course of the study, some individuals actually moved from one type of dwelling to another several times. A small minority who had access to social welfare were staying for some periods of time in shelters. In conjunction with this, their migration history 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 countries 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 spend in Polish criminal justice system. Overall, they were all individuals for whom the economic transition in Poland brought sudden degradation of status, poverty, insecurity and unemployment. This is most definitely a section of Polish society which can be described as having essentially lost due to their country’s transition to a market economy (Rakowski, 2009, Stenning 2005).

Crucially for subsequent analysis, most of them have been working in the UK for some time and their decline into homelessness had a fairly similar trajectory – they had been laid off suddenly without compensation, lost jobs in the construction industry due to end of (formal or informal) contrast, were thrown out by their landlords or had been victims of unscrupulous employers and gangmasters extorting money and documents. This employment history may have been formally documented or in the black economy, but overwhelmingly these people were economically active immediately after arrival into the UK sometimes for years. In 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). All respondents (except the AA participants) were active 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
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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 long time, or, in court disputes with their respective spouses over property in Poland.

3. BEING ‘OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM’ AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Starting with an analysis of respondents’ general perception of the migratory trajectory, social changes in Poland and their individual attitudes towards the social world in UK and Poland, homeless migrants’ view doesn’t differ from what other groups of Polish migrants state, as documented in other studies (Eade, Drinkwater, Garapich 2007). That perception of social change matches also perfectly the views expressed by other groups whose position dramatically deteriorated after the collapse of communism in 1989 (Buchowski 2001, Rakowski 2009). Basically, these people would agree with Zygmunt Bauman’s famous 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) and that ‘they’, ‘the thieves in the government’, ‘them’, ‘politicians’ have ripped the benefits, ‘robbed the nation’ while the ordinary people bore the costs of transition. This radically polarized view depicts a social world divided into a small elite circle which did not change substantially after the end of the communist system on one side and vast amount of those at the bottom on the other. There is no place for the middle class or for any nuanced view on 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 people’, ‘working class’, ‘us’, ‘the poor’

One of crucial aspects of narratives collected during the course of this study was that this polarization, the view of the social world radically divided is extended and re-applied to new, different circumstances with structural exclusion and economic uncertainty, as the main features. In general, the respondents understand the structural constraints on accessing the British welfare state systems, and they often discuss these 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 authorities would like to get rid of them. In consequence, the welfare state and social assistance in Britain in their view becomes a part of the generalized ‘system’, which discriminates against them and keeps them in their state of destitution and poverty.
and what it really wants is their physical removal – 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 the homeless have to struggle against.

It is, then, not surprising that most of the respondents’ world views are dominated by a sense of mistrust, angst, fear and being overwhelmed by forces they cannot control. The experience from Poland partially re-lived and reinforced in the UK, has resulted in the reinforced perception of ‘the system’, the economy, the authorities, police, market forces and so on, forming a highly hostile mix about which one needs to be aware and one needs to defend oneself against – otherwise – as one migrant said: you’ll get screwed, no freedom, no work, no respect; they will get you. In some cases this feeling is given clear 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, CVs, interviews, norms of conduct – all this was treated with a deep suspicion and unease. This respondent for instances 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: 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? – said one respondent. On a cultural level then, the experience of structural exclusion reproduces and reinforces means of adaptation to an unfamiliar situation and reaffirms a world view which basically sees the social world divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’, a world engaged in 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, fill 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 them. The language of life under post-communist Poland and London streets is thus similar; it is a language of struggle, war, suffering, mistrust, suspicion and survival in dire circumstances against an alien and incomprehensible world of the new neoliberal order. This is the cultural meanings of homeless’ narratives describing the 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 them said. Almost all respondents eagerly engaged in describing similar 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. The fault line is also synchronized with the line dividing the ‘formal’ with ‘informal’ the institutionalized world of labour, capitalism, anonymity, rationalism and bureaucracy and the social, intimate, face-to-face, passionate, personal, known and trusted realm of ‘true’ human relationships.

4. ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND MASCULINITY

Life under such Manichean black and white world view would seem psychologically difficult to bear hence I argue that this meaning doesn’t carry much power on its own, its force lies in the practical application and relationship with other meanings related to gender and community 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 thief or a threat and the system is dehumanised, and essentially hostile; and taking into account the omnipresent experience of family breakdown shared by all homeless I spoke to, the value of honest, simple, personal, face-to-face based, egalitarian and trustworthy human relationships increases. I argue that the sense of fear and uncertainty towards the complex and sometimes incomprehensible world of the capitalist labour market and the global city on one side and family breakdown on the other pushes homeless migrants to seek simpler, tested, known means of finding trust, friendship and companionship. And it is no surprise that they find it in drinking group sessions among men who share similar characteristics. In the process of a positive feedback once they do find companionship – however brief
it may be since strong bonds often turn into mutual violence – the isolation from
the system increases. This functional relationship between group formations and
isolation from institutions is what makes that group particularly prone to alcohol
abuse from one side and hard to engage with the administrative system of help
– however little is there for them – from the other.

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). Among
the Day Centres and homeless services’ users interviewed, the dominant pattern
of drinking is social and communal, where typically a group of three to ten people
meet in a park, in a back alley, 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 occurring).
Alcohol consumption, as a way of creating bonds between people, becomes
paramount in the light of the fact that almost all people interviewed at the centres
live apart from their families, wives and children. As noted almost all interviewees
have a history of separation as a result of their migratory experiences, (or the
other way round - they 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 cope with
solitude and lack of companionship on one side and deal emotionally with the
sense of isolation and hostility of the generalized ‘system’.

Group drinking sessions are most often an occasion to reaffirm and
demonstrate affective friendships and relationships formed out of common fate
and situation. During meetings with members of drinking groups 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 others
because people die out there, you need to stick together – as one told me. This
information seems to be of primary importance hence their dominant presence in
conversations – but it isn’t just the content of information (particular news about
a particular person) but the fact that they are told and retold all over (some stories
kept resurfacing) builds a sense of group and shared experience which is of crucial
significance here. These bond-making mechanisms are worth emphasizing and it
is safe to say, that these groups form closely knit 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 collective actions undertaken – in most cases when the group resources are pooled, information shared, plans coordinated and detailed knowledge of one’s’ lives circulates; but these bonds are also established, and reproduced through symbolic action emphasizing collective fate which carries strong egalitarian features of these communities. This sense of community is strengthened 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. As these people stress: 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 case: You need to stick together; it doesn’t always work but to survive here you need to stick...

Even more crucial is the fact that service providers often recognize that these people form tight groups, which support themselves and can be quite resourceful; in this way communities are also reinforced by outsiders. 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.

The group bonds – however short lived, since in-fights are quite common – are strengthened since communal alcohol consumption also reinforces the perception of ‘being outside the system’ the act 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.

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); (SIRC 1998); and a few points need to be made. Historically, in Eastern Europe, as in the case of Poland, drinking has been strongly associated with its rural cultural roots where serfs and peasants engaged in frequent and excessive drinking bouts
and drinking was predominantly a male activity, marking transition into adulthood (Zielinski & Moskalewicz, 1995: 220). But drinking had also a distinct political aspect since perceived dependency on alcohol of large section of population in the 19th and 20th century was frequently constructed by the socialist and temperance movements as the way in which the oppressed classes or nations were controlled by the dominant classes and/or foreign occupiers. The long history of the state’s monopoly over spirit production – both in pre-socialist and socialist period – meant that there exists 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. 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 black market economy in alcohol in Poland (production, smuggling and sale), meant that alcohol consumption in itself – due to states attempts to control - has been elevated to a political act and seen as an aspect of citizens’ freedom from state control, as a form of civil disobedience. This theme has been discussed in detail by Polish anthropologist Roch Sulima, who writes about anti-systemic potentials in alcohol consumption; 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 dimension of reality and time, thus resisting and contesting the dominant social and economic constraints and power relations in socialist Poland (Sulima 2000).

The accounts of my respondents living rough, along with drinking have similar meanings and are often constructed as anti-systemic acts, an act of resistance against the dominant forces of the modern world. 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, these social practices are performed mainly by men. In fact it is a rarity to find a female being part of these groups, and sometimes men in discussions over the issue stress that women aren’t welcome in these circles, that they 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) notes, 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 its role in society. It is clearly 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. It is crucial to note here that a frequent account of alcohol initiation mentioned in the interviews emphasized the role of the army as the place where ‘man were made’ and large, prolonged alcohol consumption sessions was practiced as a form of initiation 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. The older know how to drink heavily; they taught the young ones…*

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

*It’s all started in the army…*

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 it 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 a commonplace among their drinking-mates, with beatings 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 anthropological perspective this masculine discourse of war and struggle on the streets of London has additional functions – 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 I spoke to for several reasons: it parallels very well with 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).

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 terms groups of people that reproduce and reaffirm egalitarian bonds between men through symbolic means associated with 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, shop lifting, begging and finding things, and dichotomised anti-institutional world view is a functional 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 sets of attitudes explain 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: 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. [NGO worker, West London]. 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. It also helps in explaining why the numbers of homeless Poles have swollen in London in the last few years. For a marginalised group and those that seem not have much to lose this action 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 as often people that took part in this study were suffering from poor health, chronic alcohol-related illnesses, depression, 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.

5. CONCLUSION: HOMO SOVIETICUS REVISITED

The set of norms and values that emphasize the moral worth of anti-institutionalism, ‘beat the system’ attitudes, the functionality of informal connections, bending the formal rules and hostility towards the elites as expressed in a polarized view of the social world has been often described in the literature and popular commentary as essentially a ‘hang over’ from the communist times and an undesirable obstacle on the road to happy modernisation project in Poland and Eastern Europe more generally. Embodied in the notion of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome numerous social scientists in the 90s 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’ or ‘socialist mentality’ which prohibits vast numbers of Poles to internalize 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). This then 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 strongly criticized, most notably by Michal Buchowski who describes it as anti-sociological, a-historical, elitist and laden with ideological undertones. Buchowski points that the tendency of Polish elites and distinguished sociologists, such as Sztompka, to construct the socialist mentality ascribed in 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 also 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. As Buchowski states in the case of the Polish rural class faced with the post-1989 change: 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 notes, *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).

In looking at, and making sense of, 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 they 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. 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. This serves 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. By radical rejection of the institutional ‘system’, homeless Poles remain in a known, tested, and familiar
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...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) as perceived by British scholars in time merge into one and after shorter than longer time on the streets among the community of homeless represent and articulate sets of norms and perceptions described above.

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 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. The violent conflicts (quite often witnessed during fieldwork) 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. What’s crucial, 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 one because of much more deeper, subtle and cultural specific factors. This answers the question posed in the introduction – as we see the growth in numbers has a cumulative effect.
Adding to this picture the increasingly difficult structural conditions on the labour and housing market and public spending cuts affecting provision for homeless it is reasonable to argue that the growth of homelessness among Polish men in London will continue to accumulate over the next years as it did in the last 6 years. The end of transition periods in terms of access to welfare from May 2011 will not solve the problem as due to a functional combination of both structural and cultural determinants homelessness will become an experience shared by more and more Polish migrants. 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 modern capitalist global city raise some crucial questions not only about the nature of social relations in post-communist societies such as Poland but about the wider aspects of migrations from A8 countries to Western Europe and its impact on social relations. It 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 21st 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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