



Review of the publication: Sylwia Urbańska, *Matka Polka na odległość. Z doświadczeń migracyjnych robotnic 1989–2010*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika 2015, ISBN 978-83-231-3366-7

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Women and mothers from rural areas of Poland who work in household services in Brussels, Belgium are the main actors of Sylwia Urbańska's sociological study of migration, work, gender, and family. The objective of this complex study is to explain the process of becoming a transnational mother in the broader context of globalization and social change. The author approaches her subject with interpretative sociology and Grounded Theory Methodology in order to collect and analyze data. Urbańska conducted 54 interviews and did intensive ethnographic field research in both Poland and Belgium between 2008 and 2009.

Stating that Polish academic research about migration, transnationalism, and global social change usually focusses on (male) members of the middle-class, Urbańska centers her process-oriented research on the perspective of low income female actors from rural areas (Podlaskie Voivodship) with traditional family structures, and blue collar/ agricultural professions. Part of this transnational identity construction refers to the powerful cultural symbol of "Mother Pole" (Matka Polka) - the strong Polish woman in crisis fighting for her family and for her nation. Urbańska illustrates how, for the interviewees, this symbol helps mend the damage of an identity that results from the challenges of long distance motherhood.

The women face these challenges in everyday life, for instance, when trying to find (illegal) work in household services abroad, living in shared rooms abroad, and trying to keep in touch with their children and other family members. But they are also confronted with powerful discursive constructions of the ideal family and mother. Sylwia Urbańska argues that the academic discourse in Poland about families is dominated by the picture of two adults of opposite sexes living together in one place caring for one child or several children. Families are seen as the basis for successful socialization, democracy, and the "healthy development" of the nation. Motherhood according to this understanding is characterized by being together with the children and sharing the same physical space. Structural-functionalism, for instance, also stresses the function of families for social integration,[1] but sets aside the negative effects of these structures for individual actors. Urbańska tries to analyze this question using an actor-centered approach and not a structure-based one, objecting to essentialist concepts of motherhood and instead conceptualizing motherhood as an analytical tool.

In the first part of the book Urbańska lays out the theoretical and methodological foundations for her qualitative empirical study. Theoretically there are many ideas introduced like care and space (of a house), transnationalism,[2] being "here and there" simultaneously,[3] "flexible love of flexible humans at a distance,"[4] or "care chains" and love as the new "colonial resource".[5] The author combines these results and theoretical frameworks in order to illustrate the state of research in migration, gender, transnationality, and motherhood. However, she does not discuss the possible inconsistencies of all these different epistemological approaches, particularly with regard to her own interpretive access to the research subject. Admittedly, the title of this part, "Theoretical and Methodological Inspiration," reflects the purpose of this fragment quite well. It is not meant to triangulate theories,[6] but to present the sources of inspiration for Urbańska's own research.

The second part is dedicated to the several intertwined factors in everyday life which lead to becoming a long distance mother. Analyzing text fragments from the narrative interviews and theoretically categorizing them in the tradition of the Grounded Theory Methodology, Urbańska impressively explicates the challenges of low-income families in everyday life in rural Poland. The aftermath of the 1989 transformations, such as being unemployed and poor in structurally disadvantaged regions, are illustrated through the experiences of the interviewees. There are also many narratives about alcoholism, physical violence against women, and abusive marriages. A lack of welfare state support and the normative regulations of social life in villages and small towns offer most women in these environments no escape. This, according to the transnational mothers of the sample, is the reason why they stayed in these abusive relationships. Working abroad and becoming the bread-winner of the family was usually a necessity, but not a wish. Most of the women feared leaving their children in Poland to start working in – mostly illegal – conditions. However, in the biographical review

work migration offered the opportunity to distance themselves from an alcoholic husband or a violent environment at home. Of course, not all transnational mothers had such bad experiences, but the comprehensible point of the author is that migration research generally does not take the circumstances of living in the place of origin into account. Sylwia Urbańska also argues that these results show how transnational motherhood influences and challenges the traditional gender roles in Poland in times of transformation, and how modern and post-modern forms of motherhood contribute both to new identities and to social change.

The third part elaborates more on the identity work of transnational mothers, the status passages, and their retrospective dealing with difficult situations. In these chapters, experiences of organizing everyday family life and maintaining mother-child relationships through long distances are analyzed. Many of the interviewees had already been transnational migrant workers in Belgium in the 1990s when there were neither legal work possibilities (before the EU access in 2004) nor easy and affordable communication such as Skype, SMS or WhatsApp. Writing letters, such as the "Polish Peasant in Europe and America" from Florian Znaniecki's and William Isaac Thomas' study almost a century ago,[7] and some rare telephone calls were the only means of maintaining exchange and contact.

For me as a reader it was, however, quite difficult to reconstruct the trajectories of the various transnational mothers. Although we meet many of the researcher's respondents throughout the book, the biographical trajectories of the single cases are sometimes hard to follow because fragments of narrations from different persons had been subsumed under thematic categories. The gestalt of the biographies,[8] which was not the main subject of the study, remained rather unclear, and particularly status passages could not be linked to certain biographies and interviewees but only to certain statements.

These statements and the overall results of Urbańska's study function as a counter-hegemonic contribution to discourse about transnational motherhood which is dominated by a dysfunctional, pathological, and normative view on mothers which could be summarized as: "Leaving their children behind and to bad influences." Urbańska intensely discusses this discourse about "Euro-orphanage" (*eurosieroctwo*) which had become dominant between 2007 and 2009 in Poland. The author draws conclusions about this phenomenon from a critical discourse analysis of different media sources such as print and online newspapers and magazines, blogs and websites, and scientific literature.

The strong side of Urbańska's study is her social-constructivist and interpretive approach to a complex social phenomenon, which allows her to challenge the hegemonic (academic) discourse about migration and motherhood in Poland. Her results show that economic migration of women and mothers is not as easily explained as migration studies and models usually try to. Marriages and family arrangements have often been complicated, violent, and abusive long before the time of migration, and are thus not the consequence of transnational motherhood. Urbańska's results illustrate that the option of work migration to another country allows many women to escape abusive marriages and to obtain new biographical possibilities abroad like earning one's own living or starting a new partnership.

From an overall perspective Sylwia Urbańska offers an in-depth insight into a social world that is often talked about but not talked to or with. Her own experiences as a daughter of a transnationally working mother and her acquaintances with people maintaining transnational relationships, together with her ethnographic study in Podlaskie and Brussels take the readers of her book into the life world of transnational mothers and their complex biographies. The interpretive study explains impressively the social, emotional, and financial costs of transnational living without putting women into the position of sole victims or presenting one-dimensional answers.

[1] See Parsons, Talcott/Bales, Robert F. 1955: Family, socialization and interaction process. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

[2] Wimmer, Andreas/Glick Schiller, Nina 2003: Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology. In: The International Migration Review, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 576–610.

[3] See Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette/Avila, Ernestine 1997: "I'm Here, but I'm There": The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood. In: Gender & Society, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 548–571.

[4] See Beck, Ulrich/Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth/Livingstone, Rodney 2013: Distant love. Personal life in the global age. English edition. Cambridge, Malden, MA: Polity Press.

[5] See Hochschild, Arlie Russell 2003: Love and Gold. In: Ehrenreich, Barbara; Hochschild, Arlie Russell (Eds.): Global woman. Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, pp. 15–30.

[6] See Denzin, Norman K. 1970: The research act. A theoretical introduction to sociological methods. Chicago, Ill.: Aldine Publishing Company.

[7] See Thomas, William Isaac/Znaniecki, Florian [1918-1920] 1996: The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. A classic work in immigration history. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois press.

[8] See Rosenthal, Gabriele 2004: Biographical Research. In: Seale, Clive; Gobo, Giampietro; Gubrium, Jaber F. (Eds.): Qualitative research practice. London: SAGE, pp. 48–64.

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