

Dislocation and Criminality: The ‘Lithuanian Problem’ in East London

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In this article we use the findings of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Newham, East London, to examine how the local police approached what they termed the ‘Lithuanian problem’. With one in ten recorded crimes being attributed to Lithuanian migrants, we detail the police’s attempts to characterise these migrants and divert their energies away from criminal activity. In doing so we draw on three related areas of the academic literature: the nexus between gender and migration, a more specific focus on Lithuanian masculinity, and the insights provided by alien conspiracy theory. We argue that the processes of othering through which police defined Lithuanian criminality not only overlooked intra-group differences but also contributed to the perpetuation of the ‘problem’.

Keywords: Ethnography, crime, migration, gender, masculinity, alien conspiracy theory.

In the year 2009-10, one in ten of all recorded crimes in the London Borough of Newham (LBN) was credited to a group labelled ‘Lithuanians’. This statistic prompted attempts by local police to define and address the ‘problem’. In what follows we seek to describe and analyse these attempts and explore the stories of a number of Lithuanian migrants whose lives and behaviours were the loci of intervention. More specifically, we analyse the findings of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2013 using three related areas of the academic literature: the nexus between gender and migration, a more specific focus on Lithuanian masculinity, and the insights provided by alien conspiracy theory.

We begin by reviewing these areas of the literature before detailing the setting and methods of our ethnographic fieldwork. We proceed to describe police attempts to define and solve the problem, and explore the life stories of three male migrants who were inducted into rehabilitation programmes. The discussion ends by drawing conclusions about police attempts to address the ‘Lithuanian problem’ and describe how these attempts played out.

Migration and Dislocation: Gender, Emotion and Alien Conspiracies

Our review of the extant literature is divided into three parts. The first pertains to migration and masculinity, the second to masculinity and suffering, and the third to alien conspiracy theory. As noted by McIlwaine et al. (2006), research on migration has until relatively recently been subject to skewed perspectives on gender. That is, the orientation of researchers in this area has swung from one underpinned by a set of normative assumptions bound up with male migration and so-called masculine traits, to one which, in seeking to redress the balance, focuses on the specificities of female migration. The first was shot through with migratory dispensations rooted in risk-taking, adventurousness and courageousness. The latter is largely concerned with the emancipatory potential of female migration. The animating principles of male migration have not been cast solely in a positive light; issues including gender violence and desertion have been identified with the plight of male migrants.

This has subsequently been complemented by a more nuanced approach which takes account of how gender influences migration and, in turn, how gender and its associated practices, behaviours and so on are reconstituted through migratory realities. This two-way-dynamic takes place not just in receiving nations and locales but within what scholars have

called ‘transnational social fields’ (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2001, Huang et al. 2000, Mahler 1999, Pessar 2005, Yeoh et al. 2003). It is in moving across borders, becoming aware of expectations and norms attached to gender and relating these to the expectations and norms of one’s own culture that negotiation proceeds. Indeed, this process of negotiation has challenged much of the received wisdom regarding gender and migration, with rites of passage associated with marital eligibility and breadwinner status giving way to the male migrant as ‘trailing spouse’ (a role traditionally reserved for female migrants).

In their study of male migrants working in the low-pay end of London’s service sector, McIlwaine et al. (2006) used research findings on masculinity to make a set of original claims about male migration and embodiment and emotion. They describe how the migratory experience is embodied in ways that correlate with the performative dimensions of gender and, more specifically, how physical events and emotional experiences are hallmarks of gendered migration. They also complicate the narrative in which such low-paid migrant workers are cast as a monolithic group with regard to their social positioning. While this group of male migrants was concentrated at the low-pay end of London’s service sector, this masks the fact that they were drawn from an array of backgrounds in both social class and ethno-national terms. These various class positions inflect migratory paths together with the narratives through which migrants make sense of their current predicaments.

One set of emotional experiences considered by McIlwaine et al. (2006) encompasses anxiety, pain and suffering. This is a theme which dominates discussion of Lithuanian male identity and one which proves significant in our own analysis of Lithuanian male migrants in East London. Tereškinas (2010) has situated the social suffering of Lithuanian men in relation to the dislocation wrought by the transition to post-Soviet rule. Rapid social, economic and political change left many working-class men marginalised and unable to construct the kind of life narratives that would rationalise their plight against a backdrop of newly-minted ‘successful’ masculinities. The resulting deficit in terms of self-worth and feelings of anxiety and despair was mitigated by a set of destructive practices including alcoholism and violence. Men who choose to leave Lithuania do so partly in order to address this deficit but, as we will see, feelings of anxiety and inadequacy continue to find expression in destructive patterns of behaviour while being thrown into relief by gender norms in the host society.

Our final frame of analysis draws on the criminological notion of the alien conspiracy theory. This identifies key threats to the normative order as emanating from alien, essentially foreign sources rather than from within the UK’s own backyard. As a consequence, the response to alien transgression emphasises the deviant pathology of recent arrivals, which becomes extended to entire communities. As Marotta has noted, ‘the stranger comes to symbolize the very ambivalence that the ordering impulse is attempting to destroy’ (2002: 42). We argue that in discourses related to the Lithuanian community, boundaries between natives and ‘foreigners, lower class, ethnic offenders or a combination thereof’ (Van Duyne 2011: 2), constitute a demarcation between criminal and non-criminal via the vehicle of ‘othering’ (Agozino 2000). Through the transgressions of Lithuanian men, these discourses express the identification of aliens as a principal threat to aspects of British society and the subsequent institutionalisation

of othering on the grounds of transgressive ethnicity, a device that highlights the tainting of the UK by foreign criminality.

Settings and Method

The research described in what follows took place between 2011 and 2013 in the East London Borough of Newham (LBN). Situated north of the River Thames, around five miles from the City of London, Newham is one of the poorest boroughs in the UK (ONS 2011). It is also the second most diverse in terms of the ethnicity of its residents. Unlike in other settings, Lithuanians' whiteness could not be used straightforwardly as a resource to blend in (Daukšas 2013). According to the results of the 2011 Census, 29% of Newham's estimated 307,000 population is White (16.7% White British, 0.7% White Irish, 0.2% Gypsy or Irish Traveller, 11.4% Other White), 4.6% of mixed race (1.3% White and Black Caribbean, 1.1% White and Black African, 0.9% White and Asian, 1.3% Other Mixed), 43.5% Asian (13.8% Indian, 12.21% Bangladeshi, 9.8% Pakistani, 1.3% Chinese, 6.5% Other Asian), 19.6% Black (12.3% African, 4.9% Caribbean, 2.4% Other Black), 1.1% Arab and 2.3% of other ethnic heritage. With the highest fertility rate in the country (LBN 2014), this incredibly diverse populace is set to grow rapidly in coming years. In terms of religion, the population of Newham is 40% Christian, 32% Muslim, 9.3% No religion, 8.8% Hindu, 2.1% Sikh, 0.8% Buddhist, 0.1% Jewish (ibid.), with the borough being home to some 35 mosques, 26 Anglican churches, 16 Baptist churches, 12 Catholic parishes and four synagogues.

An ethnographic approach was adopted, with observation, participant observation and in-depth interviews used in combination (O'Reilly 2011, Venkatesh 2008). Avenues of access were secured via the Metropolitan Police Service as part of a wider ethnographic project that examined the policing implications for the London borough of Newham of being the principal host of Olympic venues for London 2012 (Armstrong et al. 2016). Ethnography is particularly relevant as a methodology to facilitate an understanding of marginalised communities (Kearns and Smith 1994). Others exploring the complex social issues associated with crime have recognised the method's potential to give a voice to society's most peripheral groups (Robinson 2002, Emirbayer and Williams 2005, Bourgois and Schonberg 2007). The ethnographic method is thus both a process and a product (Milgate 2007). Making sense of what is witnessed is thus not a simple task. While there are different definitions of 'ethnography', there is broad consensus that the method requires the researcher to understand and articulate the meanings through which social agents encounter the world (Atkinson et al. 2002). That understood, we now seek to explain why the migrants whose stories appear in this article came to be in London.

Go West

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 brought independence the following year to the Baltic state of Lithuania, after 45 years of communist rule. With a population of 3.2 million in 2003, the newly independent state did not deliver economic prosperity to its people. By 2009 the population had shrunk to 2.75 million, as the young and ambitious left their homeland to seek better (i.e. more prosperous) lives most notably in the USA and to a lesser extent Brazil. Following Lithuania's accession to the European Union in May 2004, Norway, Sweden, Spain,

England and Ireland became destinations of Lithuanian migration. A decade on and some 45,000 Lithuanians in the Republic of Ireland constituted 1% of the total population. Employed in construction work that typified the so-called ‘Celtic-Tiger’ economic boom of the Republic, the Lithuanians were the hired muscle for members of the Irish-born population fitting the occupational self-description of ‘Property Developer’. The celebration of the cheapness of the migrants’ labour and their penchant for hard work was slightly off-set by the horror evoked by stories that Lithuanian women were arriving in Dublin — via the budget flights of RyanAir — just days before their expected date of giving birth so as to bear the child in Ireland, register the new-born as ‘Irish’ and thereby assume for that child a life-long entitlement to state benefits.

In England today, some 140,000 Lithuanians are concentrated in Peterborough (Northants), Boston (Lincolnshire) and Kings Lynn (Norfolk), having been attracted to these towns by the opportunity to work in the laborious and notoriously low-paid and unregulated tasks associated with agricultural harvesting and food processing. Additionally, by 2010 an estimated 25,000 Lithuanians were residing in East London, primarily in the borough of Newham, where they worked (especially in the case of women) in the low-paid and generally under-regulated services sector (in many instances in cleaning jobs) and, in the case of men, in the similarly low-paid and unregulated property construction sector. The choice of Newham, we learned anecdotally, was partly down to the presence of a local church and a perceived absence of ‘ownership’. The one Lithuanian church in London was to be found in Bethnal Green a few miles outside Newham. This location was a focus of newly arrived Lithuanian migrants. From here began a search for cheap housing and one district of Newham, Beckton, suited many pockets. The same place was perceived as having no ethnic majority. As one Lithuanian business entrepreneur explained: ‘Sri Lankan, Indians, Africans had ‘their’ areas [...] Beckton had no claim, so we moved into places there.’

The People of Providence

As well as the tens of thousands of Lithuanians living exemplary lives there existed individuals who arrived in the UK with the personal demons that in many cases characterised their lives back in Lithuania. Stereotypically, the Lithuanians of East London were characterised by the police as possessing a combination of features, both intellectual and physical: poorly educated, physically tall and strong, God-fearing (that is, church-attending Catholics) but with a penchant for massive consumption of beer and vodka in leisure time. Such consumption was often linked to violence.

One Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Detective Inspector (DI) had dealt with the Lithuanians of Newham by virtue of his inquiries into Violent Crime in the borough. He had first been alerted to the propensity to heavy drinking and consequent violence amongst Lithuanians by the bodies of two dead Lithuanian seamen found on two boats docked in the borough. Deep frozen and partially decomposed, the bodies bore injuries consistent with violent assault but also potentially some form of industrial accident. The remainder of the Lithuanian crew provided no clues as to what had happened. The same DI had spent the best part of the following 15 months talking with the Lithuanians in the borough, both those who had come to the attention of police and one who held positions that defined him as the spokesmen for the

local Lithuanian community by virtue of his membership of the local police Independent Advisory Group (IAG). The DI's profile of Lithuanians was succinct:

They're a brutalised people historically occupied by Germany and then Russia [...] always under the heel of a bigger nation. They work hard for poor wages. And they drink like there's no tomorrow — they don't count beer as 'drink'. Drink for them is Vodka. They drink at home more than in pubs, but that's when trouble starts; they get totally pissed, start getting argumentative, then hit one another. That's when we get to know them.'

For a variety of socio-cultural reasons many Lithuanians carry a variety of personal 'baggage' which outwardly manifest itself in a propensity to addiction of both (or either) alcohol and drugs. For police, one possible reason for this was the decades of repressive Soviet domination. Drawing on what might best be described as political-psycho-analysis, for many Lithuanians this repression was internalized (external dissent would result in arrest and worse), manifesting itself in a collective pessimism and individualised in a mass morbidity characterized by habitual alcohol consumption. When the decades of Soviet rule ended, certain circumstances did not change. Research published in 2010 listed the following statistics for Lithuania:

- It had the lowest levels of residents living a healthy life in the EU.
- It had the highest morbidity rate in the EU. Women lived on average to the age of 77.2 (the fourth shortest life-span in the EU). Men lived on average 65.1 years, which is the lowest male life-span in the EU.
- It was fourth in the EU for death by heart disease.
- 26.5% of the population smoked.
- Lithuanians consume the most alcohol per head of any EU nation. (European Commission 2010).

What did change was that for many Lithuanians their homeland was no longer their future. Over the decade 2000-2010 close to one-third of the population of Lithuania migrated. Some chose to live in East London.

Eastern Promise: Defining the Problem and Formulating Solutions

In 2009-10, one in ten of all recorded crime in LBN was credited to a demographic termed 'Lithuanians'. The clue is in the name; the description was applied to migrants (nearly all male) from the post-1989 Baltic state. But this loose classification did not tell the full story about the perpetrators or their criminal behaviours. The problem at one level was who and what precisely constituted 'Lithuanian', and what criminal acts they committed. As we try to show, police approaches to 'Lithuanian crime' were underpinned by an occupational culture characterised by the counting, auditing and 'problem-solving' of New Public Management (REF). Some remarks from two Newham detectives illustrate this issue. As one Detective Superintendent explained:

Some have been known to sell their Lithuanian passports for £700. We found a web-site offering Lithuanian passports and identity documents to order. The recipient of these then becomes a legal EU citizen capable of working in the UK and drawing UK benefits. It's believed some £26m a week leaves the UK to pay for the upbringing of Lithuanian children.

As little was known about the Lithuanians, one MPS Safer Neighbourhoods Officer suggested a trawling exercise: 'they have a fleet of white vans leaving a supermarket point every Thursday making their way overland to Lithuania. We should be stopping them and shaking down the passengers [...] find out who's who and what's in the van [...]' This 'supermarket sweep' never happened but the impulse behind it reflected the frustrations some in the MPS felt in attempting to find out more about a group about which they knew so little but who numerically accounted for a significant amount of recorded crime in Newham. What was more 'knowable' was the extent of their violence. This frequently required the attention of uniformed policing. As one Detective explained with regard to the causes of such violence:

'They usually live in overcrowded places — either sharing rooms and communal areas or squatting a premise. They then drink too much and arguments break out and they thump one another when very drunk [...] In late January 2011 a 37-year-old Lithuanian male was found dead in the house he shared with six other Lithuanian males. He died as a consequence of a blow to the head. The suspect — also an alcoholic and acquaintance of the deceased — turned himself in to police within 48 hours.'

The police were aware of another form of crime involving Lithuanians. As an officer stated: 'there are adverts on GumTree offering cash for specified cars and car parts with statements such as "no questions asked as to origin"'. These vehicles, whether luxury sports cars or minivans, needed fuel, with fuel theft becoming synonymous with Lithuanians:

'Theft of petrol and diesel is a big thing with them. They drive off from station forecourts and then sell it on GumTree — Diesel 80p a litre, 50p a litre cheaper than the garages. They steal fuel often using "moody" (counterfeit) credit cards. The issue then is "theft" not "Fraud". We had one last year who did £5,500 this way [...] How? False tanks in the vehicle — you fill one then it goes through to tanks they've welded on. They have white vans carrying amounts of fuel like mini petrol tankers.'

The police response to the Lithuanians required personnel, money and powers. Enforcement and arrests required uniformed and plain-clothes cops. Enforcement also involved Lithuanian-born officers deployed to Newham to assist in the task. On top of these, personnel were needed for 'payback'; that is, assisting in the return of monies obtained fraudulently. European Union (EU) funding was available for enforcement costs (with a total of £85 million for successful applicants). One just had to find a compelling and urgent problem. The criminal activities of the Lithuanians had seen the DI visit the Lithuanian Embassy in London and receive the head of the Lithuanian police to negotiate a cross-border policy strategy. The latter

had visited Newham in 2010. The friendship established by the DI with his counterpart was genuine, though it brought the realization that respective resources were not equal; Lithuanian officers earned around £300 per month. Seeking to formalize the mutual exchange of criminal intelligence, the DI wanted to trace the links between Lithuanian criminal networks in East London and groups and individuals in Lithuania. If the latter were well-known criminals then his hunch that money laundering was occurring on a grand scale and as part of an international monetary fraud was confirmed. According to the DI, the weakest link in the UK was two high street banks. A recent drive to attract new account holders had seen the criteria for opening an account lowered — individuals had only to show one item of identity: ‘they know a way around the banking system.’

While such fraud was perceived as a problem, the policing priorities at the time of the research were Olympic-related. As home to the London 2012 Olympic Stadium and Village, the borough’s streets had to be safe. Public safety was paramount in the eyes of the council, police and Olympic apparatchiks. The polluting presence of the street-drinker and rough-sleeper was unwelcome, whatever their origins. The local police and dedicated agencies were tasked with addressing these issues and in doing so revealed some telling migratory trajectories. Meanwhile the DI had used sport as a diversion from the lure of crime. He asked the council to fund the rental of a school hall wherein local Lithuanians could meet twice weekly to play basketball, the thinking being that those prone to crime would find good company and an antidote to their criminal energies. One individual notorious for drunken violence was even introduced to the local rugby club in the belief that a penchant for physicality and drink could be channelled into more codified activity.

Two agencies that assisted Lithuanians were to be found in or had their origins in Newham. The first was the Drug and Alcohol Service for London (DASL). The other was the recently established (Autumn 2011) house on a main road a few miles outside of London (in Essex). These premises, and its personnel, are explored in detail later. The DASL premises in Newham welcomed all residents of the borough with drug- and alcohol-misuse problems, even if around 40% of its daily users were Lithuanian-born migrants. Two such individuals, whose life stories follow, were regulars at DASL in 2010-11. These stories underline how very different trajectories can result in shared circumstances and criminal propensities. Ultimately a costly multi-agency response was required to address their needs.

One well-intentioned drug and alcohol treatment programme for Lithuanians in London had an inauspicious beginning. Opening its doors in late November 2011, the idea was that those who entered the house would remain there for 12 months and undergo daily counselling in the 12-step addiction treatment model. After just three weeks most of the former intake had left to return to their former lives in Newham, their places being taken by others from what was sadly a long list of Lithuanian-born addicts residing in Newham.

The conditions to assist those seeking recovery from addiction were idyllic compared to the circumstances some of these men had found themselves in. Their new — if temporary — home was 100 metres from the busy route that linked London with Essex. Set in 1.2 acres the bungalow, built in the 1980s, had six bedrooms and five bathrooms. A sunken Jacuzzi hinted at a once-wealthy owner. The mini-gym and pool table eased the tedium, and the pond might

one day be replenished with fish. The escapades of wild rabbits entertained the bored and the venue was safe. Weekly provisions were paid for by the Lithuanian church in East London; some worshippers who were once consuming too much alcohol themselves. The bungalow owner was a Lithuanian philanthropist and recovering addict. While addicted he lost some of his fortune but kept his property and made it available rent-free to the addiction counsellors.

At any time, those undergoing treatment were under the care and counsel of one — but sometimes two — ‘social workers’ of Lithuanian background. Both were former alcoholics now employed on a full-time basis to live with and instruct those in the programme. The two call themselves social workers. Their remit is to break the tedium with visitors — both religious and lay — visiting the bungalow to give ‘lectures’. The programme demanded total abstinence from drugs and alcohol. As demonstrated in the stories below, this was not always a price residents were willing to pay.

Sol: Degrees of Decline

With his tracksuit displaying the ‘Lonsdale of London’ East End boxing club logo across his chest the athletic and alert young man with the side parting might be considered, to many an on-looker, the quintessential ‘sharp’ white working-class young man that once dominated the streets of Newham. This young man, however, was born in Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania. An inquisitive mind, combined with a good education, were the factors that pushed Sol to seek a future in Western Europe. His planned future in business encouraged his enterprise and the degree he sat in Business Administration would — he thought surely — have some value in a mercantile city like London. The cosmopolitanism of London also appealed to the young man bored with the mono-culture of a provincial city in the Baltic. Acting on his ambition Sol arrived in the UK initially in Manchester in 2004 and stayed there for four years before moving to Newham. His point of contact upon landing was his ex-wife who had left Lithuania in 2001. Still on good terms she helped his arrival and assimilation and remembered how some of her family had made the move to the UK in the mid-1990s, told of the good incomes available from farm work and factory employment. The scenario demonstrates how, even after divorce, the trailing (ex) spouse model remains prevalent, with the traditional ‘female follows male’ pattern having been reversed.

The business degree however proved of little use when Sol’s command of English was rudimentary. The human capital represented by his qualifications meant little if not complemented by language proficiency and, despite his attempts to move beyond them, saw Sol fall back on the opportunities provided in his transnational social field. He was to work as a carpenter with men from Lithuania and Poland on a rate of £12.50 an hour. Such a rate was similar to that paid to UK-born carpenters but in the eyes of many customers the latter were not as ‘flexible’, nor hard-working, as the newly arrived. Money earned through carpentry afforded Sol the opportunity to realise his dream of running his own business. At one point he was the ‘gaffer’ (boss) to a team of four carpenters and fixed the deals with the British property owners. Unfortunately, one large deal saw a subcontractor renege on an agreement. Receiving none of the thousands of pounds the deal promised, Sol felt it a duty to pay off his workers using his own savings. He also paid the rent on the two homes they were living in. With a large banking

overdraft and no work coming his way, Sol left Manchester in 2009 and sought a new life in London.

There was work in the capital, albeit the pay for a carpenter was as low as £10.00 per hour. A labourer was lucky to receive £6.50. A roof and a bed were provided by a shared house with a tenancy belonging to a former employee in Manchester. Such a living was precarious and meanwhile debts were accumulating. Comfort from such worries came via alcohol. In a sense Sol was, in seeking solace in vodka, returning to the irresponsible youth of his late teens. He married at the age of 18 on discovering his 18-year-old girlfriend was pregnant with their child. Sol explained the oblivion that alcohol offered in those years:

‘Lithuania was a cold and poor society [...] there was never much to do [...] Generations don’t know a social occasion without alcohol [...] binge drinking is a normal part of the growing-up process.’

Never abstaining, Sol drank whilst he worked and earned. His drinking became especially problematic when he no longer had the funds to pay for it. This coincided with his time in Newham. Finding shelter in a shared squatted house with drug-users and alcoholic offered no respite. The beer and spirits he drank daily were obtained illegally but with a self-justifying motivation: ‘[...] I stole from shops [...] I’d never done such a thing before and I felt really bad about it. I. I was thinking, “if I don’t get a drink I’ll die”.’

He was to find himself in a police cell. A theft of four cans of beer and two bottles of wine brought him a fine and criminal record. Released to a shared house for Lithuanians in a similar plight people were drunk all day and frequently fought, Sol had to get out:

‘I was part of a community of drinkers and with no work and nothing to do all day you slide into that lifestyle [...] 20 cans of strong beer was a normal day [...] I couldn’t carry on. The only chance I had was to go back [to Lithuania] but drinking is everywhere there. Then a friend told me about DASL. I came here and I liked it.’

With the assistance of the workers at DASL Sol was alcohol-free from July 2010 to March 2011. He sought absolute abstinence and newly confident moved to Leicester to begin a business in clothing recycling. At times five people were working for him. Within a year however the business had failed. Seeking to be friendly to those he employed and their families he threw a barbeque and in the middle of it took a beer. Others followed — soon after he was back to problem drinking and back in a squat in East London. To add to his decline, he was sentenced to seven weeks prison for persistent shoplifting.

When he and the others were evicted from their squat Sol slept rough for a month. Drinking non-stop, the alcohol brought depression; relief from black moments was more alcohol. It was while sat on the steps of a bank premises that Sol was approach by outreach workers from a homeless charity. Clear of alcohol and drugs for the past two months Sol occupies the empty hours by middle-distance running and weight-training at a council-operated sports centre. He anticipates that his completion of English and Maths courses will permit him to enter a foundation year programme at university. For the first time in years Sol is in the company of non-drinkers. He sees his former squat-mates and their condition motivated him to

stay clean. ‘There’s no other way left for me [...] I go to church every Sunday — but I always used to before I started drinking!’

Sol has no shortage of ambition and drive. At times his ideas and ingenuity have brought him to the brink of being successful in his UK life. However, economic downturns have meant a working life of boom and bust. Well-mannered and well-educated he is astute but vulnerable. When things go wrong, he seeks comfort in drugs and drink. The consequences have been addiction, arrest, imprisonment and two failed relationships. One son lives with his mother in Manchester, the other in East London. Estranged from one family he sees the other regularly but meanwhile lives in a small room in a hostel full of people in similar circumstances to his.

Jonas: Liquidity and Assets

The medications dispensed by the staff of Newham General Hospital have for decades comforted and cured tens of thousands of ill and afflicted. In the mid to late 2000s, staff at the hospital were initially unaware of the frequent — Lithuanian — visitors to the toilet area of the reception where they sought the sustenance provided by the liquid hand-wash dispensaries that were located above the five wash-basins. What was intended to prevent the spread of germs in the hospital was being taken away to assist the spread of alcohol addiction. The cleanser, while blue in colour, was 90% ethyl alcohol. Diluted with lemonade, the substance was being drunk in a variety of locations by alcoholics without access to money to buy a drink. One such consumer was a 53-year-old named Jonas.

Older in appearance than his age suggests, the responses of this clear-shaven, well-groomed individual are given without reservation. This is a man used to the company of other men by virtue of the best part of 30 years in a variety of Soviet prisons. The duration of his custody suggests his crimes were serious. Mystery surrounds the full extent of his involvement in professional crime networks. Suffice to say that he was a close associate of some of Lithuanian’s biggest mafia names.

Old enough to remember the Cold War, Jonas attributes his life story to the Soviets. Born in the Ukraine to Lithuanian-born parents the family moved to Lithuania so his carpenter father could take employment on a wood-yard in a small town. An unremarkable childhood and school career ended at 16 when seeking a career. He travelled to the capital city of Vilnius some 100 kilometres away. The neighbourhood he lived in was driven by violence and drug-related crime. The police were both ineffective and part of the problem — in Jonas’ memory they would demand a percentage of the proceedings of crime, particularly when the goods stolen were from the local meat factory. The poverty of his neighbourhood only confirmed the poverty he had known in the mill-town: ‘My parents worked in that factory getting crap incomes, and the factory got the good monies — that was Communism. I wasn’t going to do that kind of work.’ As well as the emotional baggage represented by the legacies of Soviet rule, the networks of informality that took root during this period continued to form an important part of the transnational social fields that Lithuanian migrants found in London. These networks have been examined in the case of Lithuanians in other contexts, foremost among which is Ciubrinskas’ (2018) research in Chicago, where informal ties were used to mitigate the effects of downward mobility and assimilationist processes.

Jonas did not seek to overthrow the system or be part of another system within it. His individual resistance to the dominant system saw him involved in various criminal enterprises and incarcerated throughout his late teens to late forties.

‘The communists had good schools and hospital [...] but my family laboured for little income. I was seeking something I didn’t have. For this reason, I was in a youth offenders institute by the age of 11. My mother informed on me as a punishment! There were the 200 boys between the ages of 11 and 15 in that place.’

Operated by former military personnel, the institute was regimented and occasionally brutal. The ideal was not realised:

‘At 15 I was effectively an adult. I was on my own. I was very fit and strong and disciplined in my ways. I also realised there were easier ways to make a living than working in a factory.’

In the 30 years of his life wherein prison was a feature or threat, Jonas was repeatedly convicted for crimes of, originally burglary, then later violence. Residential burglary was his thing in his late teens. He also robbed people. The two activities impressed some circles he was to enter: ‘Crime culture respected what I was doing. It became my way of life. Some of the big men from Russia took an interest in me.’ Another group of men who found him interesting were the police and prison authorities. His various criminal activities brought him the trappings of the gangster life in terms of ostentatious jewellery and expensive vehicles as well as the attention of women in bars. The money came from drug distribution and the enforcement such exchanges were underwritten by. At his criminal peak Jonas was one of the top five criminal figures in Lithuania. Such notoriety brought him lengthy jail sentences, the longest being eight years for murder.

Whereas other Lithuanian migrants sought to enhance their prospects through amassing forms of human capital such as formal qualifications, it was Jonas’ brute physical capital which afforded him status in the transnational field of Lithuanian migrants. As an enforcer he would hurt those who owed monies to the gangsters he associated with. He would also extort funds from bars and other premises of entertainment. In his recollection violence was rarely required in such a pursuit. He relied on what he calls ‘the psychology of fear’. His crime associates had a notoriety that did not provoke too much debate when monies were requested. Some kind of epiphany had occurred just seven years prior to our conversations. A dispute with those he had considered colleagues saw him in a room with 30 of them. Unfortunately, some in this number were seeking to kill Jonas’ friend. Requisitioning a meat knife from the kitchen of the restaurant they were gathered in, he repelled assailants with the threat that he would kill as many as possible if they touched his associate.

Violence was his leitmotif but was used instrumentally. Crimes and convictions saw him in prisons in Russia, the Ukraine and Lithuania. The gangster life whilst occasionally rewarding brought a heavy burden: ‘Some were out to kill me [...] surprisingly this provided less a sense of fear than the stress of always needing to be alert. I had to get out of organised crime...I’d seen the endings of other people and my ending was not looking too good.’ What replaced his

life of crime and periods of incarceration were attempts at domesticity. The quiet life Jonas sought however was somewhat ruined by his turning to alcohol and drugs.

His years in prison restricted his access to alcohol. When out of prison, Jonas drank ‘socially’ and usually just at weekends. He took a variety of drugs when in prison but would never consider himself an addict to the outside world. ‘Prison in Lithuania wasn’t particularly a deterrent. It was sometimes more comfortable inside than outside. It became my lifestyle.’ The home comforts that Jonas enjoyed in some places of correction were afforded him by prison officers and fellow inmates by virtue of Jonas’ connections in criminal networks. The availability of a variety of drugs in prison brought him wealth and status by virtue of his being able to supply and distribute the goods. The same drugs, however, also brought him Hepatitis C and HIV via injecting heroin using a shared needle. By 2010 Jonas was living on the streets of Newham with no money to his name and with both an alcohol and drug problem.

This is how he was found by DASL workers. The journey into such decline began when Jonas attempted to change his life after being released in 2006 following a four-year custodial sentence. When in prison some 25 years previously he had married a woman and had a son with her. Both had, in early 2006, moved to London. Two years later Jonas travelled the same route. At the time he admits to be in good physical health and, having learned to read in prison, had discovered spirituality and religion. For the first two months in London he enjoyed his new-found freedom accorded to him by a police force who know nothing about him and neighbours who cared not as to who he once was.

Decline set in. The promised job in laying carpets with one of his wife’s relatives did not materialise. The post-2009 construction industry recession meant employment for a man of limited skills was near impossible to find. The accommodation he lived in was overcrowded. ‘Four families and their kids — but my wife wouldn’t leave it for a new place with me.’ Domestic arguments turned violent and came to the attention of the police. Barred by an injunction from going near his wife and the premises, Jonas both breached the restriction and sent threats to kill. Arrested in 2009 he served a six-month custodial sentence in a UK prison. Jonas’ wife and son both held down jobs, a fact which illustrates the importance of the intersection between gender and generational differences in this context.

When the latter left the mother’s home, however, the newly-lonely former wife and mother allowed Jonas to cohabit. After a month of reconciliation an argument required the attendance of police who took him from the house and after driving him miles away left him in the street. The issue was two-fold: the tedium of cohabiting without employment had seen Jonas start drinking on a daily basis. Drink was his companion and when ordered to leave the house he sought the shelter offered by a squat full of Lithuanian alcoholics and drug addicts. As with many others operating in the transnational field of Lithuanian migrants, it was necessary to occupy the interstices of the host society. The freely-available drugs tempted him on occasion. The consequences were too much to bear, albeit some — professing kindness — attempted to make his problems worse: ‘the drugs I began taking took me to a dark place. I was dangerous and knew in my soul I had to get off them [...] when I was in prison in the UK they thought I was a heroin addict — I wasn’t ever — and they prescribed methadone even though I didn’t ask for it!’

Preferring the privacy of park benches and the grounds of churches and even Newham General Hospital, Jonas was not exactly happy but through various practices had access to alcohol, even, at times, the alcohol that was meant to kill germs on hands. His drink of choice was strong cider which was cheap, and funded by money obtained from street-begging which at times afforded five litres of cider a day. Salvation from this situation came in the shape of a nurse at Newham hospital. Seeing the forlorn figure of Jonas on a daily basis in the hospital grounds she suggested he go to the premises of DASL. Acting on this advice he stayed from the minute it opened to the minute it closed. Attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings Jonas realised that a life without alcohol was both preferable and possible. While making progress Jonas is not yet clear of his addiction:

‘I’m trying to stop but I occasionally return to it [alcohol]. Two weeks ago, I visited a friend who had spent the previous two weeks drunk. I had to leave him after a day [...] I know that if I drink for say two consecutive days my mental state is affected. I become violent and not because I’m being provoked.’

The anger that remains in Jonas is now mainly reserved for the DASL workers that assist him on a daily basis. Institutionalised by virtue of decades in prison and having only a rudimentary command of English, Jonas has occasional difficulties in managing the minutiae of everyday existence. The one-room hostel accommodation he has is no hardship for a former long-term prisoner, but managing a mobile phone bill and balancing a budget that would ideally prioritise rent is challenging. In such scenarios, he rants in anger at his inabilities, his anger ostensibly directed outwards but ultimately internalised. In his mid-fifties and now HIV positive, Jonas will not find the kind of regular employment that will enable him to live independently. The best he can hope for is faith and charity. His new-found Christian faith (‘I was never against God [...] but I’m getting more inclined that way’) has given him access to money via a minister who utilises Jonas’ dexterity in a variety of maintenance jobs. The church congregation also call on his industriousness to tend their gardens in return for money. Other money comes from fellow Lithuanians some of whom consider his welfare as a duty on them all. Others, maybe remembering his former capacity in the crime world, reason that their largesse might one day see him look kindly on their problems with other Lithuanians. A word in an ear from Jonas still carries weight in circles even though Lithuania is 1500 miles from Newham. In this sense the caricature of Lithuanian masculinity operationalised by local police was not altogether inaccurate. However, it had unforeseen consequences that in some instances could perpetuate self-destructive cycles of addiction, violence and destitution.

Demetrius: Reflection on Dislocation

The Programme Co-ordinator of the DASL house is Demetrius, aged in his early thirties. Born in a small town in Lithuania, he was drinking alcohol from the age of 13 and by his early twenties was addicted to both heroin and crack cocaine. Good schooling and a middle-class family did not halt his descent into addiction. To fund his intake, he worked as a carpenter and later a bricklayer. His arrival in the UK in 2004 was informed in part by the prospect of easy access to his drugs of choice. That said, he knew he would have to work to pay for what he

craved. He thus worked in the Millennium building boom that typified London. The money he earned was spent on drugs.

Demetrius' addiction trajectory began with strong beer and cheap vodka in his early teens. His relatively privileged background points to what is glossed over in the police's othering of Lithuanian migrants, namely class differences. His drinking led to the consumption of a variety of amphetamines, both in powder-form and in table MDMA form. The Lithuanian university system and condition of the job market combined to saturate the amphetamine market. 'I would say 90% of those who graduate with a chemistry degree in Lithuania move into producing amphetamines. It pays 10 times more than working in industry.' From amphetamines, Demetrius moved on to injecting heroin and smoking crack. He recalled the ease of obtaining both types of drug, primarily from a Roma village outside the capital city of Vilnius. This openly-tolerated drug market produced in his estimation a drug-related fatality a week in the location. For those whose poison was alcohol the chance to drink oneself into a stupor was everywhere, by virtue of illegal 'stills' brewing cheap vodka and other drinks derived from distilling potatoes. Demetrius spoke with regret of what was tolerated and what for many was the norm:

'It's expected that you get hopelessly drunk [...] every family in life-stage celebration encourages that state of being. You can be drunk and crash your car or smash your place up and beat up your wife [...] that's all fine. No one interferes with such behaviour. Violent relationships are normal; around one in three Lithuanian women are victims of domestic violence [...] Religious Ministers? They're ceremonial; they exist to celebrate tradition rather than enforce beliefs.'

His comments underline the connection between masculinity and violence that exists in the transnational field of Lithuanian migrants.

In his time in London, Demetrius was drug-dependent for seven years, living in a variety of Newham-based 'crack-houses' and accepting the methadone substitute offered to heroin addicts, only to sell it and use the proceeds to buy the 'real thing'; that is, heroin. Something had to change. The Lithuanian church in Bethnal Green, East London, offered sanctuary for the homeless and a place for the squatters to wash. It established a Day Centre for addicted Lithuanians. In its two years in operation those attending numbered up to 30 daily. Food was provided by church monies and from the charity provided by a nearby supermarket store. Out of this gathering came the inspiration to take matters further; the Day Centre needed to be supplemented by more intense programmes. Eventually the A12 bungalow was obtained and a programme established that combined addiction treatment based on the 12-Steps, Day Top and the Minnesota Programme.

Demetrius bought a one-way ticket to the UK 17 years ago to join his brother. This familial connection provided his initial place to stay in Bedfordshire. Paid work followed quickly: 'Some work is available in kitchens and as waiters. Others go into building trades [...] If you don't know the trade, you learn from those who pay you.' Proficiency in the English language was learned on-the-job. What this meant was that the migrant's social life was almost exclusively spent with fellow migrants:

‘With money from building and little knowledge of the UK, our social lives are with similar people. We visit each other’s homes and we do what we know — we drink too much. Sometimes we go to public bars but we ‘pre-load’ by drinking excessively at home. We have a saying in Lithuania ‘the first bottle is expensive [...] then it all seems cheaper because you don’t notice what you are spending!’

When employment brings a good income, the drink can flow with minimum consequences — that spent can be earned or the hangover sweated out with hard graft. That said, the lot of the Lithuanian labourer was not glamorous, even to the fit, hard-working and capable individuals like Demetrius. As he explained:

‘Lithuanians are generally polite, well-mannered and respectful. We are a people brought up under decades of Communist-style rule which was rigid in what could and could not be done, particularly around public behaviour. Thanks to this and the widespread Christianity of the Catholic Church or the Orthodox version, we are respectful of elders and in my childhood and teens would not dream of swearing in public.’

Here again the role of religion and legacy of Soviet rule in the Lithuanian transnational field are underscored. But reducing Lithuanian migrants to these characteristics via processes of ‘othering’ re-inscribes the boundaries of the transnational social field, and particularly its more problematic elements, and thereby perpetuates ‘the problem’.

As Demetrius notes, the admirable qualities of self-reliance and stoicism make the Lithuanians very employable when in the UK:

‘Go to North London, Neasden Junction and I was one of the dozens, sometimes hundreds, of Lithuanian men hanging around early morning hoping for a day’s work. Like the rest, I’d claim to be a tradesman even if I had elementary skills. But the people who sought out our labour were mainly Indians who had bought properties only to refurbish them to rent out or sell on. They were not that particular. What attracted them was our willingness to work for £30 a day [...] some worked for less than that.’

The day’s labour usually resulted in cash payment the same day. Sometimes the money promised was not paid. Their response at such times? ‘Nothing [...] we could hardly go to the police could we?’ At times, those depriving them of their earnings were fellow Lithuanians and Polish-born entrepreneurs.

When he was working, he could service his habit. When laid off from work because he was both drunk and unreliable, he had no money but had to purchase alcohol and drugs. This led to a life of crime and a reflection on the nature of both drugs policing and the judicial system:

‘The UK provides for those out of luck. There is JSA [Job Seekers Allowance] and the free-food provided by the various soup kitchens. Then you claim homelessness and get a place in a hostel [...] I was a heroin addict so I received free methadone. The result of all this is that many are happy to live with what is provided for them

[...] they are glad they are in Newham. In Lithuania there is no free food and it is minus 17 for the winter months. There are no hostels for addicts — you are forced to go into rehab centres or prison [...] even in prison, here life is good; you receive decent food and can use the gym. There is one guy on the streets of Newham who has recently become sober but who has 27 custodial sentences. Your policies are not deterrents.’

In Demetrius’ logic the chance of being caught in the UK doing a robbery were low and the possibility of a prison sentence and the unlikelihood of conviction even less so. That said in Demetrius’ opinion robberies perpetrated by Lithuanian nationals were rare. What they did do however was steal goods that had value, notably mobile phones, satellite navigation systems and scrap metal.

Those seeking the less-risky acquisitive routes to income sold their identity. This practice of ‘kiting’ saw Demetrius turn-up with two items of identity and proof of address and open a bank account. One bank was chosen by the Lithuanians for two reasons: one was that the staff in its branches were usually very young and implicitly gullible. They also learned from inside contacts in the banking company that staff were on commission for each new account opened; they did not inquire too hard into the authenticity of prospective new customers. The new customers meanwhile put money into their account and shortly after were offered credit card and overdraft facilities. Selling their new found identity to those who knew their way around the banking system produced £50 cash for the (addicted) reseller and often fraud income to the value of tens of thousands of pounds to the person with the false ID. At the height of such fraud, Demetrius held five bank accounts and credit cards.

The money he received did not go to waste on paying for accommodation. Throughout Newham, properties are squatted or sub-let, sometimes half a dozen times. These are overcrowded with Lithuanians in various states of addiction. Such situations can be a haven to those down on their luck:

[...] at one time I was friends with a property owner who had around 30 Lithuanians in their houses. He had nothing bad to say about us [...] we paid him and didn’t damage the place.’

So, why the prevalence of assault in the domestic sphere perpetuated by Newham’s Lithuanians?

‘A number of factors ... overcrowding, drug abuse, drunks arguing [...] and maybe the fact that we don’t go to the police to settle our arguments. There are many so-called drunken assaults which in truth have their origin in monies owed or not paid for jobs done.’

Conclusion

Police approaches to the definition and solution of the ‘Lithuanian crime’ problem are certainly consistent with some of the principles of alien conspiracy theory. A strong ordering impulse fuelled by the diktats of New Public Management and their audits and Key Performance

Indicators (KPIs) sought to reduce Lithuanian male migrants to a set of characteristics which threatened so-called national values. These characteristics were bound up with perceptions of Lithuanian ethnic and lower-class identities and concerned problematic individuals who needed to be contained and their criminogenic impulses dissipated. As shown above, however, the processes of othering that defined Lithuanian criminality not only overlooked intra-group differences but also contributed to the perpetuation of the ‘problem’. Solutions which sought to contain Lithuanian migrants and guide them towards collective rehabilitation re-inscribed the boundaries of the Lithuanian transnational field (along with its most troublesome elements), undermining attempts to break self-destructive cycles of addiction, violence and destitution.

For local police, Lithuanian male migrants were a problem, particularly in the context of an occupational culture that judged its efficacy and therefore success by metrics. The deviant pathology of these men was recounted by the police in a simplistic anthropological way as a combination of stoicism, sadness and refuge in alcohol. This was compounded with rather classless penchant for crimes of theft and violence, along with the more instrumental crime of benefit fraud.

In terms of practical outcomes, the suggested joint collaboration with Lithuanian police counterparts never materialised. Benefit fraud was too hard to quantify and the Olympics required the streets to be free of polluting people; drinkers and shoplifters had a greater potential to besmirch the reputation of East London and so the Lithuanian problem was managed at a very low level of policing. After the DI was reassigned to a different task in another borough, the Lithuanian problem was rarely mentioned in local police circles.

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