Developing an ‘inside-out’ approach

A transnational sociology of sending countries

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Now I’m trying to make my [women] friends into rebels – don’t be scared, just go ahead and do it! If I can change anything it will be in my own environment, among people near me. You couldn’t on a big scale like the whole city . . . I try to show my friends that there is a different way of looking at things, a different way to live, and you can be more open and assert your own rights.

Lucyna, return migrant from Ireland living in Wrocław, 2016

This final chapter reflects briefly on our experience of developing an inside-out approach to understand the impact of migration on sending countries, combining qualitative and quantitative data. We have argued throughout the book that Polish society, and therefore Polish social change, can only be understood with reference to Polish stayers’ links to Poles living abroad. Our puzzle, however, was to understand how those small individual links could connect to wider processes of change occurring throughout society.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011, 3) pose this puzzle in terms of how social remittances ‘scale up’ to ‘influence regional and national changes’. Their question, with its focus on change starting at the local level, runs counter to the assumptions of policymakers who wish to ‘harness the diaspora’ (see chapter 3) and organise migrants, particularly business elites, to provide change top-down. Taking a lead from Levitt, our book has investigated the process of grassroots social remitting in detail, especially in chapter 4. We have shown how social remittances could ripple out from migrant to stayer and then from stayer to stayer, particularly if there is a sense of reciprocity,
when recipients of new ideas give something in exchange. Non-migrants should feel that they are making contributions of their own, and that the sending country has something to give to the receiving society, as well as vice versa. Previous scholars have understood that ‘circularity’ is important in social remitting, but often without finding evidence; we were able to find examples in our research of how a consciousness of reciprocity makes social remittances more acceptable in the particular domain where social remitting takes place, be it family, workplace or local community. However, social remittances are not identical to their twins – economic remittances. In most cases it is unrealistic to try to track them very far. Moreover, the social impact of migration includes many indirect influences (e.g. various gender equality impacts documented in our book), which cannot helpfully be labelled social remittances.

Therefore, instead of seeing influence as proceeding ‘up’ or ‘down’, we adopted a third approach and investigated how migration sat side-by-side with other determinants of change. This seemed a more helpful way of viewing the relationship. We applied an inside-out approach and mapped different social and economic trends occurring inside Polish society before looking ‘out’ across international borders to consider how migration might be contributing to those trends. We also considered the various other, non-migration influences that might be at play. Sometimes it seemed possible only to say that migration was one of various factors. However, in writing the book, we became more conscious of how migration influences might be conceptualised relative to other determinants of change.

We identified three relevant aspects of the relationship between migration and social change. The first aspect is the social and geographical location of change: we have been interested in those particular places where migration influences are more important, vis-à-vis other factors, as influences for change. In particular, we showed examples of migration leading to changes in views and behaviour among people without higher education and/or living in small towns and villages. The second aspect is the type of factor causing change. For example, in many cases of social change, migration influences can be categorised as supply-side or demand-side factors. This helps us see how they back up other supply-side or demand-side factors. For instance, returning to the first trend presented in this book, the theme of migrants’ relatives learning English, migration creates an additional demand for English-language courses in Poland. Table 7.3 presents this idea as a diagram; it would have been possible to organise the content of other chapters into similar tables.
The third aspect to consider is whether migration influences push forward or hold back the tempo of change that is already happening for other reasons. Migration clearly helps add to the number of Poles who are confident in foreign languages, so it accelerates that particular trend. In other areas, change in a particular direction can seem surprisingly slow, for example rising levels of generalised trust. It seems that migration is a factor pulling in the reverse direction, diminishing trust in strangers among some sections of Polish society.

Since our aspiration was particularly to identify migration’s contribution to the most significant overall changes taking place in Poland as a post-communist society, it was important to begin by having a good overview of change in our sending country. We have argued that Polish society is becoming more open and equal, although we know that both claims, especially the former, will raise some eyebrows. We have justified our claim with detailed evidence from the publicly available and well-respected CBOS and Social Diagnosis (Diagnoza Społeczna) surveys. It is important to possess such data, given that more displays of intolerance on the streets and the Internet in Poland in recent years have led to a great deal of liberal pessimism.

However, survey evidence is always superficial and imperfect; tolerance and equality are both multidimensional phenomena; and there also exist counter-trends. We have tried not to see change as simple and unidirectional, and especially not to fall into the trap of viewing change as a catching-up process with Western countries, which themselves exhibit plenty of inequality and intolerance. Other than in chapter 5 (on the labour market) we have also tried not to make normative statements, although it proved impossible to ignore the normativity of others and, especially in chapter 6, we do distance ourselves from certain migration myths. Analysis is not usually helped by claims that things are good or bad. However, having provided our analysis, we hope policymakers can use some of our evidence. It should be of interest on different levels: EU, national, regional and local.

In order to map social change in Poland, the first step in our inside-out approach, we had the advantage of being able to consult extensive publicly available survey data, as well as some quantitative data from our own projects. This was essential, but our attempts to mix migration research with mainstream sociology would have been much easier if there had been more overlap between the two disciplines in the past. One of our main arguments is that, in order to understand the impact of migration on Country X, migration scholars and mainstream sociologists need to
collaborate. Data about the migration experience of survey respondents could helpfully be included in social surveys on every topic, alongside age, sex and so on. Qualitative sociologists could also be more alert to the fact that their research subjects live in transnational social fields and, when they investigate specific areas of social change, keep an eye open for any migration influences.

In our project, we enjoyed the advantage of being able to rely on a large body of Polish migration scholarship, both quantitative and qualitative. This is a blossoming field of migration research. Before we began, we knew a great deal from other researchers’ and our own findings about the transnational social space encompassing Poland and other European countries. This made it easier to conceptualise how migration influences occur, and to explore our interviewees’ transnational fields. Since social change is a mutual process between Poland and Polish society abroad, understanding the contours of society abroad (particularly in some countries, notably the United Kingdom, Ireland and Norway, and to a lesser extent Belgium and Iceland) was essential.

Because of overlapping content, in practice it was sometimes difficult to decide which information should be placed in chapter 9 (‘Polish society abroad’) and which in earlier chapters. However, the two-pronged approach was essential, more particularly because it enhanced our ability to bring into play the receiving country scholarship on diversity and cosmopolitanism. Without this literature on the impact of migration on receiving societies, and the emerging literature on social remittances circulating between countries with regard to attitudes to diversity, it would have been harder to apply an inside-out approach and analyse how migration might be contributing to trends towards more openness in Poland (insofar as this process is taking place).

We hope that our research can be replicated and extended in other countries with a great deal of migration, such as Romania or Lithuania, or even countries outside the post-communist region; this depends on the availability of a sufficient body of migration and sociological literature on interrelated themes. There is scope for many small-scale studies of individual places and different types of change, but also for large countrywide studies with multiple fieldwork sites. Ideally, these would be long-term anthropological studies, allowing the researchers to see those connections between migration and change in everyday life that might not be consciously realised by local people, and that they would be unlikely to mention when interviewed by a visiting sociologist.

There are also many additional aspects of change in Poland that we hope can be covered in future research and that we did not have time or
space to cover thoroughly here – even though we found evidence of various migration influences. We particularly regret being unable to explore in greater detail topics such as civil society, education, popular culture, changing fashions in given names and English-language influences on Polish. We would also have liked to have compared more systematically different Polish regions, cities and towns.

Finally, as noted at the beginning and end of chapter 2, our book has been about society in change, not how society has or was changed. Given that we have no adequate temporal perspective on our subject matter, we do not make any predictions about the shape of change in the future. We hope that mobility-driven change will continue to happen and that the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU will not constitute such a watershed that after 2019 it will be possible to look back with hindsight at 2004–19 as a well-defined time of mobility-induced change – change that we will soon be able to assess from a sufficiently removed perspective. Mobility will presumably continue unchecked between Poland and continental Europe. However, even here the nature of social change wrought by migration is likely to evolve. As that generation of Poles who moved and settled in western Europe after 2004 grows older, and as these first-generation migrants increasingly have children and grandchildren born abroad, the transnational social space will inevitably be transformed. Longitudinal research will therefore be essential in order to understand the EU as an evolving ‘laboratory of migration’.