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COST Action IS0803 Working Paper

‘New Others: Identity Construction and Transnational Belonging Among Latvian Migrants to Guernsey’

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This paper was first presented at: **WG2 Travel, Exchanges, Translations**
On: **14-15 May, 2010**
Location: **Sofia, Bulgaria**
Keywords: **Latvia, Guernsey, gated space, migration**
Disciplines: **anthropology, human geography**

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“A heady mix of stunning scenery and the best of contemporary living, Guernsey is the perfect destination. Inspiring walks along the cliff paths, rambles through the rural interior or lazy days on the island’s beautiful beaches, Guernsey has it all.”

The above quote is an enticing promise from the main tourism website of Guernsey. However, while the Channel Island of Guernsey has much to offer tourists, those who come to the island as migrant workers, often to service the needs of these tourists, experience a rather different vista. The popular encyclopaedia Wikipedia entry for Guernsey (2010) briefly mentions that one of the biggest ethnic communities on the island is Latvian. Guernsey, along with Ireland, has been among the first and most popular places for Latvians to search for work abroad since mid 1990s. This article asks why it is that Latvians go to work in Guernsey and how they construct belonging to different places.

The paper is therefore an exploration of two places² – Guernsey and Latvia – and even more, to a space ‘in-between’ that is experienced by people both navigating and constituting this transnational space, and in the process, living through a complex social change. The analysis takes a qualitative, interpretative perspective and is based on participant observation and 30 ethnographic in-depth interviews in Guernsey and Latvia conducted between January – March 2010³. Eighteen interviews were audio recorded with permission of informants, while others were conducted without tape recorder but notes were taken during the interviews. Interviews lasted between one to four and half hours and the recorded interviews were fully transcribed, marking also silences, pauses, crying and laughing. Interviews were conducted either in hotels,

¹ The paper has been presented at the conference Identity and ‘the Other British Isles’, University of Huddersfield, 23-25 June 2010

² Most broadly, hereafter I use ‘place’ as a term for a space (social space) of social interaction, whereas ‘space’ is used as more abstract and conceptual. (Lefebvre, [1974]1991 [1992], 2004, Soja, 1996, Cresswell, 2004)

³ Author’s PhD research in progress, scheduled for 2009-2011. In this paper data from the first phase of the fieldwork are presented.

cafeterias or at informants' places of residence. In addition, a researcher's diary was kept during the fieldwork (January, 2010), and other sources such as press and official documents were analysed. Informants were accessed by the 'snow-ball' method of sampling, initially establishing few contacts through the Latvian social network website www.draugiem.lv ('For friends') and developing these contacts through the informants' social networks. Some key informants were contacted on several occasions either by phone or internet, and correspondence was continued throughout the fieldwork. All transcripts and notes were reviewed and compared to find conjoined social meaning, interrelated themes and contexts (Ellen, 2003).

Past and future merge and overlap in narratives about life in Latvia and Guernsey, and the making and re-making of the self blends with stories about family, friends, community, political and geographical positioning in both places. It is an ongoing transnational process constituting the 'European' space as a conceptual map, which reorders social life of individual migrants and comprises their understanding of how physical and cultural processes are intertwined in and through the separate places where they live (Wilson and Donnan, 1998). A significant literature now exists (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991; [1992], 2004, Giddens, 1984; May and Trift, 2001, Cresswell, 2004,) which explains space as *process*, rather than a bounded entity. May and Trift (2001) argue that time and space cannot be separated – space has an existential temporal dimension - there is never a space without time.

Guernsey in 1990s was expanding its production under the privileged taxation regime and while Latvia in 1990's, was striving to "return to Europe." These two spatio-temporal worlds and their connective threads of episodic passage and return, suggest the radically uneven quality of social time in Latvia and Guernsey. These dialectical time-space relations between migrants' perceptions of space and political and economic conditions are central to this analysis.

Opening Guernsey for Latvians

Migration from Latvia to started in mid-1990's, when Latvia, which had recently established its independence from the Soviet Union, embarked upon its journey towards accession to the EU. The offshore islands called the Channel Islands, as territorial dependencies of the British Crown, yet a part of the neither EU nor European Economic area, are themselves worthy of research as 'a world within a world.'

Even more, Russell King (2009) underlines in his recent work on the global significance of islands for migration studies. The Channel Islands are endowed with a critical location in

geopolitics – located off the Northern coast of France – with their unique status as direct dependencies of the British Crown, but maintaining their own legislative, monetary and taxation systems, together with their own parliaments and a Governor appointed by the British Crown. So also in the specific ‘island’ character of the organisation of their economies, they are particularly dense fieldwork sites of current migration research. Guernsey – an island in size of 78 square kilometres and with around 62 thousand inhabitants (Policy Council, 2010) - is a naturally bounded place, but it is also a shifting and rapidly changing social space. These contrasts allow us to interrogate processes that would otherwise be taken for granted in more ‘regular’ defined territorial contexts.

Any island, surrounded by waters is subjected to specific preconditions, different from those of mainland territories. The authorities of Guernsey primarily portray the island as a uniquely endowed natural place, as a geographically bounded entity which is not made from an ‘elastic band’ and cannot shelter more people than it ‘naturally’ can. This exclusionary notion of ‘the island’ as an identity, underpins regulations governing housing and therefore access to residency. This itself is in constant tension with the notion of the island as a socially produced space -- greatly elastic, in constant motion in terms of migration flows and its economic positionality as an offshore zone requiring migrant ‘man power’ to maintain its productivity in its various economic sectors.

Furthermore, changes in different localities should be always seen in relation to other spaces: in mid-1990’s Guernsey’s employers were seeking migrant labour from their previous source, the Island of Madeira which was rapidly growing into a tourism destination and could not provide the sufficient number of workers. Employers therefore decided to seek and establish contacts with another source country. And there it was -- Latvia, a new ‘returnee’ to Europe. The statement of one such employer neatly sums this up:

Q: I wonder how did your company choose to recruit Latvians?

Interviewee: Basically, in that time, in 1997 (...) our managing director, he spoke to people here and in the UK, and he also did go out to Latvia, I think a couple of countries were suggested. You know, we started talking and somebody suggested: “Latvia, good workers!” And then we went to an agency and started working with them. And we found that Latvians are good workers and there are no problems with them. In a way it was a bit

of luck because after Madeira it was a first country we tried. It just worked out, you know.”

At the beginning, migration to Guernsey was organised by the Latvian State Employment Agency and soon after, the service was outsourced to a private employment recruiter. Informants often stressed that there were some mysterious criteria, especially after applying repeatedly for a position, whereby a person’s work and private performance was assessed. Any applicant could end up on a blacklist and be excluded from returning. But formally, during the initial years, candidates were chosen if they had either training in agriculture or experience in related work.

In mid-1990s initially only women were recruited to work in the horticulture sector while other areas of employment, such as the hospitality and service sectors, were gradually opened up for both men and women around the year 2000. Latvians, along with Portuguese, form possibly the largest ethnic groups of migrants in Guernsey. More precise quantitative data could be available from the census scheduled for 2011 but it is believed that there could have been around five to eight thousand Latvians in Guernsey in 2007. The numbers have declined in the past few years, but started climbing again in 2010 under the severe impact of recession in Latvia. The length of a stay in Guernsey varies considerably; some migrants come for fixed periods (nine months or up to five years, according to a housing licence and work permit received, while some come for only one to three months. Many are travelling back and forth in a continuous transnational shuttle. The only official information, obtained from the Social Security department of the States? of Guernsey, suggests that “in 2007, 706 Latvian workers are believed to have arrived in Guernsey, which included around 350 who had work in Guernsey previously. Many of these workers will now have left the island” (email correspondence on 20th April, 2010). This rather small official number is mainly related to the means by which Latvians were recruited and the sectors in which they were employed, mainly agriculture, tourism and services. Besides, most of migrant people have several part-time jobs: for example, one informant Maija, works full-time in a managerial position in a department store, but in early mornings, late nights and weekends cleans houses and also works in a restaurant. However, there is also a space for temporary ‘undocumented’ labour for short period of stay.

Due to lack of data it is impossible to provide quantitative evidences also from Latvia: one of the most comprehensive research on recent geographical mobility in Latvia (Krišjāne *et al*, 2007) assessed that all together about 86 thousand of Latvia’s inhabitants were working abroad in 2006 and 9% of respondents had longer or shorter experience of work abroad. The main destinations of recent migration were Great Britain and Ireland, but there were no specific

questions asked about the Channel Islands as destination countries. Other research (Hazans and Kaia, 2009) about migration from the Baltic states assessed that about 76 thousand of Latvia's inhabitants have worked in the Great Britain during 2004-2008. Data from the Bank of Latvia (2010) on remittances' assessment showed that around a half of whole migrant remittances (in average 210 million lats/244 million GBP per annum came from the Great Britain (113 million lats/131.5 million GBP, respectively). It is assumed that in average a half of British minimum wage is sent back to Latvia, whereas other half is spent for migrant's own daily expenses. All together migrant remittances in Latvia could reach 1-2% of Latvia's gross domestic product (ibid).

The constant shifting of people in time and spaces does not allow precise statistical figures to be presented. By contrast, Latvians themselves believe their numbers to be larger, related perhaps to the constant shifting of people creating a multiform 'imagined community' (Anderson, [1983], 2006). From a different perspective – the official non-acknowledgement of the scope of migration sustains the perceived social order of the island community as a naturally bounded place, and in other words, maintains a strategic invisibility of the temporary others.

Statistics (and lack of it) should be interpreted as the outcome of the social process (Barbesino, 1998). However, a deeper empirical and theoretical debate on this matter is beyond the scope of the article.

Islanders by chance

In most of the interviews, when asked about their lives and how they decided to come to Guernsey, informants stressed that they had not heard about Guernsey before, and in truth, they could not even locate it on a map. "I wanted to go abroad to earn money," was the most typical answer. It was an 'x space' somewhere in Europe. 'Going abroad' was a recognition of possibilities; an opportunity to compress a journey in a person's own way 'back to Europe'. Lefebvre calls this a revelation of the totality of possibilities contained in daily existence and a radical recognition of new opportunities (Lefebvre, 1991: 11). This moment is spatially temporal, where temporality is conceptualised as boundaries in time and space provides the anchor which is pulled up or dropped for temporal and temporary fixity in geographical location. The decision to go abroad was very often narrated as the *moment* in one's life, exactly a spatial-temporal moment of transition in a person's life stage and life cycle, and in the current context, simultaneously closely embedded in the spatial-temporal evolution of the nation's life.

The very fact that many Latvian migrants went to an unknown place to them, itself is manifesting a peculiar and significant feature of geographical imagination and positionality on the West and East axis. Europe was a trajectory valid in itself and it was not that important to know a specific geographical place. Yet, 'the island' as a specific place and climate often plays an important role and was often narrated as exotic, which gives additional value to the journey of a labour migrant. The exclusiveness of the island was both a selling point for recruiters and dream-making for potential workers. "I was tired of life in Latvia and wanted to have some changes. My friend sent a video with tidal waves in Guernsey. I thought how great it would be to live there for a while," Elga, who was interpreter in Latvia, fluent in five languages, recalled her decision to apply for a work in a hotel in Guernsey. In words of another informant Inta, narrating her three months break in Latvia in April - June: "I was blessed. I had two springs in a one year." The value of the island increases further as it is a place where once can practice and improve English language, a global currency to be exchanged in an unspecified future either back in Latvia or in another place.

There were often very pragmatic reasons why the place was chosen: there was a recruitment agency having a contract with an employer in Guernsey, and this employer was ready to pay for a flight allowing deductions from salary earned in Guernsey. Zinta, who first went to Guernsey in 2000, tells her story:

"I heard gossips around me that people go abroad and earn the money somehow. I was searching for that kind of job, and I called to a state recruitment agency and I was told to call a company x. Two options were proposed – Ireland and Guernsey. Lack of money was a reason I chose Guernsey because this contract promised to pay for the plane ticket. A ticket to Ireland cost me four months income and I did not have such a big money. I even borrowed to be able to pay to the recruiter."

The socioeconomic context of post-Soviet society helps to explain the quote: the Soviet economy was an economy of shortages and in order to get a 'deficit' commodity or service, one should obtain knowledge, cultivate informal networks and listen carefully as to where and when it could be possible to get something.

It is worth noting, that information about a post-soviet deficit – an opportunity to work abroad -- was targeted to wanted short-term migrants who would accept 'the Guernsey package'. It included both opportunity to work and earn money, and specific rules, such as restricted period of stay on the island. In addition, a further limiting restriction was the practice of issuing housing and work permits to a single working person while there was little inducement to overstay as

there were almost non-existing social allowances. Such practices are convenient for employers and in this sense are similar to a liminal space on the US-Mexico border (Chavez, 1991; 1992, cited in Donnan and Wilson, 1998: 107-113) and to guestworker programmes in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s: instead of a full human being, an employer receives a productive worker, whose reproductive side (including growing up, schooling, sickness, child-raising and retirement) is left at the other side of the border. The worker is aware of these rules and in the guestworker situation in Europe historically and, as revealed in Guernsey, liminality is constructed as shared expectations on both sides -- employers and employees -- that guestworkers will leave after the work is completed. These and other regulations were not seen as unacceptable however by the most of the Latvian informants. On the contrary, they fitted to people's construction of their life project – to go for a work for a short period of time, and reach the target of cash they wanted to earn, then come back to Latvia to fulfil their dream in terms of buying a property or some other expensive purchases previously beyond their reach.

The transnational interlude was in reality perceived as 'time off' from the 'real life' in Latvia, less financially rewarding but ultimately the location of their habitus. It had been a dream to be able to cross the borders thereby simultaneously creating the pathway of return – but a return of different selves – richer, in a better social position in their own eyes and those of others. In that sense, the 'return' to Europe was a strategic and provisional mobility, actually a vehicle for its opposite – a 'return' to Latvia. The period of work abroad offered rewards in a compressed time calculation, hastening the achievement of broader life-goals which could not be realised within Latvia but would ultimately be enjoyed there. In the typical words of informants: "I could earn in one week in Guernsey what I earned in a month in Latvia".

However, it would be incomplete to explain the decision to work abroad solely in terms of economic reasons. Migration allows individuals to go through many experiences and shift biological, linear and social time. Motivation for migration was equally an inner urge to become a 'different' person. Thus, accounts are typically embedded in other contexts -- feelings of being out of place in a rapidly changing society-- changes in family and work life circumstances were surging within the individual until they reached the moment of final decision. Relocation is a radical strategy to find a new self, and confirms intentions to become a different person. As Liene, who turned forty when she first came to the island in 2000, said: "I felt old and useless in Latvia but here no one cares how old the waitress is as long as she carries out her duties."

Disgraced working class

In general, Latvian recent history is that of radical unevenness of the rhythm of its institutional time – periods of social turbulence and accelerated ‘catching-up’ with Europe have replaced the previous steadiness of the nation’s pulse: in the late 19th century Latvia rapidly passed through the phases of archaic, traditional peasant culture to an industrial revolution and modern culture at the beginning of the 20th century, a process which took several hundreds of years in many other now Western cultures (Vike-Freiberga, 2010: 22). Besides, Latvia was an independent state for only twenty-two years between the two World Wars. Only one generation experienced what it meant to build wealth in their own country and the hope that their investments would bear fruit in the future. The Soviet period, which followed for half a century after the Second World War, replaced the brief interlude of independent statehood. The previously growing middle class with its entrepreneurial individualism was fragmented and replaced by a state ideology based on celebration of the collectivism of the working class -- the core of the Soviet class structure.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the geopolitical repositioning of Latvia as a former Soviet republic entailed the aspiration to ‘return to Europe’, itself is an example of liminality. Contingently, the ideology of collective progress was expurgated in favour of one of radical individualism as the route to material success. Liberalism in the sense of celebration of the free market, which can be found in most of the post-socialist countries emphasised individual success as the measure of social worth and “the very term ‘working class’ became disgraced and discredited” (Balockaite, 2009: 16 cited in Woolfson, 2010) This is also one of the main reasons why the post-socialist period has been characterised by a loss of trust in political leaders (Verderey, 1996). In these newly independent democracies, society and the state are seen in constant opposition to one another. These tensions between idealised ‘non-class’ representations of the new post-socialist nation and the lived experience of the excluded majority also leads to out-migration, as a powerful way to assert the voice of discontent in society where a majority was left voiceless (Woolfson, 2010). Yet, neoliberal agents and structures were not only abstract or unavoidable external sources of intervention and societal reconfiguration. It was also Latvia’s own elites who wished to compress the time -- to catch up with Europe in a shorter time. Subscribing to the neoliberal re-ordering of state and society was seen as a way of purchasing a ticket on this fast train to Europe. The most significant drivers of the fast GDP growth in mid-2000s, rather than investment in productive enterprises was mainly based on consumption and mortgage loans. Many Latvian migrant workers searched for employment abroad because they

had to pay back mortgage loans at home. For those ordinary Latvian people, Guernsey was a geographical timespace in which to pursue their strategy to become European.

Everyday rhythms in Guernsey

The presence of a highly mobile Latvian community in Guernsey can be perceived as process of permanent temporality (Bailey, 2002) – Guernsey housing and work permit laws stipulate constant change-out of migrants. This temporal space of Latvians in Guernsey has been constituted over the time and is always remembered as it was from the beginning, revealing a price which has been paid to enter into the island, and yet a space for themselves individually and Latvians as a social group to carve out a better future. Memories, of how a person came to Guernsey were often presented as leading to strictly defined spaces and roles in the island's society. Such memories could be of six to eight women sharing a small room with bunk beds, of being locked by a supervisor at 11 pm in their hotels, and of working the entire nine months without a holiday. Even nowadays in hotels, which are mainly serviced by Latvian workers, posters written and signed by an employer (and translated into Latvian) are visual reminders of a disciplining control over these somewhat 'uncivilised' workers. However, in most of informants' narratives this experience is portrayed as rather exotic, and one's 'luck' is constantly contrasted to the perceived socioeconomic position of Latvians who remain in Latvia. As an imagined community, Latvian migrants belong together in fragile solidarity, yet the unifying element is resentment towards the own state, Latvia, which has made its own people exiles in pursuit of a dream, and at the same time perhaps, the uniquely non-passive victims of its neoliberal turn.

Informants continuously stressed that they were in Guernsey only for a limited time. They often described it as a time in a "labour camp" from which they will return to normality after the nine months shift is over. Yet, this should not be interpreted in historical discourse of war experiences in Guernsey, however striking it could sound. Comparing interviews with people of different generations, those who had experience living and working in different circumstances (for example during Soviet times) indicates a framework of reference based on the perception of collective work practiced in the period of socialism, when students, in particular, went for short term unskilled work either in Latvia or in other parts of the Soviet Union.

However, in pendulum migration, the time spent in Guernsey is usually longer than time spent in "normal life" – nine months in Guernsey and three months in Latvia as one informant, who works in a warehouse, said with certainty: "I am here only for work, I live in Latvia!" But after reflecting her inner time and belonging in relation to physical time, she reformulated the

answer: “But (...) actually, it is so that the most of the time is spent here”. Yet, in everyday rhythms, the irreversibility of a person’s lifetime is not reflected this way. The self is perceived through physical presence in a place, through memories and future intentions and these all together constitute their lifeworld, such that it is not possible to answer the question: “Where do you live?” in a straightforward way any more.

Conclusions

Guernsey has become embodied experience for many Latvians and more generally, an inseparable part of the Latvia’s way back to Europe. Simultaneously, Guernsey’s contemporary living history is inseparable from that of its Latvians. Guernsey is primarily perceived as a European locale, which does not undermine its specific texture of being a British space. On the contrary, it draws our attention to that ‘Britishness’, and Great Britain as a perceived Western space, ‘Europe’ -- a different cognitive scale when looking from the continent’s north-eastern edge.

It should be stressed that Guernsey is a special case which cannot be generalised as typical of migrant destinations, but despite and even because of this, a situated ethnographic research allow us to see sharper some aspects that we might overlook in other territorial contexts.

The most important feature revealed is the temporality of economic organisation of *migrant* jobs, which is especially pronounced in islands, and can be particularly clearly seen in a territory on the margins, such as Guernsey as a semi-dependent territory of the Great Britain, partly subscribing the EU laws. There is now almost complete free movement of labour for the new EU member nationals which includes Latvians. They are within that ‘Europe’, which could be seen as a gated community protecting itself from the outside (Houtum, and Pijpers, 2007). However, intra-European migrants also enter into societies with established class structures, systems of privilege and exclusionary laws. Latvians entered into a specific segment of British society with highly developed class sensitivities towards the lower orders whose destiny it is to serve their needs. The ramified and exclusionary class structures of the island are the welding of these invisible ‘secondary’ gates within Europe.

Guernsey’s case affirms the main research conclusions of recent out-migration from Latvia: that earnings differentials are in the main driving force and most often, the choice of those with secondary/vocational education, and more likely than not from the country’s regions rather than capital city (Krisjane *et al*, 2007).

Guernsey's case also draws attention to the dangers of an uncritical perception that migration 'just happens': in fact migration is often targeted, strategic and managed, and subsequently develops further through social networks with the capacity for the creation of distinct class-ethnicity enclaves.

To conclude this article underlines two aspects with possible wider theoretical implications for migration research in Europe:

Firstly, a naturally bounded space is in constant tension with socially produced space. Physical boundedness of a space is a matter of negotiation, and space can become elastic: more sectors are opened for migrant workers over the time, longer stay without leaving the island is more often granted, and more Latvians establish families with locals in the island. Furthermore, as of October 2010, Guernsey a historical decision to establish a minimum wage will come into force potentially creating a mechanism to overcome some of the worst abuses suffered by migrants on the island.

Secondly, transformations and contemporary migrations in Europe constitute complicated processes. Migration from the post-social societies to the Western Europe needs to be re-conceptualised from simply a one-way outflow. Ethnographical accounts could allow us to examine this process more in detail. Rhythm and textures of timespace connect past, present and imagined futures, events of "unactualised relations and these relations are real in a person's social time without being present and they are ideal without being abstract" (Lefebvre, 1996: 229, cited in May and Trift, 2001). For those Latvians regularly travelling back and forth, it is important to draw boundaries by rhythm in time, to stabilise the constantly shifting places and spaces, and to create the totality of fragmented being in which 'there' and 'here' co-exist in an unresolved tension of a never-completed search of a new self. In the migrants' journey their geographical mobility is actually a vehicle for a 'return' to Latvia – whether imagined or real and at the same time a 'return' to Europe which has issued only a very selective and spatio-temporally provisional invitation.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere respect and gratitude to my informants in Guernsey and Latvia. All names of informants are pseudonyms. I am grateful to Charles Woolfson, Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society, REMESO, Linköping University, Sweden, for his encouragement and evocative critique.

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