# 'It Was a Whirlwind. A Lot of People Made a Lot of Money': The Role of Agencies in Facilitating Migration from Poland into the UK between 2004 and 2008

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*The period after May 2004 – when Poland acceded to the European Union – until the onset of the recession in the UK in late 2007 saw a multitude of British employment agencies bringing migrant workers from Poland and placing them in temporary employment in the food industry, in construction, in social care, and in jobs in logistics and transport. Up to one half of the migrants who arrived in the UK after 2004 found work through an agency. As they arrived, a growing number of media and NGO reports highlighted both the exploitative living and working conditions in which many Polish workers found themselves and the role of agencies in this. Yet, the specific role of agencies as intermediaries between employers and workers has been comparatively neglected within the wealth of scholarly literature that analyses post-2004 East–West migration. This article documents how and why agencies recruited Polish workers into the UK labour market after May 2004. It argues that recruiting from Poland was a 'market-making' strategy for agencies, specifically linked to resolving a temporary crisis in finding a sufficient supply of workers willing to work in temporary agency jobs for low wages and in poor working conditions. The success of this new competitive strategy for agencies rested on: 1) marketing Polish nationals to employers as ideal-type 'flexible' workers, and 2) how quickly and easily they could move recruits from Poland into the workplace in the UK. This research contributes to an emerging body of work that analyses the competitive behaviour of agencies and the low-wage markets in which they are embedded, and to an also emerging body of literature exploring the role of migration intermediaries within Europe and internationally.*

*Keywords: agencies; recruitment; Polish migration; labour-market intermediaries*

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## Introduction

*Have you heard of our recruitment agency: Angie and Rose Recruitment? We're the next big thing! We've got Polish, Lithuanian; basically all Eastern European workers. Set up ready to go right now. Hardworking. Work overtime. Work shifts. Work. Evenings. All the time. I mean, we've got everything there (It's a Free World, Ken Loach 2007).*

In *It's a Free World,* the social-realist film director, Ken Loach, powerfully depicts the ease with which those searching for a quick profit could establish employment agencies in mid-2000s Britain. *We'll be set up for life*, argues lead character, Angie, in persuading flatmate Rose to join her in setting up a business in their kitchen with nothing more than a laptop and a mobile phone. This was not just fiction. In the 2000s, an army of SME (small and medium-size) employment and recruitment agencies proliferated in the UK and in Poland. In 2007, agencies in the UK generated 23.2bn GBP (28bn euros) in annual revenues from the recruitment and placement of temporary workers, including migrants, in the UK (Key Note 2008: 2). Globally, in the same year, the industry turned over 256bn euros (CIETT 2010), representing the peak of a trebling of business over the past three decades (Coe, Johns, Ward 2010).

Although most employment agencies' business takes place within national labour markets (Coe, Johns, Ward 2008), nevertheless the period after May 2004 when Poland acceded to the European Union until the onset of the recession in the UK in late 2007, saw a multitude of British agencies bringing migrant workers from Poland and placing them into temporary employment in the food industry, in construction, in social care, and in jobs in logistics and transport (Findlay, McCollum 2013; Green, Owen, Jones, Owen, Francis, Proud 2008). Eastern European nationals were over-represented in the agency workforce, with up to one half of migrants to the UK after 2004 finding work through an agency (Stenning, Dawson 2009). By 2007, one in seven agency workers had arrived in the UK in the previous three years (Forde, Slater 2008), and only one in four agency workers working on food production lines had been born in the UK (Balch 2009). The agencies and agents which brought Polish nationals to the UK were identified by journalists and by human rights organisations as being responsible for, a not insignificant, amount of exploitation in their working and living conditions (c*f.* Anti-Slavery International 2006; Lawrence 2013; Lawrence, Pai, Dodd, Carter, Ward, Watts 2004; Pai 2010). Yet, the specific role of agencies as intermediaries between employers and workers has been comparatively neglected within the wealth of scholarly literature that analyses post-2004 East–West migration (McDowell, Batitzky, Dyer. 2009).

In response to a gap in the scholarly literature which analyses the specific role of agencies as intermediaries in facilitating post-2004 East–West migrations, this article documents how and why agencies recruited Polish workers into the UK labour market between May 2004 and 2008. The article argues that recruiting from Poland was a 'market-making' strategy for agencies (Peck, Theodore, Ward 2005). In order to secure job contracts with employers, British agencies marketed Polish nationals as ideal-type 'flexible' workers, and competed with each other on how quickly and easily they could move recruits from Poland into the workplace in the UK. As mediators between UK employers on the one hand and Polish workers on the other, agencies were entrepreneurs that sought out profitable markets for their 'products' (Gray 2002; Ofstead 1999; Tseng 1997). This research seeks to contribute to two bodies of literature. Firstly, it contributes to an emerging scholarship that analyses the competitive behaviour of agencies in low-wage markets (c*f.* Coe, Johns, Ward 2008; Peck, Theodore 2001). Secondly, the paper contributes to an also emerging body of literature exploring the role of migration intermediaries, both within Europe (Elrick, Lewandowska 2008;

Fiałkowska, Napierała 2013; Findlay, McCollum 2013; Pijpers 2010) and internationally (*cf.* Goss, Lindquist 1995; Salt, Stein 1997).

The article proceeds with a brief review of the conceptual framework underpinning this research, followed by a contextualisation of the political and economic context in which this phenomenon occurred and an account of the research methods. The sections that follow analyse how and why recruiting directly from Poland became a competitive strategy for British agencies, as well as why the geographical focus had shifted back to the UK by early 2008. The article concludes with some observations on how, through reaching into the most eastern side of the European Union to hire workers, agencies made new forms of flexible migrant labour possible for British employers (Gottfried, Fasenfest 2001; Ofstead 1999).

**Conceptualising agencies' competitive strategies**

This research explicitly draws on the work of scholars who have analysed agency growth strategies in local and national labour markets (see Coe *et al*. 2010 for a full review of this literature), and on literature which theorises the role of migrant labour within national labour markets (*cf.* Piore 1979). The former body of work theorises how agencies continually seek to develop growth strategies through expanding into new sectors (Peck *et al*. 2005) and developing new services to sell to clients (Ward 2004). To generate profits, agencies must continually compete for clients (employers) to whom they can supply workers (Gray 2002). Agencies must also seek out new sources of labour to recruit in order to continually replenish the supply of workers to their clients (Ofstead 1999). This is central to their market-making strategies (Peck *et al.* 2005). In so doing, agencies may target particular groups of workers who they perceive to be 'suitable' for this type of work, or who they believe may be more likely to accept it (Ofstead 1999). If the targeted workers are not reachable in the immediate vicinity, agencies may open or relocate their offices in order to entice workers into agency jobs (Ofstead 1999). In a study of low-wage urban neighbourhoods in Chicago, Peck and Theodore (2001) analysed how agencies specifically located their offices and hiring halls close to welfare offices or homeless shelters, because they had identified a low-paid, flexible workforce which they wished, at that time, to recruit for day-labour construction work.

Scholars have theorised how agencies actively 'sell' temporary labour to potential clients by intensively cold-calling or otherwise marketing their business and the types of worker that they supply (Parker 1994; Vosko 2000). Employers may already be open to employing these workers and need only gentle persuasion. For employers, the attraction of hiring agency workers is that they avoid having to comply with the employment protections, such as pension payments, sick leave, annual and maternity leave, that are due to workers on standard employment contracts (Allen, Henry 1997; Gonos 1997; Parker 1994). Employers can also hire agency labour in order to bypass any collective bargaining agreements in place in their firms or to avoid hiring unionised workers, thus reducing labour costs while also reducing the influence of potentially troublesome employees (Gonos 1997; Peck, Theodore 2002). Most importantly, employers can hire and fire agency workers almost 'at will' without the costly need to make redundancy payments (Autor 2001). In short, agencies make it possible for employers to have flexible workforces and be able to add or dismiss employees as production requires. Consequently, Kalleberg refers to agency workers as a modern day 'reserve army of labour' (Kalleberg 2000: 348).

The economic geography literature focuses attention on agency activities within national labour markets, leaving them – in relation to hiring labour overseas – largely un-theorised. However, a body of useful research has sought to explore how agencies, when supplying migrant workers, may go beyond marketing the attributes of agency labour as a form of workforce organisation, to pitch the specific and racialised 'attributes' of workers. In a study of agencies in the Philippines which recruited nannies and domestic workers for

overseas destinations, Guevarra (2010) found that these businesses worked to promote and transform Filipino labour into an 'idealised' workforce in order to obtain business. In contrast, Geraldine Pratt (1999), in a study of nanny agencies in Toronto, found that these firms deliberately juxtaposed the 'characteristics' of nannies from the Philippines, presenting a racialised duality between the (white) European nannies – represented as superior in training and in decorum – and the (non-white) Asian nannies – shown as uncivilised and poorly motivated. The explanation lies, argues Pratt, in attempts by agencies to construct a two-tier wage structure between the nannies and to displace demands for higher wages, in order to more effectively compete with other recruiters. Those who attempted to subvert expectations were accordingly constructed by agencies as greedy; agencies promoted the idea that nannies from the Philippines should be grateful for the wages they received in Canada, which were substantially higher than those received at home (Pratt 1999; see also England, Stiell 1997).

The literature also reveals many similarities between the theorisation of why employers want to hire agency workers, and of how they seek to employ migrant labour. As with agency workers, employers may also seek to hire migrant labour in order to avoid or to undermine trade unions (Kelly 2002; Preibisch 2010). Similarly, hiring migrant labour may be a way to resolve temporary 'shortages of labour' which would otherwise have to be resolved by raising salaries in order to attract more candidates (Piore 1979). Hiring migrant workers, therefore, may be an especially attractive solution to employers who are looking to resolve profitability crises in labour-intensive, low-wage sectors of advanced industrial economies, including horticulture (Castles, Kosack 1973; Piore 1979; Rogaly 2008). Of additional benefit to employers is their belief that migrant workers will work harder and for longer hours, thus enhancing profitability in the long term (McDowell, Batitzky, Dyer 2007; Preibisch 2010). As Kalleberg (2000: 348) refers to the temporary workforce as a 'reserve army' so also do scholars conceptualise migrant workforces as a 'reserve army' of labour (Castles, Kosack 1973; Miles 1982).

The following section documents the political and economic context in which recruiting from Poland occurred.

## The context in which agencies' competive strategies developed

Agencies comprise a small, but expanding, subsection of a much larger and immensely profitable global professional and business-services industry, which includes ITC and telecommunications, legal services, distribution and logistics, and financial services (Coe, Johns, Ward 2007). Agencies which are specifically engaged in cross-border recruitment also sit within a wider 'migration industry,' which includes travel agents, immigration consultants, insurance brokers and others (Gammeltoft-Hansen, Nyberg Sørensen 2013; Goss, Lindquist 1995). No data exist on the number of businesses, people within the 'migration industry,' or migrants who are facilitated across national borders, nor to the migration industry's profitability, although reference has been made to the 'multi-billion dollar' revenues generated (Kyle 2000: 66). There is, nevertheless, a consensus that this industry has evolved and grown with new forms of businesses and subcontracting business relationships evident within global production networks (Barrientos 2011). The rise of subcontracted labour should be understood in the context of neoliberalism, flexibilisation and the deregulation of global labour markets (Harvey 2007). In other words, agency work has thrived within labour-market environments in which state regulation has sought to encourage *labour markets to behave more like 'real' markets, to strengthen the play of competitive pressures, to erode social protections and to de-collectivise employment relationships* (Peck *et al*. 2005: 6; see also Allen, Henry 1997).

In addition to the benefits gained from neoliberalism in terms of their market-share, the temporary-agency industry has travelled some distance in the legitimising of its activities. Most critically, and overturning

a previous policy advocating a ban on fee-charging agencies, the International Labour Conference adopted the Private Employment Agencies Convention No. 181 in 1997, which declared agencies to be contributing factors in well-functioning capitalist labour markets (International Labour Organisation 1997). As a result, the political clout of its collective voices has continued to accelerate (cf. Gonos 1997; Peck *et al*. 2005). At the same time, the approach taken within the EU towards the industry, in particular by the European Commission (EC), has been generally favourable (*cf*. European Commision 2003). Support for the industry has been in alignment with the EC's objective of removing barriers to the movement of labour which lay at the heart of the Lisbon and Stockholm Agreements, the European Employment Strategy and the Job Mobility Action Plans of 2002 and 2007 (*cf*. European Commission 2002, 2007). Worker mobility within the EU, including that facilitated by temporary-work agencies, has been explicitly linked to better-functioning labour markets and more competitive and dynamic economies (European Policy Centre 2010; Eurociett 2009; Eurofound 2006; European Commission 2007; Janiak, Wasmer 2008).

In the UK, the industry has been considered to be barely regulated (Geddes, Scott, Nielsen 2007). The Employment Agencies Act 1973 introduced a requirement for agencies to be licensed, formalising the pre-existing, localised and *ad hoc* requirements introduced by some local authorities (Forde 2008). Licensing, as it turned out, was relatively short-lived as, 21 years later, Prime Minister Thatcher removed it with a clause inserted into the 1994 Deregulating and Contracting Out Act (s35, Schedule 10), consistent with the broadening of the national labour market from structural regulation into more individualistic *post-hoc* regulation aimed at penalising anti-competitive or fraudulent behaviour (*cf*. Cerny 2000).

During the course of the 2000s, licensing requirements were re-introduced in five sectors. Agencies active in the supply of temporary workers to domiciliary social-care establishments were required under the terms of the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Domiciliary Care Regulations 2002 to apply for a licence to operate. Quite tellingly, though, the intent was to improve standards in social-care delivery rather than the employment protection of domiciliary-care agency workers (2003). Subsequently, the 2004 Gangmasters (Licensing) Act (implemented in 2006) re-introduced licensing requirements for agencies – or 'gangmasters' in the legal terminology of the Act – active in supplying labour to agriculture, horticulture, shellfishery and forestry. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) was established in order to tackle business fraud and reduce worker exploitation in these sectors, which had low rates of trade-union penetration, and long traditions of informal employment practices (Scott, Geddes, Nielsen, Brindley 2007: 4). The four sectors, however, only accounted for around 10 per cent of the estimated temporary-staffing industry, described as one of the toughest and most fiercely competitive in Europe (Geddes *et al*. 2007; Scott *et al*. 2007). Critically, the GLA's licensing standards have required any agencies operating from outside, but supplying labour into, the UK, whether directly to an employer or *via* a third-party agency to be licensed (GLA 2006). This requirement entailed agencies to comply with their own domestic national regulations in the country of origin, as well as with the licensing standards set by the GLA. However, by 2007, only seven Polish agencies had registered with the GLA (Geddes *et al*. 2007: 94).

It was in this context that, after 1997, the New Labour government in the UK embarked on a bold, but often bumpy, road to link immigration to the demands of the labour market (Anderson, Ruhs 2010; Flynn 2003). In support of his government's decision to not impose any restrictions on Central and Eastern European (CEE) nationals after May 2004, Prime Minister Blair argued that migrant workers could make up essential shortages in the UK labour market – they could do the jobs that British workers did not want to do (Blair 2004). There was an unambiguous policy to replace the often irregular workforce servicing the bottom end of the labour market with newly 'Europeanised' workers from CEE states (Anderson, Ruhs 2010; Home Office 2002: 77–78). In 2000, the then Home Office Minister for Immigration, Barbara Roche, signalled a new approach to immigration in a speech made to the British Bankers' Association at an event organised by the

Institute of Public Policy Research. In this speech, the Minister declared that Britain needed more, not less, immigration (BBC 2000), and signalled the elevation of the 'market': *You need to listen to what the business community is saying to you as to what it wants… We noticed [that] there were reports during the summer of strawberry fields where fruit was rotting because there was nobody to pick it. Well then, you have to respond accordingly* (cited in Ashley 2000). This was in tune with a neo-monetarist approach presiding at the British Treasury; *Immigrants keep inflation down*, emphasised Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, in no uncertain terms (Trefgarne 2005). Securing access to sufficient external sources of labour, such as Polish workers, was presented as critical to the UK's global economic competitiveness (Home Office 2005; House of Lords 2008).

As a result of the British government's decision to not impose transitional controls, as they were entitled to do under the Treaties of Accession, the number of Polish workers applying for a National Insurance Number in order to legally work in the UK rose from 50 000 in 2004 to over 200 000 in 2006 and 2007, before dropping significantly after 2008 (Department of Work and Pensions 2012). A flood of empirical research identified that the Polish workers who came to the UK in the early years following free movement were predominantly young, well-educated, spoke some English and came alone rather than with families (Burrell 2009; Green, Jones, Owen 2007, Green *et al.* 2008; Hardy 2009). Although Poles were evident in all sectors of the labour market, studies identified that they were over-represented in some sectors, including in agency work (McDowell *et al.* 2009; Trade Union Congress 2007; Wills, Datta, Evans, Herbert, May, McIllwaine 2010). The following section briefly outlines the research methods employed in this study.

## Research methods

The research in this article is focused on the period between Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004 and that of the onset of the recession in late 2007, early 2008. Agency and employer activities during this period exerted considerable influence on the nature and channels of labour-migration flows (McCollum, Shubin, Apsite, Krisjane 2013). Senior representatives from a total of eighteen agencies – ten in the UK and eight in Poland – participated in in-depth interviews and engaged in follow-up email discussions and telephone calls between 2008 and 2012.[1] Interviewees were either the owners or senior managers of the agencies who had been in post prior to 2008 and were thus able to share knowledge based on their own experience. All had recruited Polish workers into the UK during the period under study. Three months of preparatory work for the research indicated that agencies predominantly recruited Polish workers for jobs in food production, driving and logistics, engineering and light industrial manufacturing (Fitzgerald 2007; Green *et al.* 2007). Agencies were consequently purposively sampled according to these sectors (Bryman 2012).

Agencies' competitive strategies were analysed at the national scale – that is to say, the fieldwork was not restricted to one particular region of the UK or of Poland. This was in part due to the lack of any pre-existing empirical knowledge about the phenomenon at the national scale and in part a wish to analyse how agency activities, including their organisational geographies, were shaped by national frameworks of regulation (Coe *et al.* 2008; Peck 2001). An additional 35 key informants in Poland and the UK (including government officials, regulators, and trade-unionist and civil-society representatives) were also interviewed, and agency promotional materials, websites and media reports were analysed (Yeung 1995).

Before proceeding, some definitions of terms utilised in the research are required. Agencies mediate or broker employment relations between employers and workers for a monetary fee (Peck, Theodore 1998). This definition incorporates the recruiting agencies and agents who are one or more steps removed from the physical act of mediation in the country of origin of the worker (see, for example, Barrientos 2011). Although, globally, the industry is heterogeneous (Coe *et al.* 2007), almost 90 per cent of agency profits in the

UK arise out of the placement of temporary agency workers in largely low-wage labour markets (Key Note 2008). Temporary agency work is clearly defined by the triangular nature of the employment relationship – between the agency, the employer and the worker (Coe *et al*. 2010) and is therefore differentiated from fixed-term employment in that the agency worker, unlike fixed-term or permanent employees, holds a contract with the agency and not with the employer who expropriates the labour. Whereas temporary staffing agencies profit from a 'per-head' fee for the placement of fixed-term employees, agencies profit from an extraction of a portion of these workers' wages (Parker 1994; Vosko 2000). In effect, agencies 'rent' the labour power of temporary agency workers to employers.

Agencies engaged in international (cross-border) recruitment also commonly deliver ancillary services associated with migration, such as transportation, accommodation, loans, equipment and insurance, for all of which a fee is charged to the workers, to the employers or to both (Hernández-León 2008). The following section analyses why agencies in highly competitive markets went to Poland to recruit agency workers.

## 'Making markets'

Agency interviewees enthused about the period between 2004 and 2007 and the onset of recession, referring to it fondly as a bonanza – a time when business was good. As one exclaimed: *It was a whirlwind: a lot of people made a lot of money* (A08, Bristol, April 2009).[2] For the British agencies, the eastwards expansion of the EU and the British government's decision not to impose transitional controls on new EU nationals opened up new competitive opportunities. A senior manager in a British agency specialising in engineering and construction recruitment explained how his boss had conducted extensive market research before proposing that the firm start recruiting engineers from Poland: *My group director took it upon himself to look at a source of supply within Eastern Europe. We looked at a few countries, but Poland was, primarily, for a number of reasons, the choice* (A14, Warsaw, March 2009). For this firm, Poland was just the first stop in an expansionary drive, which later saw them open an office in Dubai, UAE. But, in the mid-2000s, *We saw Poland really as a gateway to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe* (A14, Warsaw, March 2009).

Such directness was not evident among the other British agency representatives interviewed for this research – for most, the strategy was a more gradual process. This group reflected on how they made the decision to recruit from Poland either after they saw their competitors doing do successfully or because they had become familiar with Polish nationals who had arrived independently in the UK, as this quote from a company director in Somerset illustrates.

*We stumbled on the Eastern European route. We had tried everything else. Nothing had worked and we thought we might as well give this a go as well. So, in the summer of 2005, we had a need for about 80 migrant workers, and 32 of them turned out to be Polish. Pure fluke. No design behind it at all. At the time we didn't even know the make-up of the European Union or anything like that* (A30, Somerset, April 2009).

Following what he regarded as a successful recruitment campaign 'for migrant workers' – and at this point, he recounted, his agency was happy to recruit 'any nationality,' this director decided that he preferred hiring Polish workers over and above any other nationalities, including British workers. He had subsequently sought out a business-partner agency in Poland which could help him to recruit Poles directly into the UK.

For all, the date of 1 May 2004, when Polish nationals could freely move to, and take up employment in, the UK, was critical. None of the interviewees had previously recruited from Poland prior to this date. For agencies this meant that, for the first time, they could (legally) hire Polish nationals as temporary agency

workers (Ruhs 2006). Although many Poles were already working in the UK before this date (Fihel, Kaczmarczyk, Okólski. 2006), agencies were (and are) precluded from acting as 'employers' for immigration sponsorship purposes according to British immigration law. In effect, this prevents agencies from (legally) hiring anyone who is subject to immigration control as an agency worker, although they can recruit foreign nationals on behalf of employers.

Underpinning agencies' innovations was the fact that, in 2004, agencies were operating in highly competitive localised temporary agency market in the UK. The number of agency businesses registered for VAT almost trebled from 6 500 in 1994 to 16 800 in 2005 (BERR 2008), the highest number in the EU at that time (CIETT 2010). By 2004, agency work was familiar across all sectors and industries of the UK (*cf.* Audit Commission 2011; Forde, Slater 2008; Hoque, Kirkpatrick 2008), although it was employers in agriculture, horticulture and food manufacturing who were especially dependent on this form of labour (Rogaly 2008; Scott 2013). Consequently, a 2004 government-commissioned survey of the 'gangmasters' active in these sections of the labour market estimated that there was a 'top tier' of 500 to 600 agencies supported by a base of 1 000 to 2 000 small and micro labour providers (Precision Prospecting 2004). In the same year, Brass (2004) estimated that, in total, there were between 3 000 and 4 000 agencies actively supplying agency workers to rural jobs, indicating a high degree of saturation in these markets.

In addition, agencies were struggling to recruit sufficient workers to meet employer demand for agency labour, which they need to be able to do in order to win contracts and stay competitive (Ofstead 1999). A 2007 survey conducted among agencies confirmed that, during this period, these businesses were finding recruitment challenging – what the industry refers to as a 'candidate-short' market during the 2000s (TB01, London, January 2009; Key Note 2008). High vacancy levels were reported in social care, engineering – especially in the energy sector – and food production across the UK labour market (Cangiano, Shutes, Spencer, Leeson 2009; House of Commons 2007; REC 2008; SEMTA 2007).

A recruitment consultant reflected on why his agency had invested in recruiting engineers directly from Poland in 2005:

*We started to find new enquiries from nowhere. Companies were coming to us with recommendations and other recommended companies, etc., etc… It was so obvious for us. It was just emails upon emails, phone calls upon phone calls, faxes upon faxes from the clients* (A08, Bristol, April 2009).

A deluge of what he referred to as 'job orders' for the West Country-based aerospace industry had, according to him, created a correspondingly high level of demand for CNC operators, welders and other more highly skilled engineers for which he had no ready supply of workers who could operate on a temporary contractual basis: *We just could not find enough people locally*. For this recruiter, the response was, quite simply, 'obvious': go to Poland to recruit.

Agencies echoed the familiar refrain heard in the UK at the time – i.e. that migrant workers from Eastern Europe were desperately needed to fill vacancies in the UK labour market which employers were unable to fill (*cf.* Dench, Hurstfield, Hill, Ackroyd 2006; Green *et al*. 2007, 2008; House of Commons 2007; SEMTA 2007). Recruiters, reminiscing about the period from 2004 to 2008 when business was so good for them, juxtaposed the imagery of British employers knocking on their doors for workers, with images of Polish workers queuing up at airports and bus stations in Poland seeking the agencies' assistance in finding jobs in the UK, as one recruiter depicted:

*[t]here was a large abundance of people [in Poland] who were quite young, well educated, English was the sort of language that people would speak when they came out of education. The unemployment levels*

*were 18 to 20 per cent in some pocket areas, up to 30 per cent. After 2004 [in Poland], agencies were so overflowed with CVs, with candidates. People knocking at doors every day with 10s and 100s of 'Do you have a job?'* (A08, Bristol, UK, March 2009).

According to the agencies, they were providing a service in matching the erstwhile under- or unemployed Polish workers with job opportunities in the UK. Recruiting agency workers from Poland enabled these agencies to compete. Scholars remind us, though, that the act of matching 'supply' (workers) with 'demand' (employers) is not a neutral function (Hanson, Pratt 1995). Interviewees acknowledged that the reason why they could not meet employer demand was not because there were simply no people locally, but because locals did not want the particular jobs that agencies were offering. A small agency owner explained that, for him, the problem was that the local population did not want to work at 'his' food-processing factory:

*[t]he low skill level, the low pay, the messiness of the job, the premium there is to being on the dole – the less likely you are to get people* (A30, Somerset, UK, April 2009).

Agencies whose business lay in the social-care sector echoed this refrain: local (British) workers did not want to work the unsocial hours for low pay in what, agency interviewees acknowledged, were often poor working conditions – these often included being hired as an agency worker (Hussein, Manthorpe, Stevens. 2010). In other words, British workers who were still in a position to be able to refuse to do this type of work were doing so (Low Pay Commission 2008; Moriarty, Manthorpe, Hussein, Cornes 2008; Piore 1979; Scott 2013).

Although not able to persuade British workers, agencies could, on the other hand, persuade Polish workers to come to the UK to take up these jobs. Agencies were guaranteeing that they, and the employers, had an adequate supply of labour to hand (Findlay, McCollum 2013), recognising that, at that time, young Polish nationals had few opportunities at home, which the agencies could capitalise on. The owner of one Polish agency (A02, Krakow, February 2009) argued that Polish workers did not mind taking low-status and low-paid jobs due to a different frame of reference (Waldinger, Lichter 2003). The migrants knew that they were going to return one day to Poland because, generally, the plan after their studies in Poland is to make some money, buy an apartment and then start their professional life. Thus many people, when they finish their studies, just move for one or two years to gain international experience.

Eastern European nationals were, in other words, more exploitable than British workers (House of Lords 2008). Another interviewee was even more explicit about why he preferred to hire workers direct from Poland and why this worked for him as a competitive strategy: *In 2006, if I was doing [recruiting] a British welder, if I asked him to work for 7.50 GBP an hour he would laugh at me. The going rate for a welder was 10 GBP an hour, minimum* (A08, Bristol, April 2009). In contrast, Polish engineers, he argued, were grateful to find a position in the UK; 7.50 GBP an hour was acceptable to them in a way which it was not to British engineers. In short, British agencies' competitive strategies rested on Polish workers' willingness to work for less pay; they were selling and providing 'cheaper' labour to employers. This, however, was not the only factor which was attractive to British agencies in deciding to recruit from Poland.

**'They take instructions well'**

Once they had made the decision to recruit directly from Poland, the British agencies promoted their new service on their company websites, in printed material such as flyers, and in their conversations with potential clients. The owner of a family business in the South West, which recruited Polish nationals into local

food-production factories, happily recounted making handshake deals for Polish workers over lunch with local employers, and even at his local cricket club (A30, Somerset, UK, April 2009). Everyone wanted his Poles, he remarked. As another respondent observed: *The branding to us as a recruiter of* Polish *labour is very important to us* (A08, Bristol, April 2009). One Polish agency director, when asked how he found clients for his Polish workers, shrugged his shoulders and said *I have simply the same action: you have to call one hundred cold calls, and then to meet three and maybe [there is] one client from it* (A01, Opole, April 2009). This, he explained, was the same wherever and whenever agencies operated, regardless of whether or not it was migrant workers they were attempting to place; it was 'obvious.' Agencies cold-called potential clients offering them workers direct from Poland.

Sam Scott (2013) has detailed how British employers deliberately sought Eastern European workers for particular types of employment, constructing nationals of these countries as 'good workers.' A British agent who specialised in recruiting Polish engineers for the energy sector explained how employer demand for Polish workers influenced his business:

> *We were finding from the feedback from the clients that quite often they were typing into Google 'Polish welder,' 'Polish CNC.' The news proliferates very fast so, in the engineering environment, Polish welders are huge. And we were going to them first offering th*is (A08, Bristol, April 2009).

Several interviewees described how they thought carefully about how to position their website branding as recruiters of Polish workers, or even paid for Search Engine Optimisation so that employers would find them on the first page of search engines. The branding became part of the competitive strategy, helping agencies to be noticed by employers amongst the market of other agencies, many of which, by 2005, were also recruiting Polish workers. Advertising being able to recruit *directly* from Poland was, one interviewee argued, a plus factor in competing for contracts, as her strapline advertised:

> *As a European recruitment specialist, [we] provide access to an increasingly mobile and flexible workforce. With an office in Poland [we have] an ideal link with Eastern Europe and the availability of skilled workers there* (A09, Rzeszow, April 2009).

Agencies did not, however, stop at simply advertising to employers that they recruited directly from Poland. Much as Canadian research documented how agencies marketed the migrant nannies and domestic workers they recruited in racialised terms with the objective of creating a two-tier workforce (Pratt 1999), so British agencies marketed Polish workers as 'hard-working' and 'having a superior work ethic.' The owner of one agency explained that, in the early years after 2004, he had no problem in finding clients because: *They [Polish workers] were the cream of the cream. Most were under 25… And they were so well educated* (A30, Somerset, April 2009). On this, he said, he was in agreement with employers. Another agent who recruited workers from Poland for jobs in food production and driving added: *They also had a very good working attitude. They were very good workers* (A30, Somerset, April 2009).

When asked what was meant by 'a Polish work ethic' it was clear that, for the British agencies, this was less to do with ability or motivation, but more associated with a belief that Polish workers would be less inclined to complain about their work environment and less likely to be unionised. An interviewee who recruited for food manufacturing factories shared this approvingly: *They [Polish workers] take instructions well. And they have an almost 1970s' or 1980s' attitude towards hierarchical structures* (A04, Somerset, April 2009). These were also the particular 'skills' required by this type of agency work, which might involve shift work, being notified of work at short notice, short-term, possible daily contracts and extended and

required overtime (Rogaly 2008). The skills required for these jobs were, the agent continued, a capacity both to do what they were told by their foreman, and to work long hours without complaining. In other words, 'work ethic' was related to employers' ability to generate higher productivity from migrant workers (Burawoy 1976).

In order to obtain clients, it was not enough for agencies to simply 'talk up' the Polish workers. Agencies also engaged in discourse highlighting to employers the 'positive' qualities of Polish workers *versus* the so-called negative qualities of British and other migrant workers. One agency owner spoke of why Polish workers were 'better' than the local British population: *With every employee, you get a brain. But with the Poles it actually functions okay! So that's a bonus* (A30, Somerset, April 2009). He was negatively contrasting the 'good workers' from Poland whilst shaking his head about the local unemployed workers that he said did not want 'his' jobs: the 'benefit scroungers' as he called them. When talking about the later accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007, he also negatively compared the 'hard-working' Polish nationals with the so-called 'gypsies' from these countries: *I tell my clients not to bother with people from Romania and Bulgaria. Poles are much bette*r (A30, Somerset, April 2009). This was, he explained, useful for him as it was Polish workers that he recruited.

Much has already been written about how employers construct 'migrant hiring queues' (*cf.* Scott 2013; Wills *et al*. 2010). In an earlier study, Linda McDowell (2003) found evidence of this discourse in employers' decisions in hiring migrants over white working-class labour, deliberately positioning the latter as lazy and unwilling to work. Engaging in these discriminatory practices and discourse made logical business sense for agencies, which had a financial incentive for complying with employers' prejudices, as ignoring them would mean losing contracts with potential client employers to their competitors who were hiring Polish workers (Peck, Theodore 2001; Tyner 1996). On the other hand, agencies made it possible for employers to hire Polish workers. The following section analyses how volume, speed and simplicity were essential components of the flexibilised labour they offered to employers.

**'Fast and easy Polish workers'**

Although many Polish workers arrived independently in the UK, and agencies could have attempted to hire them once there, a critical component of agencies' strategy between 2004 and 2007 was to recruit *directly* from Poland. Technically this bypasses the Race Equality Act (1976) which makes discriminatory advertising within the UK for a particular nationality of worker illegal. In addition, one interviewee reflected ruefully, Polish workers already in the UK tended to make their own choices about which jobs they wanted to do, whereas those who arrived straight from Poland were more likely to accept the jobs that agencies offered to them.

Recruiting directly from Poland also enabled agencies to mobilise the high volumes of workers which employers might require. This was especially the case in food production, in which up to a third of jobs are filled by agencies (Scott 2013). One interviewee explained that, in some parts of the food-production system, up to 95 per cent of staff on any one day might be agency workers (TB02, London, March 2009). As one recruiter, now relocated in Warsaw, reminisced, *In the early days, we had so many coming over we used to just book whole planes. Well, almost* (A14, Warsaw, March 2009).

However, it was during 2004 to 2005 that any of the British agencies first ventured into recruiting outside the UK. None had prior experience on which to draw to devise their new strategies. One firm, quoted above, had embarked on their overseas strategy after conducting market research, including how to go about recruiting from Poland. This had involved working in partnership with the British Polish Chamber of Commerce (BPCC), which had advised them how to set up an office in Poland, from where to recruit, and even which

transportation companies to utilise. Others, unfamiliar with Poland, its regulations or its language, took a shorter, quicker route, subcontracting recruitment to Polish agencies which were ready and willing to do so. As one UK respondent explained: *I know the British market fully and completely. I don't speak Polish; I don't know where to find the right workers – the ones that are right for us. They do* (A30, Somerset, April 2009).

In 2004, agency work was still a relatively unfamiliar concept in Poland (Coe *et al.* 2008). For agencies operating in this market, recruiting Poles for overseas employment offered infinitely more business opportunities than at home. As a consequence, Polish recruiters earned their income through sending Poles to temporary jobs all over Western, Northern and Southern Europe (Elrick, Lewandowska 2008; Pijpers 2010; Sula 2008). According to one recent study, the number of agencies in Poland providing 'foreign services' quadrupled over the 2000s (Fiałkowska, Napierała 2013). The owner of a Polish agency based in Silesia gesticulated as he explained: *I have an expression: for the bread I am working in Poland at home. And for the ham on the bread I am working abroad* (A01, Opole, April 2009).

Subcontracting relationships between British and Polish agencies were instigated by recruiters from either side, with online internet searches common to how Polish and UK firms 'found' each other. A Krakow agency owner recounted: *[I]t was just recommendation. Even today , the companies call and say 'I heard that you supply staff, we heard that you do it well, so we would like to work with you'* (A06, Krakow, April 2009). Another Polish agency owner explained how the relationship worked: *We are the recruitment agency. The insurances and taxes are lower in the UK. So it's cheaper to employ them in the UK as temporary workers*. He contrasted this with the situation in France:

> *Not like in France. We employ the people in Poland – we pay the taxes and insurances over here. And we send them over to the clients over there because the taxes and insurances are cheaper over here. In the UK it's [the] opposite. So it's cheaper if we employ them over there. So then the end client likes it* (A02, Krakow, February 2009).

In other words, according to this agency, although Polish workers were cheap to recruit and hire, the difference in agency and employment regulations between Poland and the UK meant it was cheaper to send Poles to the UK for the British agency to supply to the employer. Polish recruiters mobilised workers for jobs in the UK through job fairs and internet job boards and even with the assistance of giant advertising billboards, strategically placed along Poland's main highways. According to one Krakow-based agent, fairs for temporary jobs in the UK were held in *Shergine, in Rzeszow. Krakow. Katowice, Poznan. We had them all round Poland* (A09, Rzeszow, April 2009). Other Polish recruiters, specialised in recruiting for the UK, opened offices around Poland. 'Word-of-mouth' recruitment was also especially important to Polish agencies because it was cheaper: *We spend an enormous amount on advertising and on PR, but this only gives us 20 per cent of our employees*. The other 80 per cent, he explained, came from far cheaper 'word-of-mouth' recruitment (A03, Opole, March 2009). Agencies also advertised for workers on job portals and through social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and the Polish social network *Nasza Klasa* ('Our Class').

Meanwhile, British agencies competed for contracts with clients on the basis of how many Polish workers they could supply, and how quickly the migrants could start work. Agencies pitched 'fast-and-easy' migrant labour to employers, as Figure 1, a screenshot of a 2007 Polish agency website targeted at the UK market, demonstrates.

One interviewee, representing a British recruiter, boasted how, in less than a week after having the first conversation with the client employer, he could ensure the delivery of 100 Polish temporary workers at the required workplace: *In some cases, we'd get an order for 100 workers on a Tuesday afternoon, then have*

*flights booked and them all there ready to start on a Monday morning* (A14, Warsaw, March 2009). As the British agencies competed with each other for contracts with employers based on the speed with which they could turn round high-volume recruitment, the Polish agencies, in turn, competed to obtain business from the British agencies based on how quickly they could mobilise recruits to the UK. A Polish interviewee made an analogy between the Polish recruits whom he sent to the UK and fresh food; if the time between selection and placing in temporary employment was too great – which he defined as approximately three days – then the worker would 'go off': *Many times I'm making the comparison: our branch is like a selling point with goods* (A01, Opole, April 2009).

To facilitate speedy recruitment, agencies conducted only basic screening checks so that recruits could be put on a plane or bus as soon as possible. A Polish agency manager explained that, while he undertook some checks on the welders and care assistants he recruited, he made very few on workers to be supplied for food--processing jobs:

> *We were checking the references. We organised everything by telephone, by email. They didn't have to come [to see us]. If we had a good person we just checked the references* (A06, Krakow, April 2009).

In other words, his agency did not even meet with the candidates face-to-face. Job selection was a simple exercise to be undertaken by telephone or by computer. What he meant by a 'good person' was simply that their CV matched expectations and their references were appropriate, he explained. A British interviewee went even further: *Really, we checked that they are who they say they are. That they can speak English – well a bit! That they have two feet, two hands, etc.* (A30, Somerset, April 2009). More than one agency respondent who recruited from Poland explained that it was not necessary for all employees to speak fluent English in order to work in the UK:

> *It is important. It's not like, you know, picking up British papers. You need to be able to communicate with the clients at the basic level to be able to understand what the job is and to be able to communicate with them* (A08, Rzeszow, April 2009).

While the Polish agencies mobilised workers, the British agencies focused on managing the insertion of the Polish workers into employment as quickly as possible after they set foot on British soil. One interviewee described the endeavours his agency made when organising the recruitment of Polish nationals during the period 2004 to 2008:

> *We were helping them with national insurance, with bank accounts, with the Home Office. Yes with WRS [Workers Registration Scheme] forms. We were finding accommodation. We were arranging plane tickets. Train tickets. They had full support from us. They had all of the maps and all the information. And which bus they had to take. And which stop they needed to get off at – just the full package* (A09, Rzeszow, April 2009).

This constituted what another interviewee labelled an *all-inclusive package, just like the holidays* (A06, Krakow, April 2009), although working on a food-production line as an agency worker was far from being a holiday (*cf.* Lawrence 2013). These workers were 'ready to go' – 'just-in-time workers' (*cf.* Herod 2000; Moody 1997).

**'And then it downsised'**

And then it all changed. Just as quickly as it had flourished, agency-led direct recruitment from Poland into the UK slowed to a trickle. The whirlwind was over. At the time that this research was conducted, the UK recruiters in this sample had largely stopped recruiting directly from Poland: *And then it downsised… There's no massive structure any more*, related one interviewee sorrowfully (A10, Warsaw, March 2009). Nevertheless, Polish workers who were already in the UK still comprised a significant component of their temporary agency workforce in the UK.

There were two connected factors which contributed to why direct recruitment from Poland into the UK had mostly ceased by 2008. The first was that, in 2008, after a continuous period of economic growth during the 2000s, the UK and the rest of Europe (with the exception of Poland) had moved into an economic recession with its associated knock-on effects on employment. In the UK, 2.4 million people were recorded as unemployed (HM Treasury 2009) and, as one interviewee argued, *At crisis time, employers don't need any more low-skilled people; there's a shortage of high-skilled people* (A07, Lancashire, August 2009). As another put it:

> *In the last nine to 12 months, there's been a massive shift because of the UK crisis. Naturally there have been a lot of UK people in the market looking for work so there hasn't been a need for us to supply anyone from Poland, or from any other EU state to work in the UK* (A08, Bristol, April 2009).

Secondly, by 2008, almost one million Polish workers were already in the UK, having arrived either *via* an agency or independently. This meant that UK recruiters could simply advertise in the UK for Polish workers, most often through advertising in Polish language albeit illegal according to anti-discrimination law (Craven 2010; EHRC 2010). Some sought to recruit through Polish social networks, as one Polish employee of a UK-based agency explained:

> *I was Polish so it was quite easy for me to access those niches. And Polish shops, Polish newspapers – it was much easier for us to find skilled Polish CNC operators than in England. We targeted a niche. Like I said, Polish shops, Polish newspapers, websites, friends, etc., etc. We could get really good people that way* (A09, Rszeszow, April 2009).

Another spoke of the queues of Polish workers who continued to weave their way around the streets near his office, despite the recessionary labour-market conditions (A08, Bristol, April 2009).

Overall, Polish nationals no longer had as much need of an agency to organise migration if they wished to go to the UK. By 2008, Poles who wished to work in the UK were more likely to know a friend or a family member who had been to the UK, and who could assist or advise them. Many, by this point, also spoke English (Garapich 2008; White, Ryan 2008). As one respondent argued: *Poles have become more settled since 2003. They create some links, it's easier now, they know how the system works. They don't rely on the formal agencies and they try to find work by themselves* (A10, Warsaw, March 2009). Even without this, Poles were still able to travel independently to the UK and approach an agency once there, as one UK respondent explained: *Often they arrive having heard about us* (A04, Somerset, April 2009). In addition, many chose to stay at home, able to find employment in a much improved Polish labour market (Fiałkowska, Napierała 2013).

In introducing the business of international recruitment, an industry representative emphatically asserted that *Agencies would always prefer to go to a candidate down the road; this is the easiest for them and for the*

*employer* (TB01, London, January 2009). The changing labour-market conditions and the increase in Polish workers already in the UK, or savvy enough to know how to get there independently, meant that British agencies could return to doing exactly that (Findlay, McCollum 2013).

## Conclusion

This article has placed employment agencies – an often-ignored labour-market intermediary within academic accounts (Coe *et al*. 2010) – centre stage in order to analyse why and how, from 1 May 2004 until the onset of the recession in late 2007, early 2008, British employment agencies embarked on recruiting low-wage workers from Poland. It has argued that agencies, as capitalist profit-making businesses (Ofstead 1999) identified asignificant new business opportunity after 1 May as, from that date, agencies were, for the first time, (legally) allowed to hire Polish nationals as 'agency workers' (Ruhs 2006). Operating in highly competitive labour markets at the low-wage end of the UK labour market enabled agencies to resolve what had become a temporary crisis through being able to source sufficient numbers of local workers at a price that employers were willing to pay (REC 2008). This was a particular problem for employers in industries such as food production, which had an overwhelming reliance on agency labour. In turn, agencies rely on having access to sufficient sources of labour if they wish to remain competitive (Ofstead 1999).

Despite the distance, the differences in language, in labour markets and in regulatory frameworks, British agencies were able, through outsourcing recruitment to Polish agencies, to facilitate high-speed recruitment, and place 'plane-loads' of Polish workers in employment within a matter of days from receiving a 'job order' from a client. Most critically, agencies were able to recruit high volumes of migrant workers willing to work long hours for low wages who they had identified as being unlikely to complain about working conditions (Burawoy 1976). The strategies' success relied on British agencies being to deliver workers from Poland 'fast and easy,' with agencies competing on how quickly and how easily they could manage this. Thus British agencies, with few exceptions, subcontracted recruitment to Polish agencies, embarking on new spatial geographies in the process (*cf.* Peck, Theodore 2001). Engaging in transnational subcontracting consequently made it possible for even the smallest agencies to recruit internationally (*cf.* McDowell *et al*. 2009).

Ultimately, agencies made it possible for their clients (employers) to hire migrant labour which, in these industries, was a way of increasing flexibility and productivity and reducing the costs of labour (*cf.* Preibisch 2010; Purcell, Purcell, Tailby 2004). In this way, agencies themselves actively engaged in increasing the flexibility of low-wage labour markets in the UK and throughout the EU (Theodore, Peck 2002). In addition, British and Polish agencies branded themselves as recruiters of 'Polish workers,' marketing them as 'flexible' *vis-à-vis* other workers, using well-understood terms such as 'superior work ethic' to signal the migrants' flexibility to UK employers. This made logical business sense for agencies (Tyner 1996), as employers had also identified Polish nationals as an ideal flexible workforce (Currie 2007; Scott 2013). The ramifications of agency strategies, however, go beyond simply meeting employer demand for particular workers. Agencies influence demand for particular types of worker – including migrants – by making their recruitment possible for employers. Through selectively mobilising particular populations, agencies enable employers to bypass anti-discrimination legislation – what Peck and Theodore refer to as a 'crude sorting function' (2001: 488). Agencies also facilitate the avoidance of regulations associated with standard employment relationships (Theodore, Peck 2002), and evade responsibility for reported exploitation (*cf.* Anti-Slavery International 2006; Lawrence 2013). According to Ofstead (1999: 274) *Part of its [agency industry] growth and success in new areas must be credited to its own efforts in creating demand where it might not otherwise be present*. In short, the industry normalises flexibility not only for employers, but also for workers, labour unions and governments (Gottfried, Fasenfest 2001).

**Notes**

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[2] Codes are used to identify interviewees. The 'A' identifies an agency representative. The 'B' identifies a trade union representative.

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