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Do we need other "posts" in migration studies? Polish migration to the UK through a postdependence lens

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In this paper, I discuss postdependence as a compelling new lens to study Polish migration to the UK and Poland as a migratory context. Revisiting existing critiques, I argue that neither postcolonialism nor postsocialism sufficiently reflects on the complicated geo-historical situatedness of Poland and its distinctive migratory circumstances. Postdependence, on the other hand, advocated by Central and East European scholars, opens up new avenues for exploring dependence, oppression, and the politics of difference, offering a decolonial perspective on migration from/to/within the area. In the paper, I draw on a study of encounters with difference conducted with Polish nationals in England and Poland. In this study, participants utilised orientalist and essentialist discourses to make sense of sameness and difference, and to reflect on England and Poland. I propose that the employment and circulation of such discourses should be understood and explored against the overarching framework of postdependence. In doing so, I address a wider question of whether new conceptual frameworks (new "posts") are needed and why. The paper contributes to the fast-growing body of work on East–West migration in Europe and the emerging scholarship on decolonising migration studies.

KEYWORDS
migration, narrative, Poland, postcolonialism, postdependence, postsocialism

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss postdependence (*postzależność; studia postzależnościowe* in Polish) as a fascinating new lens to study Polish migration to the UK and Poland as a migratory context. Postdependence is a theoretical and methodological framework to explore broadly understood relationships of dependence and oppression (Nycz, 2014). Thus far, Poland has been largely explored through postcolonial and postsocialist lenses (Kuus, 2004; Mayblin et al., 2016; Owczarzak, 2009) and "thinking between the[se] posts" (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p. 113) has been the dominant approach in the scholarship on contemporary Polish society and migration (Burrell, 2011a; Horolets & Kozłowska, 2012; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012; Kuus, 2004; Owczarzak, 2009; Stenning, 2005a). While there is no doubt that this approach is helpful, its adequacy has been increasingly questioned (Cervinkova, 2012; Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2012) and a group of Central and East European scholars have called for the employment of postdependence as a history-sensitive and "indigenous" project (Gosk, 2010; Nycz, 2014; Tlostanova, 2016).

Yet, despite its relevance, postdependence remains marginal to English-language scholarship on Polish migration and Poland more broadly. In this paper, I call for the employment of this compelling new lens in the field of Central and East European migration. In doing so, I address a wider question of whether new conceptual frameworks (new "posts") are needed and why, and respond to emerging calls to decolonise migration studies (Mayblin, 2019; Vanyoro et al., 2019).

The paper is inspired by a recent publication on postcolonialism and Poland by Mayblin et al. who have argued "that [while] postcolonialism offers important insights into understanding Polish attitudes to difference … more work needs to be done to make the theoretical bridge" (2016, p. 60). Throughout the paper, I critically engage with this work and wider post-colonial/postsocialist scholarship to suggest that postdependence has an immense capacity to make this bridge and to contribute to the greater understanding of migration from Poland.

Empirically, I draw on a study with Polish migrants to England and their significant others in Poland, exploring encounters with difference in terms of ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, gender, age, and disability (Gawlewicz, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b). In this study, participants employed orientalist and essentialist discourses to make sense of sameness and difference, and to reflect on Poland and England. This included utilising the binary rhetoric of East and West among others.

In the paper, I make an important contribution to debates in East–West migration studies by showing how through a critical engagement with postdependence we can advance the understanding of Polish migration to the UK and Poland as a migratory context. In doing so, I also bring postdependence to debates on decolonial approaches in migration research that have thus far neglected spaces in Central and East Europe such as Poland.

I start the paper by discussing (de)colonising perspectives on Poland as a primary context for migration to the UK. Then, I briefly outline the design of the project that this paper draws on. Finally, I explore how postdependence aids an understanding of orientalist and essentialist discourses employed by research participants.

2 | (DE)COLONISING PERSPECTIVES ON POLAND AS A MIGRATORY CONTEXT

This paper is situated within debates on decolonising migration studies (Mayblin, 2019; Vanyoro et al., 2019) that have emerged amid wider efforts to decolonise disciplinary knowledges (e.g., Esson et al., 2017; Jazeel, 2016; Noxolo, 2017; Tlostanova, 2016). By decolonisation, I understand attempts to challenge Western European (largely Anglophone) knowledges naturalised as universal and modern, and to incorporate indigenous worldviews produced in "other" places and languages. In line with Mignolo (2000) and Santos (2014), it is not my intention to suggest that "Western" knowledges should be replaced by these alternative epistemologies (indeed, this would be an act of colonisation in itself). Rather, I believe they should coexist and be consulted together in an effort to recognise the importance of "pluriversality," that is, the entanglement of various knowledges (Mignolo, 2000).

2.1 | Postcolonial approaches

Here, I specifically respond to Radcliffe's recent call to "'go beyond' postcolonialism" (2017, p. 329) to understand contemporary migration from/to Poland. Postcolonialism is a diverse and multidisciplinary approach to exploring legacies of colonialism and forms of control and oppression sustained by unequal power relationships (Chakrabarty, 2000). Historically, it has questioned certain ideas underpinning theories of modernity, in particular the assumption that "Western" societies have become more modern than others (Spivak, 1988). While postcolonialism has largely engaged with relations between Western European (postcolonial) states and non-European former "colonies," after the collapse of socialism in Central and East Europe "scholars have borrowed theories from postcolonial studies to understand its [socialism's] implications for postsocialist experience" (Owczarzak, 2009, p. 4). This led to the development of a considerable body of work addressing Central and East European spaces with a multitude of approaches as well as some disagreements about what historical era/system is equivalent to "colonialism" (Chari & Verdery, 2009; Kuus, 2004; Mayblin et al., 2016; Owczarzak, 2009; Stenning, 2005a).

In Poland, understandings of colonialism have been deeply entangled with historical periods of dependence on external political powers, including losing sovereignty to the Kingdom of Prussia, the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian Empires (during the partition era 1772–1918), and being a satellite state of the Soviet Union (1945–1989; Gawlewicz, 2014; Mayblin et al., 2016). When communism collapsed and the country transitioned to democracy during the 1990s, the emerging neoliberal politics incited powerful imaginaries of "backwardness" and "lagging behind" Western European states stemming from the Cold-War-era binary of the capitalist West and the communist East (Kuus, 2004; Owczarzak, 2009).

Poland's position became even more complicated against the backdrop of joining NATO and the EU (1999 and 2004, respectively). The rhetoric of needing to "catch up with the West" or "return to Europe" was strengthened by a newly emergent "division … into the European core, the Central European applicants not yet fully European …, and an eastern periphery effectively excluded from membership" (Kuus, 2004, p. 475). This rhetoric re-established the colonial relationship between the European East and West, and presented Poland as an "in-between" place producing a profound tension described as an "inferiority-superiority complex" (Kurczewska, 2003; Zarycki, 2004). On the one hand, Polish society appears to self-orientalise as insufficiently modern when juxtaposed with the iconic West. On the other, it seems to declare high levels of national pride (Marciniak, 2009) alongside a propensity to essentialise not only the European East and West but also the non-European world.

Mayblin et al. (2016) have illustrated that such simplistic perspectives continue to resonate in popular discourses and personal narratives of contemporary Poles. This is also reflected in the literature on Polish "westward" migration. By looking at the constructions of the UK as a receiving society, Horolets and Kozłowska, for example, demonstrated that Polish migrants associate the UK with "high culture, excellence in education and heights of civilizational development" (2012, p. 51). Burrell, on the other hand, famously spoke of "the enchanting powers of western things" (2011a, p. 153).

2.2 | Postdependence approaches

While postcolonialism provides a useful lens to study identities and experiences of Polish migrants (Horolets & Kozłowska, 2012) and has been applied in scholarship on Poland (Bakuła, 2007; Buchowski, 2006; Cavanagh, 2004; Owczarzak, 2009; Stenning, 2005a), its capacity to reflect on the broader Polish context has been questioned by a number of Poland-based scholars (Gosk, 2010; Nycz, 2014; Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2012). Gosk (2010), for example, has argued that while Poland experienced periods of dependence, it has never been colonised in the same way British, French, or other European colonies were. Moreover, the Polish state itself remained at certain historical periods a colonising power towards the so-called "Eastern borderlands" (Bakuła, 2007). Therefore, rather than "the colonised," its complicated position should be better characterised as the "colonising colonised" (Gosk, 2010) or, as Mayblin et al. have proposed, in "triple relation" "as former colony, as former coloniser and finally in relation to the western hegemons" (2016, p. 61).

Given these critiques, the "local" postdependence framework offers a useful alternative. Employed by a group of Central and East European, predominantly Polish, literary scholars since early 2000s, postdependence embraces theoretical and methodological approaches to explore broadly understood dependence and oppression (Nycz, 2014). The term "dependence" does not indicate the existence of an absolute state of independence. It rather points to relations of dependence/co-dependence that may produce spaces of control and subordination on one hand, and choice or auto-creation on the other.

Nycz (2014) notes that postdependence was partly inspired by the dependency theory looking at exploitative core/periphery hierarchies between the economically powerful states and the "underdeveloped" ones (Dos Santos, 1970). It has nonetheless embraced the criticisms of dependency theory (Kapoor, 2002) and focused on how dependence unfolds in cultural and socio-historical perspectives (Nycz, 2014).

As a framework, postdependence acknowledges the complex geo-historical and socio-political situatedness of Poland and relates to wider Polish history. Similarly to postcolonialism, it critically engages with issues of power, identity, and the politics of difference (e.g., majority–minority relations, non-normative identities, gender politics, LGBTQI lives) yet acknowledges the unique impact of "local" knowledges and histories on the production of difference.

In this paper, I propose to extend this framework to Polish migration studies. Polish migration to the UK, for instance, is a growing and vibrant field: I would wish to see more conversations engaging with postdependence within this field. Mayblin et al. have called for "a *long-durée* perspective penetrating complex Polish history and hegemonic relations with other nations – either as a colonised or colonising power" (2016, p. 72). Postdependence offers such a perspective. In addition, because it embraces a set of approaches and is an open-ended, flexible framework, it also has the capacity to reflect on and explain change in other societies with history of dependence in the region. Indeed, Central and East European scholars have increasingly suggested that it could be employed in other Central and East European spaces, including Russia (Sywenky, 2013; Tlostanova, 2016). There is also a separate strand of research on coloniality in Central and East Europe that resonates strongly with postdependence (e.g., Baker, 2018; Boatcă, 2010; Dzenovska, 2013). By conceptualising Central and East European peoples as both objects and subjects of colonial power, this work reaffirms the need to simultaneously historicise and provincialise postcolonial scholarship on Central and East Europe.

Of course, other "posts" are already out there, in particular postsocialism. However, it is important to emphasise that these frameworks explore *postsocialist* change without reflecting on wider and, indeed, complex histories of dependence in the region (Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012). In addition, postsocialism tends to be critiqued by Central and East European

scholars as a discursive category developed (i.e., imposed) by their "Western" counterparts and implicated in a problematic Cold-War-era division into the first, second, and third world (Cervinkova, 2012). Cervinkova, for example, has argued that postsocialism is a "project of epistemological dominance and subjugation … that lacks the empowering qualities of post-colonial scholarship" (2012, p. 159). As a history-sensitive and "indigenous" project, postdependence not only has these empowering qualities but is a direct response to the need to decolonise disciplinary knowledges (Jazeel, 2016; Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017). It has the capacity to re-shape how we think about Polish migration and Poland in the same way other decolonial approaches allow "re-thinking the world *from* Latin America, *from* Africa, *from* Indigenous places" (Radcliffe, 2017, p. 329).

3 | CONTEXTUALISING THE DISCUSSION

In the paper, I draw on 51 in-depth interviews collected as part of my PhD project (2010–2014) on Polish migrant encounters with difference in terms of ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, gender, age, and disability (Gawlewicz, 2015b, 2016a). This includes multiple interviews with 14 Polish migrants in England (32 in total, at least two with each) and single interviews with their significant others, that is, family members and friends, in Poland (19 in total). While in the paper I only present material coming from interviews with the migrants, I wish to emphasise that my discussion is informed by data collected from both migrant and non-migrant participants.

In England, the study was situated in Leeds – a Northern English city offering a range of possibilities of encounters with difference alongside the axes of ethnicity, religion, and class. Indeed, Leeds has a proportion of minority ethnic population close to the national average (15%, against 14% in England, according to the 2011 Census) and a history of transition from an industrial to a post-industrial city. The migrant sample included nine women and five men aged between 21 and 51, and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. They were recruited using a range of techniques, such as leafleting in Polish venues in the city, networking with gatekeepers, and chain referral among others. In Poland, the significant other sample included 13 women and six men aged between 20 and 80, who were recruited via migrants and thus spread across various locations.

I collected all interviews in Polish and then translated them into English (Gawlewicz, 2016b). Subsequently, I employed narrative analysis to explore this material because this allows the investigation of relationships and socially constructed understandings that commonly occur within interview accounts.

In the study, I conceptualised England as an ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse society and Poland as a *relatively* homogeneous one (by comparison), yet with complicated historical relationship with diversity (Mayblin et al., 2016). In doing so, I was guided by an argument that for the majority of Polish migrants to the UK the experience of migration is often intertwined with the experience of increased diversity.

4 | DISCOURSES OF POSTDEPENDENCE IN POLISH MIGRANT STORIES

There was an evident tendency among research participants (both migrant and non-migrant) to essentialise and orientalise Poland and England, and to construct them in binary oppositions (something that I have also discussed elsewhere: Gawlewicz, 2015a). This was particularly clear in narratives of how migrant participants imagined England prior to and post migration, and is very well captured in the quote below.

> There was this idea that life's easier in England and the West in general. My friend had a great example. In his town [in Poland] a girl was getting married to a French guy and people were asking about his profession. 'Who cares, he's French!' somebody replied, meaning that she'd have a fat and wealthy life simply because of where he was coming from. And, it was the same with England. […] And such thinking still persists. When we visit Poland, everybody thinks that we must be well-off. And the truth is – my brother left this country [England] without savings and my friend with debts. […] I'm still kind of disappointed because England didn't experience such loss during the war [WWII] as Poland. So, for such a rich country – everything should be so fucking amazing here, super-shiny. My uncle used to go abroad during communism. There was nothing in Poland. And yet he had a Sony TV. He had a stupid coffee machine, right? […] It goes back to the inter-war period. My grandpa's brother migrated before the WWII. […] Some people came back, bought estates. They really had money. My father also worked abroad when I was little. He was in Libya for a year … in Germany for a few months. When he came back he bought a brand new car, right? […] So, that's why there was this idea. (Marek, m, PL, mid-30s)

Clearly, Marek builds his narrative on the East–West binary: England (embodying the "West") is juxtaposed with Poland (a "non-West"). In addition, the narrative is entangled with Polish history as well as the history of Polish migration. Marek jumps between the so-called inter-war period (roughly 1920s to 1940s), the Second World War (1939–1945), and communism (late 1940s to 1980s). He speaks of migration as an opportunity to improve one's socio-economic status and goes back to historical migrations of Poles and bringing Western products to Poland in times of shortages (Burrell, 2011a, 2011b). Finally, he speaks of his own migration and how some of the assumptions about England that he held in the past turned out to be false. In fact, he implies that these assumptions were mobilised by *stories* that he had been exposed to back in Poland. Marek's quote is a powerful reminder that migration experience is embedded within, and constructed against, "locally" produced identities, histories, and discourses. As such, to be fully appreciated, it needs to be "provincialised" (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Like Marek, the majority of research participants admitted having unrealistic ideas of England before they moved there. They spoke of high-culture, aristocracy, wealth, power, and superiority (Horolets & Kozłowska, 2012). But their narratives also touched on whiteness, Christianity, and high social status (i.e., they made implicit assumptions that English society was white, Christian, and upper-class). This is reflected in a few illustrative quotes below.

> I was surprised to find how few English people lived here – especially in London. It was pretty shocking for me. […] I started recalling memories related to the people … Some stories, anecdotes, TV programmes, films … where Englishness had been sort of stressed. For example, five o'clock tea. (Magda, f, PL, 20s)

> It was a surprise – I realised there are no Londoners in London. There are no British people. For me, a British person is – I had this image of a British person as a figure from the colonial times. White male, middle-aged, with a pipe in his mouth and a funny cap, who hunts for elephants. (Filip, m, PL, 20s)

> I love books and […] I've read English literature. So, my idea of English people was … I imagined there weren't regular people in England. I imagined there were princesses and counts, only residences and palaces. And, when I came here and saw that a Brit can also be vulgar working on the production line, this idea of high social class ... it became sort of lower – my own level. (Irena, f, PL, 50s)

These narratives were often informed by problematic colonial imaginary and romanticised portrayals, here epitomised by the figure of a White British man hunting for elephants (supposedly, in one of the former colonies) and five o'clock tea. But, they were also a reflection of self-orientalisation as subaltern (Burrell, 2011a, 2011b) on the one hand and reclamation of "equal" or even "superior" status on the other (illustrated in Irena's quote). The majority of migrant participants spoke of a profound surprise that they had experienced on arrival to England (brilliantly captured in Marek's "everything should be so fucking amazing here"). They admitted that they had been confused when they discovered that English society was facing issues of poverty and deprivation, and encompassed a range of non-white, non-Christian, and working-class identities. Clearly, their imagined social hierarchies had been deconstructed and reconstructed through the experience of settling in England.

These narratives also tended to be situated within wider discourses of migration and mobility, as illustrated in Marek's story. Participants spoke of historical migrations of Poles, migrations in their families, and of looking towards the "West" as a primary migration destination (because of the "idea that life's easier in […] the West"). In these stories, orientalist and essentialist tropes intertwined with migration ones. Interestingly, all participants were familiar with these tropes, regardless of whether they took them for granted or challenged them. They seemed to sit deeply in participants' minds and to reflect wider circulation of discourses and ideas that permeate Polish historical, political, and cultural consciousness.

While exploring these narratives through postcolonial and postsocialist lenses is helpful, I find these frameworks neither fully adequate nor sufficient (for the discussion of their limitations, see "Postdependence approaches" above). The "local" perspective – that is, telling and hearing stories "from" Poland – is easily missed. For example, how to explore the tendency of jumping in time between the pre-Second-World-War, communist-era, and contemporary migrations in Marek's story; how to discuss the problematic assumptions of whiteness and Christianity of British society that Filip made, or how to examine the assumption of superiority and inferiority in Irena's quote.

Postdependence does justice to these stories and puts them into perspective. First of all, it embeds them in "indigenous" discourses of authority and subordination, power and oppression, dependence and independence (Gosk, 2010; Nycz, 2011). This embedding matters because it explains why Poles might associate England with high culture, excellence, aristocracy, and civilisational development. Second, it embraces the narrative tension between the sense of inferiority and superiority

(Kurczewska, 2003; Zarycki, 2004) as well as the entanglement of the local and subaltern with global imagined geographies. Finally, it explains historically charged connections and emplotment of migrant narratives within wider historical and political discourses. In doing so, it also allows to trace back the overt use of essentialism to not only the socialist period, but also the trauma of two World Wars, the partitions (1772–1918), and the history of predominantly westward migration.

5 | CONCLUSIONS: DO WE NEED 'OTHER' POSTS?

By engaging with emerging work on postdependence, I have argued that this framework facilitates the understanding of the migration experience of Polish people as well as contemporary Poland as a migratory context. I have shown that Polish migrant stories draw on wider historical and geo-political discourses of sameness and difference, mobility and immobility, and dependence and independence. These discourses are fundamental to claims about place and space, difference and diversity, and affect how everyday lived experience is interpreted. In the paper, I have proposed that the employment and circulation of such discourses should be understood and explored against the overarching framework of postdependence. While postcolonialism and postsocialism offer valuable lenses to study Poland, I have illustrated that they do not tell the whole story and need to be "provincialised" (Chakrabarty, 2000).

The paper offers a significant contribution to migration scholarship, in particular East–West migration in Europe (Burrell, 2011a, 2011b; Horolets & Kozłowska, 2012), by proposing the constructive use of postdependence in exploring Polish migration to "Western" places. Additionally, it responds to debates on decolonising migration studies and disciplinary knowledges (Jazeel, 2016; Mayblin, 2019; Radcliffe, 2017; Vanyoro et al., 2019), including in this very journal (Esson et al., 2017; Noxolo, 2017; Stenning, 2005a), by suggesting a local perspective on Poland. Through engaging with these two bodies of work, it also takes the research on postcolonialism and Poland a substantive step further from Mayblin et al.'s (2016) contribution.

Of course, this raises a question of whether we need "other 'posts' in 'other' places" (Mayblin et al., 2016, p. 60). As a geographer and migration scholar, I understand this question to be closely intertwined with issues of identity, representation, and justice. How to explore identities and experiences of people from other places? How to ensure that their voices are heard in the right context? How to do justice to their experiences in other contexts (e.g., when they migrate)? Guided by these questions, in this paper I have shown that migrant narratives are simultaneously embedded in local and global (imagined) histories and geographies; they can be simultaneously subaltern and "colonising." Addressing this interesting tension by drawing on local, subaltern knowledges (Mignolo, 2000; Santos, 2014) opens a new perspective on, arguably, the same old story. I believe that to be complete this story needs to be re-told and re-heard from elsewhere (Radcliffe, 2017), in particular in the field of migration studies.

I also believe that whether we need other "posts" is a question of ethics. As researchers, we are responsible for how we represent research participants in our work on the one hand, and are accountable to research users on the other. Re-thinking the world from another place – Latin America or Africa or, indeed, Poland – is an attempt to do justice to both: research participants (their experiences and voices) and research users (their subjectivities and desire to understand).

Finally, while in the paper I have focused on Poland, I wish to return to an earlier point that postdependence has the potential to reflect on transformation and power imbalances in other "postsocialist" spaces in Central and East Europe (Sywenky, 2013; Tlostanova, 2016). Following debates on the limits of "Western" thought in understanding these spaces (Baker, 2018; Boatcă, 2010; Cervinkova, 2012; Dzenovska, 2013; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012), I suggest that this potential requires further attention in future research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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