The Polish plumber and the image game

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The Polish plumber is the butt of jokes throughout Europe, and even the Polish tourist board has made use of the cliché. However, in the UK, which until now has not put a limit on the number of work permits for members of new EU member states but will begin to do so for Romanians and Bulgarians, there is a growing resentment towards eastern European economic migrants. For the Poles working in the UK, meanwhile, the market speaks louder than words: for them, migration is a way out of high unemployment and an illiberal political climate at home.

It may be a mark of our imagined sophistication in western Europe that we like to think in terms of fluid images rather than static ones. We seem to prefer movement to stillness, and we take a pretty poor view of images that are too familiar, representations that seem hardened, time-worn, or over-simple. We like to feel that we recognize the preconceived idea, that we have overstepped the stereotype, and that these representations are something we are in a position to deconstruct or explode. Though when one considers discourse about Polish plumbers, Turkish taxi drivers, or Roma travellers, it is tempting to think that we may be deceiving ourselves.

Perhaps our confidence is something to do with the capacity for experimentation in language and expression that modern urban living can offer, its social and cultural mix, its fast-flowing and fractured style - the displacement and connection between worlds. But in cultures where images continue to be revered as windows on something absolute, unchanging, and immovable, this is not quite so. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, for example, icons are venerated as a route to the sacred. In Catholic areas of eastern Europe, visual representations are considered salutary, and are most often expected to be taken at face value. In Hungary, Slovakia, or Poland, images of politicians or cultural heroes are still displayed in schools, offices, and public places. They are supposed to act as reminders of aspiration, identity, and place - though, as I hope to show, this may be changing as the style of international business takes hold. These days, representation is more about marketing and “the market” than about ideology or identity.

Central and eastern European cultures are of course still largely rural. Over one third of
Poland’s population, about 15 million people, live in the countryside where roads are dust tracks and horse drawn carts and ploughs are commonly used. Life is predictably dull and attitudes tend to be conservative, stolidly Catholic, and suspicious of difference or innovation. Yet the countryside has long given and continues to give Poland its core cultural identity. Until the early 1990s, rural people were confined to their villages and parishes, and had little direct voice in public life. But now there is a significant media presence that purports to represent them.

The infamous Catholic radio station Radio Maryja is in many ways the voice of Poland’s hitherto excluded rural population, and a response to the post-communist economic drive that has left so many people struggling. Since 1991, people have been able to have their say on lengthy phone-ins broadcast from Torun, and tune in daily to meditations, prayers, household tips, and views which are coloured by a fundamentalist Catholicism, and sometimes by xenophobia, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. Radio Maryja is variously estimated at having between one and four million listeners. Until quite recently, it was publicized throughout Poland by an unreconstructed image of the young Madonna, displayed on impressively big roadside posters, for example. Today, on its website, the Madonna image is considerably less prominent and comes up as a small medallion again the backcloth of a crowd of banner-waving faithful.

Radio Maryja supporters say that it airs vital social issues and attitudes that would otherwise remain suppressed. That it is an outcry against the immorality of fast-track capitalism. Critics argue that it exploits low levels of education and encourages the growth of divisive, and dangerous, social and political attitudes. Terrorism, for example, generated a remark that “from one point of view, Israel, which destroys all its enemies using the hand of America, is the principal beneficiary”; gay rights have been said to reflect the “rising terror imposed by the homosexual minority”.

Politically speaking, Radio Maryja has been a hugely useful tool for the nationalist-oriented government currently in office and was instrumental in bringing it to power in autumn 2005. The Law and Justice Party won the election unexpectedly on the back of the rural vote and of widespread resentment of the corruption of successive post-communist administrations. Now, all the media set up by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, the founder of Radio Maryja (including a TV station and a daily newspaper), have exclusive rights to official government announcements. The Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers regularly appear on live broadcasts.

But from the perspective of international public relations and the global market, Radio Maryja has been a disaster for Poland – and this matters because Poland is, after all, a free-market democracy within the European Union. Its public image at home and abroad has been associated with a satirical depiction (on Polish television) of cohorts of middle-aged matrons up in arms against loose morals among the young. The supporters and listeners of Radio Maryja have never been able to shake this off. Since then, they have been known as the “mohair berets”: a representation of the devout and the embittered, manufactured in Poland and turned international stereotype.

Images like this, and reports about Radio Maryja’s occasionally outrageous reporting, have done a great deal to brand Poland as stuffy, affirm it as anti-Semitic, and cause anger or irritation, as well as a certain amount of amusement. But they have also raised
questions about the degree of racism in the country, and exposed it to challenge. The stereotype has taken shape and is "out": it has been brought to public attention at home and abroad.

The ramifications of this are quite complicated. It goes without saying that the prospect of an intellectually straitjacketed, repressively racist state in central Europe is deeply troubling. We are not quite there yet, but in April 2005, Marek Edelman, at 87 the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943, wrote an open letter published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, protesting against a broadcast on Radio Maryja alleging that Jewish groups were profiteering from the Holocaust. The letter attracted considerable attention in Poland and abroad, and Edelman’s warning that persecution begins with words that can lead seamlessly to deeds was widely quoted.

And indeed, the day before Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Poland for his first visit in May, the Jewish rabbi Michael Schudrich was attacked with a can of spray in central Warsaw. Members of the Union of Jewish Students also received threatening phone calls. Soon after, a detailed investigative report in the weekly *Polityka* showed that, supported by the political climate, neo-Nazism is growing in Poland and European neo-Nazi groups are training their ranks there: neo-Nazi membership in Poland is thought currently to be around 25 000. There were also disturbing reports that the deputy chief of state television, Piotr Farfal, had published a neo-Nazi magazine calling for the expulsion of Jews from Poland.

The publicity surrounding Radio Maryja and by extension the activities of the Polish far Right raised anxieties and questions over something that might otherwise have been swept under the carpet. “What is happening to Poland’s reputation abroad?” people asked (because where prosperity is in doubt, image is a serious consideration). Even in liberal Polish publications, you are likely to read far less about Jewish issues than about outside allegations of anti-Semitism; less about sexual minorities than about problems of perceived homophobia; less about ethnic minorities than the kindness of Poles towards newcomers struggling with a bureaucratic migration system; less about questions of religious belief than about the moral significance of the Catholic Church and the role it should play in politics.

Every Western allegation of anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, or religious prejudice adds fuel to the fire. It confirms in Polish eyes that nobody understands the historical tragedies, the decades of economic struggle, the vulnerability of Poland’s geographical position, and gives further excuse for the right to claim that Poland is being unfairly targeted from abroad. Was there ever a time in the past 200 years when Poland was not threatened from the outside, people will ask, or ruled by puppet governments, or overrun by foreign incursion? Are the threats to the Polish state really so much less real now than they have been the past?

But this kind of talk, intended to encourage loyalty and patriotic fervour, is being met by an astonishing vote of no confidence in the idea that this state, and the building of it, really matters. There has been a huge exodus from the country by people determined to find the lives they want not in their recently recovered homeland, but elsewhere. And they are staying away, because, they say, they like being in an environment that is less restrictive and more tolerant. Patriotic sensibilities, tenacious as they are, are clearly
very vulnerable to market sensibilities – even in Poland. The lifestyle that is linked to national ideology, as it’s being offered now, is not what people would choose.

This brings me to the Polish plumber and events in France in 2005. The catch-phrase “le plombier polonais” was first used during the run-up to the EU constitution referendum in France by Philippe de Villiers, leader of the Mouvement pour la France, and the “no” camp. The plumber was a symbol of cheap labour arriving from central Europe. He symbolized a challenge to Western societies because he was a migrant – therefore uncivilized, inferior, and a threat to the national lifestyle – and because he was exploiting the liberalization of the EU market, making money, and taking work away from his hosts.

The phrase got picked up by politicians and journalists throughout Europe and was used on both sides of the political debate. The Swiss Socialist Party used the slogan “Plombiers de tous pays unissses vous” in its campaign in favour of the free circulation of people in Europe; Pascal Lamy, the French head of the World Trade Organization reportedly denounced “plumber phobia” for twisting the debate of Europe’s future; and there was even talk in the French Socialist camp of building a statue in honour of the Polish plumber.

But, interestingly, it didn’t end there. In June 2005 the Polish Tourist Board came up with a response to all the rhetoric with its own image of the Polish plumber as a hunky, young, Californian beach boy with bulging biceps flanked by images of the Tatra mountains. The caption went, “I’m staying in Poland, come one and all”.

This proved to be the highest profile advertising gimmick ever for Poland, generating a huge media response worldwide and subsequently hopes that as the number of foreign visitors goes up, Poland may gain a sorely needed reputation as a good-times destination for the young and the lively. And it called into question the image of a dreary, grey, crime-infested kill-joy of a post-Soviet state known for sausage, vodka, the late Pope, and of course Mohair berets. Here was a new sexed-up Poland with lots to offer, inviting everyone to come and see.

Market-driven representations like this one are all about what people want – this is what makes advertising campaigns, of course. Journalism, on the other hand, seems to prefer representations that are more anxiety driven, more about what people find outrageous and frightening. There is an obvious dichotomy or tension between the images of an international business market that is out to galvanize, encourage activity and movement, and the representations of a national discourse that seeks to curtail movement and maintain the status quo.

Take this example from Britain’s Daily Mail: “Unemployment is up to is highest level in six years as thousands of workers arrive from eastern Europe at a rate of 250 000 a month. In April and June, 701 000 visitors from Poland and seven other EU countries arrived.” [1]

Or this excerpt from the Guardian: “British lives are wasted in offices, leaving only a couple of hours each day for us to call free, even if they are spent on journeys to and from the workplace, frequently with one’s nose pressed into the unwashed underarm of someone speaking Polish.” [2]
But the migration market has a voice too, powerful enough for it to resist media attack with considerable confidence. The liberalization of movement in the EU has created a very active immigration industry comprised of media, as well as lawyers, travel agents, fixers, restaurateurs, and job brokers who sustain links between the country of origin and the country of destination. In addition to a daily paper in Polish which has appeared in London since the end of the Second World War, Britain now has a number of weekly magazines published in Polish, each with a circulation of about 20,000, sometimes more. One is a freebie called Cooltura (Kultura was the name of a highbrow Polish journal published in Paris during the Cold War). Another new glossy, selling at a pound and published in Polish and English, plays on cultural memory in a similar way with its name “HEY-NOW” (Hejnal in Polish refers to the hourly trumpet call from St Mary’s Basilica in the Old Market Square in Cracow – a cultural equivalent, if you will, to the chimes of Big Ben). Most of these started up on the back of immigration advice offices which, in 2004, turned into business consultancies, keeping the newspaper on as part of the business or as a main advertising partner. The papers provide all the information previously only available through informal networks to help visitors settle in: you can find out how to go about getting a job, finding the right course, how to claim benefit, use your Trade Union membership, lobby your local politician, and get a sense of what the British public may feel about you. You’re also given a quick and user-friendly glimpse of what’s happening back home from a more lively and liberal perspective than you would be likely to get in Poland. The mood of these papers is openly market-driven, they encourage people to go get, while giving warnings about obvious pitfalls and dangers. They are overtly part of the migration business that builds up chains and social networks that expand into transnational communities, making migration less costly and risky and building up the momentum of movement.

This is where business comes into direct conflict with sensibilities linked to a desire for security and stability. In Britain, a study at the Centre on Migration Policy and Society, University of Oxford, has shown that negative feelings about migration are growing. [3] The majority sentiment is that movement in is out of control, there are too many newcomers, and they get too much help. Immigration is an issue at the forefront of people’s minds though public knowledge about it is very limited. (One MORI poll suggested for example that according to estimates made by the public, the UK hosts 23 per cent of the world’s asylum seekers. The figure is in fact under 2 per cent.) There is also confusion about the different groups of migrants and why they might want to be here, which suggests that public anxiety may be emerging from the character of the public discourse promoted by politicians, policy makers, and particularly journalists – who set the terms in which public debate occurs. Negative attitudes may be associated less with social impacts than with perceived impacts. The Oxford survey suggests, for example, that there is evidence that attitudes to immigration are becoming more negative among those educated to degree level – that is to say: readers.

Recent warnings from the rightwing watchdog organization Migration Watch on the BBC that “profound changes are bound to occur in British society […] specially in the poorest areas” if present rates of migration continue, or from Slough Borough Council [London district authority – ed.] that social cohesion is being jeopardized were unlikely to go unheeded. Nor have they been. It was recently announced that limits will be imposed on the number of work permits given to Bulgarians and Romanians entering Britain when these two countries join the EU in January 2007. But this was preceded by months of
warnings in the media that on New Year’s day 30 million people would have the right to come and work here; that “the homeless would cause havoc on Britain’s streets”; that there were already more than one million eastern European workers in the UK; and that one million Moldovans had already obtained Romanian or Bulgarian passports in order to move freely around the UK. Unscrupulous recruitment agencies were said to be luring people over to Britain and abandoning them in low-paid jobs and overcrowded accommodation. “You can’t get a quart into a pint pot”, said the media: the public services simply couldn’t, or wouldn’t be able to, cope.

The debate was conducted very largely in terms that suggested that the UK was dealing exclusively with “a new underclass” prepared to work “for a pittance” (as Sir Andrew Green of Migration Watch put it [4]), and in a language where different groups were often conflated and statistics used very loosely. A recent BBC report on Romania referred throughout to Roma, but not once to Romanians. Figures on migrants who have come to the UK since May 2005, usually described as “eastern European, mainly Polish”, range from 329 000 to 600 000.

For the Poles who are already in the UK, this kind of press representation isn’t exactly water off a duck’s back – but the market still speaks louder than words. Many may be pleased that from January they will not be competing for jobs with as many other eastern Europeans as they had feared. But for Polish plumbers, doctors, interpreters, biochemists, and builders, the conflict isn’t just between the forces of British social or national protectionism and the freedom to work. Migrant Poles also have to contend with the psychological pull of their own nationalism and self-image as workers from a country where, until recently, to be an expatriate and yet stay respectable you had to call yourself an émigré.

In Polish national mythology, the migrant is either a political refugee cum resistance fighter, a Battle of Britain pilot, or a Solidarity dissident. One must bear in mind that Polish literary culture is mainly founded on nineteenth-century classics written in exile: Adam Mickiewicz’s narrative poem Pan Tadeusz is probably the best known example, though there were many more. The Polish sense of ethnic identity was largely constructed around the biographies of men who lived and died abroad.

In the more recent past, after the Second World War, Polish refugees from the Nazi occupation and then from Soviet Communism had to cope with a residue of myth that imposed on them a burden of nostalgia and a moral imperative of self-sacrifice. Together with this, there was an implicit suspicion of anyone who made good, because in doing so they must have abandoned their patriotic duty.

What is particularly intriguing about this is that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, about 12 million people left Poland for reasons that were predominantly economic. They were farmers, miners, and bricklayers and they went everywhere – though many ended up in the United States. But in Polish historical discourse these people are mostly overlooked.

One thing that the Polish plumber has achieved (in each of his two guises – as migrant underdog and as media star) is to ensure that this is not the case any more. The Polish economic migrant is no longer out of the picture. It may come as no surprise then that
the people who have complained loudest at times about the arrival of the new migrants in Britain are the older migrants, the “émigrés”, the people who formed successive governments in exile in London before 1989, or the Second World War pilots who flew with the RAF.

Interesting then that after the 7 July tragedies in London last year, the Polish Tourist Office in the UK chose to come up with a poster showing a WWII pilot bearing the phrase: “Londoners, we are with you again”. It looked at the time very much like an attempt to try and counter the image of London Poles as the fixers of leaking pipes, and reminded people of a historical bond. But ironically enough it turned out that the pilot in the poster was an Englishman with no particular connection to Poland. Once that was out in the open, the campaign was speedily dropped.

This somewhat misguided effort to transport to the UK the cherished representation of the Pole as gallant defender of the righteous falls in line with the Polish government’s current attempts to create a more effective network between its citizens at home and those who are away. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, over one third of the Polish population is living abroad. Up to two million people have left to work outside Poland since the expansion of the EU in May 2004. With an unemployment rate of 18 per cent (reported to be 40 per cent among the young), it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of those leaving are under 35. In Lower Silesia 10 per cent of doctors and 25 per cent of anaesthetists have gone and the alarm bells are ringing.

The city of Wroclaw in Lower Silesia has launched a poster campaign in Polish clubs and pubs in London appealing for people to return. Similar campaigns have been started in Poland, companies are being encouraged to employ the young and it was reported recently that a series of payouts of 5000 pounds (about 10 months’ pay) was made to 100 scientists and researchers to persuade them to stay put.

Clearly the Polish government’s promises of a “civilizational leap”, and talk of offering moral leadership to Europe has left a large proportion of the population unmoved. But bizarre ideas which link notions of betrayal, anti-Catholicism, Jewishness, liberalism, accumulated capital, and communism are in the mainstream and, as elsewhere in Europe, racism appears to be on the up. The anti-fascist monitoring organization Nigdy Wiecej (Never Again) in Warsaw noted 247 racist incidents in late 2005 and early 2006. Many of these were reportedly violent.

Yet xenophobia, fear of strangers, and wariness of guests is something Poland also knows that it cannot afford. It has a tradition of hospitality and generosity to visitors that newcomers can find puzzling and overwhelming. And in a free labour market guests are not just an inevitability, they are a necessity. The Polish plumber as media star knows this. He extends an open invitation.

Now that so many Poles have left home, people from struggling economies further east, Ukraine for example, are appearing in towns like Wroclaw to take the jobs that Poles are doing in London. But in a state that cannot escape the memory of being repeatedly carved up, the anxiety is that somehow these guests, whether they are low-grade workers or big-business investors, will take over what little there is; that they will undermine an identity, an image and personality that exists in an imagined world, but isn’t quite yet
formed in the material one.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to cite a paragraph from an article written recently by Andrzej Stasiuk, published in the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny. [5] It is an excerpt that conveys the Polish, and perhaps more broadly the eastern European, preoccupation not with the protection of lifestyles and existing welfare provisions (that is the prerogative of advanced economies) but with fear of disappearance, an anxiety that is really, in the end, about non-representation and non-being.

In this part of the European continent the great movement of peoples goes on [...] None of us are on our own ground here, so we construct complicated laws of ownership that merge into history and legend. We look towards the horizon, waiting for an attack that will deprive us of all that we have gathered in life. Unconsciously we anticipate the riders, the hoof-beat, the screams, and the flames. Though today we are threatened by something more global, richer, poorer, more civilized, less civilized, something at any rate “different” and “alien”. It nourishes our fear, and we need constant evidence of our own existence. We examine ourselves anxiously in the eyes of others. We are afraid we may be invisible.

This article is based on a contribution to the panel discussion “Mirror writing. Reflections of cultural reality”, which took place at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in London from 27-30 October 2006.

Footnotes


2. Simon Burnton, "Onomatopoeia should be the name of the game", The Guardian, 29.07.2006.


4. Andrew Green, "Yes, we love Polish plumbers, but how many more does Britain need?", Daily Mail, 10.02.2006.

5. Andrzej Stasiuk, "W Cieniu" [In the Shade], Tygodnik Powszechny, 11.06.2006.

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