Chapter 12

On the social position of undocumented Polish and Bulgarian migrants in Brussels

The last and concluding issue to be addressed in the present research refers to the position of undocumented Polish and Bulgarian migrants in Belgian society or the degree to which these people can be described as being socially excluded, marginalized, or deprived from chances of upward social mobility. In Chapter 7, we elaborated on some of the major arguments as to how a population of undocumented migrants in a country should be defined from the perspective of their social position in the host country. We also suggested that the convenient and well-established term "underclass" might not be the most correct and objective term for reflecting the position and status of undocumented economic migrants. Our reasons for refuting the term "underclass" were derived from the stigma that has come to be associated with its usage. A person is identified as being a member of the underclass if she or he exhibits any of the following traits: suffers from any continuous financial deprivation or lives on permanent welfare, has a low occupational status if employed at all, has a low social status, lives at the margins of society in constant social isolation and alienation, or is often involved in criminal activities or occupies run-down housing in the poorest neighborhoods or ghetto-like city areas.

Practical evidence indicating that Polish and Bulgarian undocumented migrants do not answer any of the so described criteria for belonging to an urban underclass has been systematically presented in Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 and it will be enlisted in the next paragraphs, too.

To begin with, the financial situation, income, and employment status of undocumented migrants constitute the first factor for refuting the applicability of the concept of underclass as a valid alternative for describing our research population. With an average working week of 40 to 60 hours, a seemingly uninterrupted occupational history

once the initial period of seeking work and establishing a client network, which usually occurs within a month of migration to the host country has passed and an income that, as a rule, gravitates around the average salary in Belgium (but can be even two or three times higher), undocumented migrants fall indisputably out of the scope of the so-called "underclass". Due to a number of reasons, including their undocumented status, motivation to work and to earn as much as possible (usually the primary motive for migration) and avoidance of periods of staying without job, undocumented migrants have never depended on any form of the social welfare made available in Belgium. We have shown also that undocumented migrants do not live in poverty and, quite on the contrary, are shown to possess the capacity to achieve increasing economic prosperity.

Of course, it is for these same reasons (being undocumented, working towards the fulfillment of specific economic goals, saving as much as possible) that undocumented Poles and Bulgarians might appear to be an impoverished and financially unprivileged group of people. Residential patterns and the practice of not spending money on decent accommodation and clothing are, however, obscuring the fact that these respondents have accumulated large amounts of savings, purchased property in their countries of origin, have been developing small businesses at home and have been supporting financially dependent family members.

What is important to understand in the process of seeking a term to describe the social and the economic position of undocumented migrants is that this description will vary depending on the perspective we adopt to tackle the problem. For example, are we attempting to describe the position of undocumented migrants from the perspective of their being undocumented in Belgium or from the perspective of what their social and economic position is in their respective countries of origin? The denotation of undocumented migrants as marginalized and socially excluded will, in this sense, change drastically depending on the adopted perspective.

To elaborate on this issue, we must start from the differences in future migration plans as expressed by Polish and Bulgarian migrants since this plays an important role in distinguishing between the social positions of these two migrants groups.

As outlined in previous chapters, the main orientation of undocumented Poles is towards returning either to their country of origin once a sufficient amount of savings has been accumulated or pre-migration goals have been achieved, or to where the capital accumulated from working in Belgium will be invested. Having this in mind, their residence in Brussels can be described as being only a temporary status, and therefore the migrants do not invest any efforts in integrating into Belgian society, improving their standard of living or coming out of the margins of society and becoming full members of Belgian society. All these efforts are viewed as redundant since the plan is to return to Poland. On the other hand, returning Poles have a significantly higher social and economic standing in Poland. They are the members of the society with a better quality of life, better accommodation, more money, higher purchasing power, and the possibility to invest in successful self-employment businesses. So, viewing the position of undocumented Poles in Brussels as marginalized and with lack of access to any of the formal institution in Belgium is relevant only from the perspective of the local society itself but not from the perspective of the migrants.

The main motivation of undocumented Bulgarians is to stay permanently in Belgium since living and working conditions in Bulgaria are not envisioned to improve in the near future. This sense of a lack of opportunities back in Bulgaria is the utmost stimulus for remaining in Belgium and working illegally. This option is perceived to be a better plan of life in comparison with returning to Bulgaria. Undocumented Bulgarians hope to be able to obtain full rights to live and work in Belgium as European citizens as a result of the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union or as the outcome of a regularization procedure after many years of living and working in Belgium. So, for the time being, undocumented Bulgarians should be viewed as a group of people without aspirations to return to their country of origin who are pushed to live in the margins of Belgian society due to their irregular status. Thus, despite their high level of work activity, income generation, and absence of reliance on state support, undocumented Bulgarians occupy the position of a marginalized class of people, who are deprived of the chance to join mainstream social institutions, to benefit from social services and medical care, and to

enjoy safe, steady, and regulated occupational status. Under such circumstances, unlike the undocumented Poles who have prospects upon return, the Bulgarian population could suffer long term consequences of being excluded from entering structurally secure and regulated working sectors, and exclusion from all forms of formal social and institutional protection in the case of violations of their rights as workers as well as their basic human rights. A related consequence, which is directly connected to continuously living in illegality, is the pushing of undocumented Bulgarians to the "borders" of society where incidences such as social isolation, exploitation, and violation of basic rights are not uncommon. And even though none of our respondents complained of being victims of human rights violations, or of excessive exploitation, the overall understanding is that being undocumented brings upon exactly these types of consequences, and because undocumented Bulgarians prefer to think of themselves as winners and not as losers who complain, from an external perspective we could claim that being undocumented is not only related social exclusion and marginalization but also to exterminating all chances for upward social mobility unconditionally of occupational involvement and steady income. The primary argument for formulating such a claim derived from the respondents' own accounts of a lack of any personal ties whatsoever with the local society and a lack of acceptance from the Belgian population. In Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, we outlined the most commonly mentioned concerns of undocumented migrants, which includes the perception that they are a second category of people: e.g. even though they are perceived as good workers who are available at any time upon request, they are still not perceived as equal human beings. Whether this is because of their nationality or of their legal status in the country is an issue open for discussion, but what is certain is that if they worked in a structurally secure sector, with some social rights, and were subject to the same working regulations as Belgian citizens, these respondents would have had the possibility to regulate their working hours, to protect themselves in situations of underpayment or non-payment, and to request higher remuneration for their services, which would not only allow for working more humane hours but also decrease the concerns of nationals that foreigners are undermining local payment standards and thus stealing jobs from nationals.

Having described the position of undocumented Bulgarians and Poles from this internal perspective, we will now touch upon issues, including what is the position of undocumented people in the Belgian market and society from an external perspective, which is not related to their motivations for settling in Brussels or returning to their countries of origin. Some of the questions we attempt to address here include: Do undocumented migrants occupy the lowest social and occupational position in Brussels? What causes this position? Does this position change with regularization of their legal status in this country?

Since the present study was not designed to incorporate research of the labor market in Belgium and the preferences of employers of one nationality of workers over the other, we will keep this discussion on a rather theoretical level, while the arguments which will be presented will have to be tested and confirmed or rejected by future research. The only primary data we can employ in answering some of these posed questions was derived for research into 15 regularized Bulgarians and 6 regularized Poles in Brussels and we will commence our discussion by looking at these cases.

Undocumented migrants who regularized their status in Belgium achieved this through the framework of PECO agreements between Belgium and a number of Eastern European countries (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10) and are all self-employed in Belgium. Examining the occupational and social position of these migrants before and after regularization reveals, however, only a limited change in their social and economic position in Belgium. The only difference in the social position of regularized migrants is obtaining residence documents, getting access to medical insurance, and having the possibility to bring to Belgium a family member legally. For the rest, these regularized respondents maintained the same occupational activities as before including charging the same prices and have the same number of clients. Practices for finding clients and jobs have also not changed in comparison with the past. These migrants continue being contacted by interested employers and clients, while continuing not to advertise their activities even though the fear of revealing their irregular presence in the country is no longer relevant.

After regularization, these migrants have also not changed significantly their quality of life and residential status. The respondents have remained in the same type of accommodation as before and they continue to save with respect to what they spend on housing, household appliances and furniture as much as possible. This pattern of behavior is considered insurance for the future, because one can never be certain at which moment working activities in Brussels will no longer be profitable. The respondents declare that after many years of living in illegality and saving every penny, the habit of saving and limiting their spending cannot change easily.

Social interactions after regularization did not change either. The social circle of the migrants remained the same as before and contact with the Belgian population is still limited and only work-related. The subjective feeling of integration did not increase, and the perception of being treated by employer and clients as a "second category person" and "only a worker" continued.

Most likely the length of time for which the undocumented migrants have been regularized has not been long enough for significant social and occupational related changes to take place, and a future study would be necessary if one wanted to examine if such changes take place at all and if "yes", after how many years after regularization and uninterrupted residence in Belgium. Another factor, which could be explored as potentially hindering the process of changing the social and occupational position of migrants after regularization is the occupational position of the migrants, that is as self-employed persons who have no chance to become salaried workers after regularization. Exercising professional activities as self-employed could be hypothesized as slowing down the potential process of upward social and occupational mobility through several venues. Being regularized under the PECO agreements does not allow for any occupational mobility whatsoever since PECO provisions tie migrants to exercising one professional activity and this is only as self-employed. In this sense, the only difference between their former undocumented status and present documented status is that after regularization, the professional activities can be exercised legally. The type of work, the relations with clients, the working hours, and the prices asked by the migrants do, however, remain the same.

Simultaneously, the social protection and social security provisions for salaried workers, which allow for some occupational stability and certainty about means of survival in the case of remaining unemployed, are not operative with respect to regularized migrants and in this sense influences directly or indirectly the lack of change in the occupational mobility of the regularized migrants.

The situation of regularized migrants concludes our primary data on the subject and next we will try to identify reasons why the position of these migrants does not change and what factors might account for the social and occupational position of undocumented migrants in general.

In search for an answer to these questions, we believe that the split (or segmented) labor market theory can offer a potential explanation for the social and occupational position of undocumented migrants in Brussels. Segmented labor market theory identifies two or more labor markets as existing in advanced capitalistic societies. The primary labor market is characterized by stable working conditions, higher wages, skilled jobs, and an internal labor market that provides possibilities for upward mobility within a company or an enterprise. Secondary labor markets are, on the other hand, characterized by high turnover rates, low-paying and low-skilled jobs, and the lack of structural opportunities for promotion (Bonachich, 1972). According to this theory, migrants and ethnic minorities are concentrated in the secondary labor market. The establishments of such a split labor market is attributed to the need of the advanced industrial societies for a constant flow of low-wage and relatively unskilled migrant laborers to fill undesirable jobs (for a literature review, see Sanders & Nee, 1987). This is in order to keep the costs of production low and to maintain competitiveness in the global market. In other words, labor market heterogeneity exists and is derived from the organization of production in industrial capitalism. Therefore, the placement of individuals within the social order cannot be understood only in terms of the personal characteristics of the individual themselves. It is the organizational structure of industrial capitalism which shapes the stratification system, not the psychological predispositions and predilection of workers (Beck *et al.,* 1980). Social stratification is the outcome of the arrangement of distinct social positions within the social and economic

organization of production. Industrial segmentation theory focuses on the critical role of the organization of production in shaping demand for labor and the effects, which these demand factors have on individual labor market outcomes. So, how does this apply to our particular research case?

In Chapter 11, we advanced and defended the position that undocumented work would not exist if there were no labor market needed for such work. What undocumented workers can offer are lower prices, longer and flexible working hours, while being a working force that can be made redundant at any moment when its services are no longer needed. In the case of remaining unemployed in Brussels, undocumented migrants constitute a labor market reserve, which can always be employed in times of economic need. This observation is highly consistent with the assumptions advanced by split labor market theory. To develop in more detail how undocumented migrants fit into this framework we can advance several observations and considerations.

In the first place, we will consider the household and domestic services provided by migrants. The changes in modern society that have resulted in the employment of both partners in a family have increased the necessity for domestic help and child caring services. Consistently with the assumptions of split-labor market theory, we can hypothesize that only limited a number of nationals would be willing to provide these services, much less compete with the low prices offered by these undocumented migrants. Over time, the domestic help sector has developed in a migrant sector, which is avoided by natives. One indicator that such a tendency is occurring in Brussels can be deduced, for example, from analyzing the advertisement of such services in the local press. Our inspection of the advertisements placed in *Vlan*, the largest free newspaper for classified announcement in Brussels revealed that out of the 40 or 50 ads for domestic services placed in each issue, only one to five are from Belgian persons. We are aware that this might mean that Belgian domestic servants have other channels of securing household jobs, but considering the fact that it was only last year when Belgium introduced a system for placing Belgian persons as domestic workers or cleaning persons, we would tend to reject this hypothesis. Moreover the newly introduced system provides household and cleaning

personnel for 6,50 € per hour, while undocumented Bulgarian and Polish women offer their services for maximum 6 € per hour. Subsequently, Eastern Europeans now have a strong hold on the domestic sector in Brussels, their reputation as good and reliable workers has gradually developed, and prospective families are aware of this. Also, the numerous articles appearing in the Belgian press and presenting the occupational activities of especially Polish workers in the city can be regarded as an instrument for increasing the popularity of undocumented migrants as workers.

The second issue we would like to touch upon is the work and services provided by the undocumented male workers. As it has been stressed several times through this work, the success of undocumented workers is rooted in their flexibility, long working hours, and unbeatable prices. We would also suggest that the quality of work provided by these workers is high, or otherwise they would not continue to be recommended by satisfied clients and actively sought out by new potential clients. The ties, however, that the studied population have to the lowest segment of the labor market are to a large degree the same as that which makes them preferred workers (in other words, the lack of occupational protection, the need to work unregulated working hours, and the need to ask for low remuneration for their services), otherwise their competitiveness in the local labor market would be reduced.

Having advanced these reflections, it is worthwhile to ask if the position of migrants would change if they were to obtain full citizenship rights in Belgium. To address this question, several considerations need to be taken into account. In the first place, one could expect that in the longer term after entering the formal labor market the prices of the undocumented migrants would increase, while the working hours and the working flexibility would decrease. Even though we have shown that, this is not the case for regularized Poles and Bulgarians we cannot completely dismiss such a hypothesis. This is due to the fact that the regularized migrants are still not subject to full citizenship and working rights. They are entitled to the legal exercise of one activity only and they do not have the right to work freely in Belgium nor the right to enjoy social security protection. Once however such migrants have the full right of European citizens, we can expect that

the motivation to work so hard, long, and cheap would decrease. In such circumstances their position would mostly likely transform slowly in that occupied by Belgian workers and companies. Moreover, the gap that arises will most likely be filled by other undocumented migrants with their underprivileged social and economic status. This hypothesis must, however, be addressed by another future study.