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Lifestyle Migration

What Is Lifestyle Migration?

Lifestyle migration[1] is the movement of relatively affluent individuals to places that offer, either in the imagination or materially, the possibility for self-realization and the pursuit of a better quality of life. Being relatively affluent, the distinguishing factor is that they are able to put quality of life reasons ahead of other considerations such as work or safety. Lifestyle migration is voluntary, driven by consumption, and shaped by cultural imaginaries. Lifestyle migrants are attracted to places that have specific amenities such as the weather, the physical environment, health and social services. They are also drawn by social and cultural dimensions (a strong sense of community, a tranquil life) that imply certain ways of living that they can relate to as offering fulfillment. Furthermore, lifestyle migration is often enabled by visas and permits that other migrants find more difficult to obtain. In more recent years, lifestyle migrations have spread farther afield than previously, and they now incorporate many destinations shaped by prior colonial relations and global inequalities. Lifestyle migration is thus marked by power and privilege.

Lifestyle migrants are not people driven to move by poverty or hardship; they are not aiming to benefit from the better economic position of the country they move to, but often from the fact it is a poorer economy. They are not moving within the context of paid work, as corporate expatriates (although they may need to work to fund the lifestyle they seek); they are not seeking asylum or refuge. Lifestyle migrants are often retired, self-employed or flexible workers, and usually creative individuals shaping new lives for themselves[2]. Lifestyle migration is thus a form of migration that runs counter to those migrations with which researchers, governments, and policy makers are more familiar. The majority of migrations around the world are of people driven by poverty, political upheaval, environmental risk, and poor work opportunities. Most move from poorer to richer economies in search of security and a better standard of living. Of course, there are other types of migration including forced migrants, corporate expatriates, students, travelling artists and journalists, and entrepreneurs. In fact, migration at the global level has become increasingly complex, fluid forms of mobility are becoming more "normal", and there are many flows that run counter to the more dominant and familiar flows. Lifestyle migration is one such counter flow. Here I will discuss its roots, what lifestyle migrants share in common and its diversity, the wider factors that shape it, and some of its longer-term impacts.

British in Spain: the Archetypal Lifestyle Migrant

There are almost certainly antecedents to the phenomenon of lifestyle migration, for example colonial migrations, expatriates, artists, backpackers and other middle class travelers who settled long-term in their destinations, but lifestyle migration arguably became a modern mass phenomenon during the 1990s with the migration of British (and later German, French, Italian, Swiss, Swedish and other North Europeans) to Spain's coastal areas.[3] British started settling in Spain's coastal areas in large numbers from the 1970s and numbers grew throughout the next decades reaching a peak of over a million home owners and 750,000 settlers in 2005.[4] They became something of a media phenomenon during the 1990s, with a television soap opera, Eldorado, based on their supposed lifestyles, and with numerous other soap operas, dramas and news reports portraying British criminals on the run, or British people running bars, and restaurants, and retired British living stressful lives working in the hot sun.[5] The British in Spain are now seen as the archetypal lifestyle migration trend.

While, for many, lifestyle migration follows a positive trajectory, for others it can lead to social exclusion, health problems, and financial hardship.[6] Many of these migrants seek a tranquil retirement, but eventually face difficulties associated with leaving their homes and family behind and starting a new life somewhere they cannot speak the language, have no roots, and find themselves lonely and alone as they get older.[7] On the other hand, they continue to celebrate the freedom, warmth, and relaxation of their new lives.[8] Many lifestyle migrants in Spain are also younger, single or with families. These seek self-employed work running a bar, or an estate agency (for examples), or work on their own account doing anything from hairdress-

ing to nail painting. Here are people who are taking huge risks with their futures and their children's futures by following their dreams and attempting to carve out new lives for themselves.

Diverse Flows

North Europeans living in Spain have continued to attract academic interest because it is such a conspicuous and numerically significant migration. Europeans living in Spain far outweigh the number of any other immigrant group there.[9] But since the late 1990s and on into the 21st Century academics have become increasingly aware of similar migrations in other parts of the world. There have been case studies of Westerners in Varanasi, India[10], North Americans in Panama and Mexico[11], Japanese in Malaysia[12] and French in Morocco[13] to give just a few examples. Over time, it became apparent that these diverse flows shared many themes in common and that, despite attempts to employ them, existing typologies or conceptualizations were inadequate. These are not (only) elite migrants, counter-urbanites, amenity-driven, or retirement migrants. The *sine qua non* of lifestyle migration is the ability to privilege the search for "the good life". The term lifestyle migration is thus a theoretical lens through which to examine the similarities and differences of these trends. It draws attention to the singularity of a phenomenon the elements of which share several things in common, albeit with different threads:

> "Lifestyle migration is a complex and nuanced phenomenon, varying from one migrant to another, from one location to the next. It holds at its core social transformation and wider processes; it is at once an individualized pursuit and structurally reliant and it is a response to practical, moral and emotional imperatives."[14]

Realizing a New Style of Life: "You Can Be Who You Want to Be"

One clear unifying theme in case studies of lifestyle migration is that of self-realization. This is most clearly identified in the work of Brian Hoey (2005), who studied Americans moving within the United States, and Michaela Benson (2011), who lived among the British in rural France, in Mari Korpela's (2009) work with Westerners in Goa and Varanasi, India, and in my own study of British in Spain[15]. In most lifestyle migration case studies, the migrants portray themselves as active agents transforming their lives through migration, and their stories are peppered with accounts of new beginnings, fresh starts and making dreams come true. They see themselves as having a pioneering spirit and their migration as giving them the opportunity to be true to their "real selves" in places that have cultures and environments with which they share an affinity.[16] They contend that by moving they are free to be the person they want to be and to live the lives they value.

However, the potential style of life that is imagined differs according to destinations. Some seek a slower and more tranquil life; they may desire to "get back to the land" (e.g. British in France, and some US-Americans in Latin America[17]). Some talk of escape from a fast-pace, consumption-driven, amoral West (e.g. Westerners in Varanasi[18]). They may see their move as escape from a crime-ridden, depressing, grey future (e.g. British in Spain). They may believe rural areas are more authentic or pure (e.g. with urban to rural Australian migration[19]). They often want to protect their children from the materialism, excessive consumption and insecurity of Western or other modern lifestyles[20]. There are also lifestyle migrants who are drawn by the imaginative pull, the cultural and lifestyle attractions, of a global city such as Berlin[21]. In this latter case, of course, the migrant is less likely to be relatively wealthy in relation to the destination country, but still has the relative wealth to choose migration for cultural rather than economic reasons. Below, I will describe three numerically significant forms, identified by Benson and O'Reilly (2009) from among a very diverse range of lifestyle migrants around the world: Bourgeois Bohemianism, Residential Tourism, and The Rural Idyll.

Bourgeois Bohemianism, Residential Tourism, and the Rural Idyll

Some migrants seek alternative lifestyles in spaces that signify what we might define as bohemian ideals. *Bourgeois Bohemianism*, then, seeks destinations characterized by spiritual, artistic, or creative aspirations and by unique "cultural" experiences.[22] Jacqueline Waldren's (1996) account of the outsiders – foreign literary personalities, artists and musicians – of Deía, Mallorca is the seminal text on these bohemian migrants. Relatedly, Pola Bousiou (2008, p. 3) describes the *Mykoniots d'élection*, who return over and again to the island of Mykonos, Greece, and are able to perform an alternative identity through "living, acting, working and creating in a tourist space". This form of lifestyle migration has also been examined and elaborated by Mari Korpela (2009) in relation to her study of Westerners living part of the year in Varanasi, India, in search of "the good vibes".

Alternatively, many lifestyle migrants are attracted to mass tourist (often seaside) destinations, such as in Turkey, Spain and Greece, pursuing *Residential Tourism*. These associate their lifestyle migration destinations with sun, sea and holiday, but are not attracted by high-spending hedonism so much as peace, tranquility and freedom. The first contact many of these migrants have had with their migration destination is as tourists, and tourism socially and physically constructs places, creating physical and social spaces for leisure and pleasure. Tourism brochures, and other marketing, furthermore construct destinations in the imagination as places for certain pursuits. These migrants therefore attempt to extend tourism sojourns into a way of life. Some are seasonal migrants, but

many settle permanently. They may work, but this is as a means to an end. The main goal is to get away from the fast pace of living in their home countries and to earn enough to have a good life, no more. The archetypal residential tourists are the many nationalities living in the Mediterranean, but other important flows include American and Canadian "snowbirds" (who spend a large proportion of the winter enjoying the warmer climate in places such as California and Florida), and the increasing numbers of Americans who have settled permanently in Panama, Mexico and Costa Rica[23].

Those lifestyle migrants in search of the *Rural Idyll* migrate in search of a tranquil life. Rural locations are here imagined to offer lifestyle migrants a sense of stepping back in time, getting back to the land, the simple or good life, as well as a sense of community spirit.[24] The narratives of those who move to the countryside often stress the unique and embodied relationship that they have with the landscape. Michaela Benson (2011, p. 84) for example, says of the British in France: "(they) presented their new surroundings in a variety of ways: as the rural idyll, with its unspoilt countryside and rustic homes; as a space for leisure; but also as a place where they were able to physically engage with the land and get their hands dirty". On the other hand, for middle-class Americans "downsizing" to rural Michigan: "relocation to romanticized rural places high in natural amenities, in which they have frequently vacationed, is a moral project concerned with 'starting over' and 'finding themselves' through purposeful place attachment".[25]

The Cultural Narratives and Global Inequalities That Shape Lifestyle Migration

While lifestyle migration is viewed as an individualistic search for the "good life", the places selected and the nature of the experience are shaped by wider factors. Literally or figuratively, places imply certain ways of living. Americans relocating to the mid-west are seeking places that are seen as therapeutic[26]; lifestyle migrants moving to rural landscapes believe they will become part of local communities that live off the land[27] or will find more authenticity[28]; Westerners in Varanasi believe by moving they will come closer to their spiritual selves[29]; and, for some Canadians, living "off grid" in remote landscapes provides something of a metaphorical island - with stillness, quiet, and seclusion.[30] These are not individual ideals, but shared cultural narratives, shaped sometimes by those wishing to market places, shrouded in myth and imagination, and enabled by physical geography and built environment. As Noel Salazar has so eloquently emphasized, lifestyle migration is inspired and guided by diverse social imaginaries: "culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making devices and world-shaping devices".[31]

It is difficult to ignore the historically-formed, global inequalities that facilitate and shape lifestyle migration in parts of the world: lifestyle migration is enabled by relative wealth. In many cases these migrants are buying second homes, or better first homes than they could afford at home. Many are living leisured lives, often living on earnings made or on capital invested in the west, or on good pensions established over decades of working in a wealthier economy. They may not be wealthy in terms of the society they left[32], but lifestyle migrants often benefit from the fact they reside in countries (or rural areas) with a lower level of income. In many cases, places are wealthy in relation to other places because of the global history of colonialism and resulting power and wealth asymmetries. It is no accident that many of these lifestyle migration flows follow the routes of prior colonial flows. Many lifestyle migration destinations (e.g. Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand) were previously colonies and/or had been occupied by Western powers in their recent histories, with the result that current hierarchies, in cases where migrants are from the prior colonizing county, are built on historically shaped inequalities.[33] There are often colonial continuities, in the shape of legal regimes and possession of forms of capital, in the ways in which people are able to move to some places (e.g. visas and permits that permit travel in one direction and not another), how they are perceived and treated when they get there (the privilege that often attends a white body), and how they are even intentionally attracted by those who seek wealthy migrants as a development tool.

Outcomes of Lifestyle Migration

Impact of Residential Tourism in Spain

The impacts of lifestyle migration have not yet been well documented but a few studies begin to shed light on this. I will start with Spain. Numbers are very difficult to obtain because many do not register or do not live there all year round, but it is estimated that even now, since the 2008 economic crisis, there are over two million North Europeans living in Spain[34]. Spain was very successful in terms of development for mass tourism. It then went on to pioneer "residential tourism", allowing construction of real estate to spread, first to the coasts and islands and then further and further inland.[35] The whole purpose of residential tourism is to attract second home owners to a town as a way of attracting investment. However, the concept takes no account of the fact that many of those who come are lifestyle migrants from diverse sending countries, who settle permanently. Residential tourism property is developed with tourism property, and is located in enclaves with very localized repercussions in terms of population change, and rising living and real estate costs. Whole new towns have cropped up in many areas, bringing vast social and economic changes. Some areas, such as the region of Murcia, have been profoundly affected, with great golf developments swamping tiny, ancient rural towns. Economies in these areas are now based on lifestyle migration (or residential tourism), tourism, construction, and real estate rather than on agriculture and manual work.[36] Since the financial crisis of 2008, these areas are devastated, with collapse of the economy, and massive job losses, while

many of the residential tourism properties are left empty or half empty for much of the year. Wealthier lifestyle migrants have been able to stay, poorer ones have been unable to leave, but many have returned to their countries of origin, often leaving empty properties behind.

Spanish academics have long been battling to get their voices heard to convince their government to stem the flow of development (although the financial crisis has perhaps negated the need for this critical voice). Tomas Mazon and Antonio Aledo Tur (2005) have been especially critical of the effects of residential tourism, which they see as massive urbanization, abandoned agriculture, and the emergence of an economic mono culture of real estate, of poor quality housing built quickly for maximum profit. They argue that the coasts are now covered in concrete, suffering creaking infrastructure, as the phenomenon spreads further inland consuming land, nature and a way of life. Rising living costs and massively overpriced real estate squeezed out the local communities whereas the sudden downturn brought huge losses for those who had migrated to these areas. Mantecón and Huete (2008) have drawn attention to the fact that these impacts of uncontrolled development, especially overcrowding, are actually counter to the tranquility, and "authenticity" that lifestyle migrants seek, and serve instead to drive them from an area.

Consequences Elsewhere

Impacts have also been noted elsewhere. In Goa, India, locals built properties to rent to visiting westerners as part of the trance music tourism scene (which became a form of lifestyle migration), but the Goan government then decided to restrict the party scene and try to attract more wealthy residential tourists. This has not really worked and now there are many locals left with empty properties and restaurants, while the drugs scene they wanted to restrict still has a hold. Meanwhile, big companies are making money in the package tourism and hotel business instead. As a result of lifestyle migration, Bocas del Toro in Panama has seen a huge rise in the cost of living, massive house-price rises, and a loss of local industries combined with a rise in insecure tourism-related work.[37] Impacts of the snowbird phenomenon and related lifestyle migration in Florida have also been profound, in terms of population increases, increased property prices, demand for public services, and cultural and social change.[38]

Lifestyle Migrants as Reflexive Agents

Lifestyle migration is having many unintended consequences, then. However, research has often shown the lifestyle migrants themselves to be critical and reflexive agents aware of their position and privilege and keen to make some contribution to the communities of which they are now part. Many lifestyle migrants continue actively to shape their lives post-migration. In the face of sometimes contradictory experiences, they work hard in their communities to live their lives the way they expected them to be, by pulling together, providing for their own community's needs and desires, and living out the cultural norms they expected to find. In research currently being undertaken in Thailand and Malaysia, we have found lifestyle migrants to be actively involved in the local communities, through being members of committees, engaging in voluntary activities, making local friends and building long-term relationships (including marriage). There is a strong community ethos in much of lifestyle migrants' behavior; they often want to preserve the natural environment; and many get involved in local campaigns. Sometimes these actions have positive side-effects for the physical environment. In Brittany, for example, it is acknowledged that lifestyle migration has repopulated and restored rural areas, and generated local interest in such renovation projects. The same has been said in Portugal. As Mantecón and Huete (2008) suggest, if policies could be implemented that value the local natural and cultural environment, as the lifestyle migrants themselves appear to, then perhaps a more sustainable form of development could be pursued.

Conclusion

Lifestyle migration is the movement of the *relatively* affluent, in search of quality of life. The movement may be permanent, temporary, full or part-time, or a fluid combination of these. Nevertheless, this contemporary form of mobility holds a sense of permanence; lifestyle migrants often speak of establishing a new home, new attachments, and a new life, even while retaining a strong sense of their "roots". They may not be absolutely wealthy, sometimes funding their lives through casual work, self-employment, pensions, and/or capital investment, but it is the fact they are able to put quality of life above other considerations that distinguishes lifestyle migration from other forms of migration. A durable unifying theme in case studies of lifestyle migration is self-realization: lifestyle migrants contend that moving frees them to be the person they want to be and to live the lives they value. Lifestyle migration appears to be a realization of what a range of contemporary theorists have referred to as the rampant individualism, fluidity and reflexivity of liquid/second/post modernity. But it is shaped by wider social, cultural, and environmental structures. For example, lifestyle migration is shaped by geographies of meaning: people are moving to places that literally or figuratively imply certain (good) ways of living. It is difficult to ignore the historically-formed, global inequalities that facilitate and shape lifestyle migration: lifestyle migration is enabled and shaped by relative wealth and global structuring. It can also have devastating impacts on local environments, economies, and cultures. However, our research has often shown the migrants to be critical and reflexive agents aware of their position and privilege and keen to make some contribution to the communities of which they are now part. Management, control (and exploitation) of migration are often reduced to analysis of costs and benefits. Diverse governments are therefore trying to find ways to attract what they see as wealthy migrants, encouraging them with tax breaks and other incentives, allowing rampant development, based on assumptions about individualistic, profit-maximizing behavior, but they

fail to understand the complexity of this migration. Lifestyle migrants are not often absolutely wealthy, they do not seek luxury goods, do not engage in conspicuous consumption, and do not appreciate mass development. Instead, in search of some sort of "authentic" life, they often care about the environment and the local community, want to restore property, are willing to invest time and energy in the locality, and are often far less materialistic than is assumed. It could be possible to harness their search for the good life for a sustainable growth.

Notes

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[2] In the United States lifestyle migrants tend to be referred to as non-economic migrants, but this covers a complex range, including some we would not consider lifestyle oriented.

[3] Casado-Díaz (2006); O'Reilly (2000; 2012a).

[4] Sriskandarajah/Drew (2006).

[5] O'Reilly (2001).

[6] O'Reilly (2007).

[7] Hardill et al. (2005).

[8] O'Reilly/Benson (2014).

[9] O'Reilly (2012b).

[10] Korpela (2009).

[11] Benson (2011); Croucher (2009).

[12] Ono (2009).

[13] Therrien (2014).

[14] O'Reilly/Benson (2009), p. 11.

[15] O'Reilly (2000).

[16] Hoey (2005).

[17] Dixon et. al. (2006).

[18] Korpela (2009).

[19] Osbaldiston (2012).

[20] O'Reilly (2012b).

[21] Griffiths/Maile (2014).

[22] Benson/O'Reilly (2009).

[23] eg. McWatters (2008).

[24] Benson/O'Reilly (2009).

[25] Hoey (2009), p. 32.

[26] Hoey (2005).

[27] Benson (2011).

[28] Osbaldiston (2012).

[29] Korpela (2009).

[30] Vannini/Taggart (2014).

[31] Salazar (2014), p. 124).

[32] Hayes (2012); O'Reilly (2007).

[33] Benson (2013).

[34] Author's own calculation using Spanish International Statistics Database (www.ine.es)

[35] Mantecón (2008).

[36] Huete et al. (2013).

[37] McWatters (2008).

[38] Tremblay/Hugues (2011).

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About the author

Dr. Karen O'Reilly is Professor of Sociology and Head of the Social Sciences Department of Loughborough University, UK. She is especially interested in social anthropology and has been studying lifestyle migration for almost 20 years.

Email: K.OReilly@lboro.ac.uk

ABOUT FOCUS MIGRATION

Publishers: Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) of the University of Osnabrück, Neuer Graben 19/21, 49069 Osnabrück, Germany
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