



## **Rebel from the neo-liberal economic models rationale: escapist strategies of rebuilding economic and family values of the British in Spain**

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This paper will look at the new emerging phenomenon of lifestyle migration - northern Europeans moving to the southern countries, re-establishing their homes. The ethnographic material is borrowed from my field research, which took place in 2009-2011 in the south-eastern part of Spain as a part of PhD data collection. Participant observation was conducted with the British who chose to relocate to Spain as their primer residence (staying there more than 9 months a year) to a small town in the inland area of Murcia region, which for the purpose of my subjects' anonymity was given a pseudonym of Cañara. The general preoccupation with the themes of tourism, aging, and 'great life in the sun' in general motivated me to go deeper into the issue of what is usually called 'lifestyle migration', bypassing the themes of sun, cheap alcohol and lack on integration and actually trying to understand what was going on in the minds and hearts of those people who chose to leave the UK and seek their new home somewhere else<sup>2</sup>.

My search brought me to the point of examining the built environment of the British in Spain though material culture perspective, as it allowed deeper understanding of the phenomenon which could be argued to be a telling example of the latest modernity. Being born into a neo-liberal

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<sup>2</sup> For a lot of my colleagues it came as a surprise that according to the government statistics and estimations the British in Spain were 47 years old on average, had children and jobs in Spain and were leading relatively 'normal' lives

environment of property consumption in the UK a lot of people were introduced into the property ladder rationale. The routine of daily activities was usually abruptly disturbed by some sort of a traumatic event (losing a job, divorce, or death of a close family member). Such traumatic conditions prompted rethinking of their current position. At some stage they became disappointed and disillusioned about the multiple aims that were set for them by their parents, families and friends. The promised reward of owning property did not bring the anticipated satisfaction. The observed mismatch between aspirations and the current situation brought a certain unease, solution to which became a move to Spain.

### **Neo-liberal environment of property consumption**

In the example of the UK, starting with 1970s a number of policy initiatives like mandatory selling of council houses was introduced. They offered people at a discounted rate under the *Right to Buy* scheme to own and manage their houses. Some other developments of that time like the deregulation of the credit market resulted in the highly competitive creditors giving out loans to even 'riskier' customers (Ford et al 2001)<sup>3</sup>. It seemed like all of the options were provided and the people 'just' had to manage it wisely and achieve the 'success' of owning a house. Research among my informants in the south-east of Spain showed that majority of them came from the working class families, and acquiring a house for them was a very new phenomenon. In most of the cases their parents were renting houses from the councils who build them after the war. Indeed, some of their parents were expressing deep concerns when their children started thinking about buying their own houses in the 1970s, as they were afraid that their children will end up in great debt.

Yet a large number of people were willing to buy a house for themselves. Indeed, informants expressed a great emphasis on the necessity of buying rather than renting a property. For them buying a house was a huge thing, a symbol of success and achievement, and ability to say 'my home is my castle' without any second thoughts. It was opportunity to feel proud, make it their own and start everything anew, to actually start their lives.

The way of acquiring a house, however, was far from easy and straightforward for a majority of my informants - they were not financially supported by the parents or relatives either because the latter wanted to give a couple a chance to 'grow up' and 'finally do something on their own', or more frequently due to the simple lack of financial means of parents or other relatives.

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<sup>3</sup>Ford, Janet; Burrows, Roger; Nettleton, Sarah (2001) Home ownership in a risk society. Policy Press Bristol, UK.

The process of getting a house was generally referred to as 'property ladder' when a couple finally managed to save for a deposit for a small apartment or house and later sold it, getting more money for it due to the growing property market and were able to buy bigger property, which was a next step on the ladder.

Starting in that system was a very difficult task, as newlyweds rarely qualified for help from the council, as they were usually young professionals with jobs and no children. After that it didn't get easier, as mortgage payments were sometimes as large as one whole salary of one partner leaving not that much money for a family to dwell on. Owning a house also usually meant less flexibility and with ever changing needs of a family (new schools for children, jobs for parents), moving usually was on the top of the agenda. In some cases families were saving for years to move, as with time when they were able to save the money, the prices of the houses also rose, so they were not really able to pay even the deposit.

No matter how hard it was to actually climb that ladder the general excitement of owning a house prevailed. People were referring to the number of opportunities their houses provided (smartly renovating the house, selling it for good money and going to a private market to buy a house of their dreams that they deserved). However, the difficulties that it created were going like a red line through all of the stories of house ownership. Owning a house required a specific set of mind and attitude. Such uncertain and risky nature of welfare and lack of support from the government imposed all the responsibility on a person to manage one's property. It does take a specific set of mind to see bringing security into your life in a form of a house, by bringing insecurities connected with it by taking out mortgages to get the house. Bring security by taking on insecurities. Especially it is difficult to understand in the circumstances when work options are not promising, when welfare will not support the 'failing' people. Despite all of those challenges people were still willing to buy a house.

I could argue that all those challenges that arose on the way of my informants and millions of other people who were considering buying a house were overcome on the everyday basis, day by day, dealing with one problem at a time. When they were young, they were promised a great future, success and dreams coming true in exchange for their hard work. It was difficult not to follow the lead, when the politicians like Margaret Thatcher were raising the bar of standards, claiming that no successful men in their thirties should use public transportation, and drive a personal car. The dream and the lead were there and with every step they were getting closer to them until someday some kind of traumatic event happened (death of a partner, relative, loss of a job) that made them rethink their priorities and means of achieving their dreams.

## **Re-discovering of the dream**

Some forty years ago owning a house, a car and may be a garage was a great thing an average person could dream about in the Western world: something that defined person to be successful, something that one could be longing for. When such aims were achieved, it was suggested that one would feel himself free of all obligations, ready to conquer the world, being on top of it.

Yet, most of my informants' attention at some stage of their life was drawn to the fact that such ideals were not quite achievable – paying out a lifelong mortgage for a house which only barely resembled the one that they have been dreaming about when they were young. The constant race for efficiency made them focus on a job that locked them in the cage of routine and they were left playing the roles that were given to them and hoping not to get fired.

Such a drastic realisation of the mismatch between the original dreams and aspirations and the reality came to different people at different time, but there was always some sort of a traumatic event that took place, which made people stop, disconnect from their daily routine and look at their life through a different lens.

For some it was the news about the disease that would eventually kill them. It made them rethink their careers, relationships with friends and family. Most of them tried to find some activity that they thought would bring happiness to them. While finding something they were passionate about, they tried to peruse it with the unlimited power and enthusiasm that they found in themselves. And the move was more of a result rather than a being a catalyst for change.

Not always the traumatic events which lead one to seek for opportunity to break away were as dramatic as finding that you were going to die – others were more trivial like losing a job. After being fired some saw it as a chance to get away and do something different. Others felt themselves undervalued and were willing to apply their skills in a different environment. Others didn't see any more opportunities for them in the related branch/job/profession and were willing to try something else.

Some of the informants got an offer for an early retirement from their employees and some took their early retirement themselves 'living a dream of their parents', as most of them put it, as being able to take an early retirement was usually seen more as a luxury rather than a job necessity, most of them retiring at 50-55.

For others the moment X came after friends or partners left them or died. For most of them it was a very difficult challenge but it made them think about their life and their future more than ever. For some the life lost its meaning, others gave up, sold everything and were trying to cheer themselves

up, but in the lives of those who actually took a move, there was something that they found worth living for: either a new partner, a new project or their own desires they forgot about.

- i. Need to feel like a new person: free, spontaneous, relaxed, successful, harmonic, and utterly romantic

After realising for one reason or another that something in their life was missing, the British started thinking about their dreams. What they wanted, therefore, was to become that person that they once aspired to. It is very difficult to draw an even picture of the desired personality, as people are different and their dreams and desires. What I would like to do here is not to present a blended version of the dream, but rather touch on the multiple aspects of those desires, as those mentioned had a tendency to be repeated more often than the others.

The ideal of becoming adventurous was at the core of a majority of my conversations. Going out of one's usual boundaries and actually doing things that they only have seen or have heard of. Even "getting out of England and enjoying other places" as one of my informants put it, was an important idea that a lot of my informants were perusing. For example, some decided to set up bed and breakfasts in south-eastern Spain without having any related experience in hospitality industry:

*It's just something we wanted to do. And as we got older..because we've always wanted to run a guest house- years and years ago, but never got off the ground.. so I suppose retiring and then we came to look, coz we didn't come with the view to buying anyway at the time, but we did get the house big enough at the end. **Bridget, 64***

Some people came to Spain without any particular plans of what they were going to do. They knew that they wanted to work to maintain their income, but not really anything more specific or planned. A lot of people came without even looking into the area, but being more spontaneous and acting on the moment:

*In actual fact I've got off the plane in Alicante. I just sort of drove, ended up somewhere, I thought, this is quite good, nice little villages around. Then I found this place, and talked to one of the Spanish guys in the restaurant, said he got some land to sell so I bought land from him. It was all done in the spare of the moment. Came out of the van, flew over, bought a piece of land, employed a builder, then I left it, I just left for 2 years. **Charles, 62***

Such adventurous spontaneity spread on some other of their decisions, like buying a first house they saw or paying all the money for one house, “putting all the eggs in one basket”, as they put it “acting against our own advice and experience”. Even though that such spontaneity was premeditated – they did go to Spain, bought a ticket, and considered buying a house there on the first place – such logical explanation still does not in my opinion reflect the true nature of the act. What was important to many of my informants was the idea that they could do something ‘crazy’ like that, that they were capable not only to do it financially but also psychologically, going out of the permitted boundaries that were set for them by their family, media and the government.

*Once we made a final decision to move we put the house on the market and sold it in 48 hours. I thought, what do we do now? So we came out on a 5-day viewing trip. We didn't know the area so we looked at the map of Spain and we knew we wanted to be down south, we didn't want it to be Torrevieja. We didn't want to go Malaga way so we just sort of wiggled our fingers and pointed at the map and thought that looks interesting, we'll go and have a look there. So we got a very basic brochure. We arrived on the Monday, met the representative and viewed on the Tuesday and put a deposit down on it on the Thursday.*

**Reena, 64**

It was a desired idea that one could live and survive in a foreign environment, learn the language, find their way around, and for some of my informants, have experience of living on their own and for themselves. Starting to live in a foreign environment was a huge step for most of them, even though Spain could be argued not to be as exotic as some other destinations might be. The mere fact that the material environment being so different, it made it rather challenging to adjust and become a part of the local communities. In fact, some of my informants admitted that the choices of dwellings that they made in Spain, was very different to what they would have normally chosen in the UK: people who really enjoyed modern houses in the UK took on a challenge of dwelling in old crumbling town houses with crooked walls and not closing windows. Yet, in most of the case those choices were done mostly intuitively, as when I asked about certain lists of characteristics that the informants might have had prior to their trip to Spain and house purchase, the lists were usually extremely vague:

*It didn't matter providing I didn't have to do any major renovation... providing it had a bathroom and a kitchen. Decoration, it didn't matter. But it had to have floors. Some of the houses didn't have floors. Or there was no kitchen. **Tamara, 65***

*We were looking for a house with a few bedrooms, bathroom and outside space. When we came to see this house there was a huge fig tree which shaded, where you see the big sky*

*there used to be fig shade on the terrace and it just had a lovely feel, didn't it? And then within 24 hours we've fallen in love with the village, didn't we? And that was it, we decided we want to live here.* **Eloisa, 56**

One of the most important factors, however, was the fact that the decision was taken by the people themselves, without being worried any more about their children, parents, regulations. Even though such strategy did give its effect of what later on my informants referred to as 'pink glasses effect' when they didn't care much about legality and trustworthiness of the estate agents and builders, nevertheless, they felt quite proud to be so independent.

Becoming such free and creative person also often meant that a lot of the British took on hobbies and activities that they had to give up either because of more prestigious jobs, or lack of time, or lack of motivation back in the UK. A lot of them took in their hands guitars, easels that were covered with dust in their garages.

The general mood that prevailed while my informants were planning their moves, was the one of adventures and challenges, some even saw in a romanticised way: packing whatever they could into caravan and setting into the journey, driving into a sunset. They remember their journey through Europe, when they finally could fall asleep without stress and the thermometer in their car was gradually rising, signifying that their final destination was getting closer.

- ii. Creating/maintaining lifestyle (productive capacity of the move, no mortgage, a chance to name a villa, back to the 60s, traditional values, making jam, back to the roots)

Understanding of lifestyle as such could be seen through Bourdieu's (1998)<sup>4</sup> notion of lifestyle – a personal ability to differentiate between social codes used in the society to make a distinction of one group from another. By buying property in a specific location, a person invests money into specific social knowledge which he intends to share with local people. However, lifestyle migrants' new habitation is no longer a "systematic products of habitus" (1998: 172) of recreating classificatory schemes in the society. Rather, it offers an immediate means of gaining upward social knowledge accumulation that according to Bourdieu is supposed to be acquired through a long process of early socialization. Hence, lifestyle migrants 'cheat' the social regulations, investing finically and emotionally into a move which evidently has productive social capacity. People choose sweeping terraces of their houses every morning under the sun than sitting in the office till the rest of their lives. They suddenly find time for their friends with whom they meet from 3 to 5 pm for the

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<sup>4</sup>Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Distinction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

‘sparkly time’ when they sit next to the swimming pool in the shadow of some fig trees and drink local rose champagne discussing current political developments and latest economic recovery strategies.

The house evidently becomes the mean of achieving certain activities, living in the area creates attitudes which the British consider sharing with the locals, and hence they are able to acquire a new lifestyle they were longing for.

The prices in Spain allowed a number of my informants to buy land with their houses, which in the UK came at a greater premium. A lot of them appreciated the fact that they could maintain their privacy, as living in the countryside was not associated in Spain with the higher social status as does living in suburbs in the UK. Even though locals didn’t associate living in the countryside with the upper class living, and even on the contrary seen as a life of poor peasants, the British felt privileged being able to reside in a house with a big plot of land attached to it:

*I would rather be up high and looking down. We saw this expanse of openness with our land on all four sides and we just fell in love. We feel very privileged, very lucky and very content. We like to get out for a day, but when we come back, there is sight of relief. It’s priceless. Sam, 67*

Indeed, the move to Spain for a lot of people meant that they could actually own a house without a mortgage, which was already a really big step for most of them. In fact, some people had dreams of building their own houses, an opportunity to do which was gained with the move to Spain. Becoming the creator/designer/architect of your own house was the liberty or better said ‘luxury’ that not that many people could consider to be an option in the UK.

*For years I had a lot of houses, I have always had this house that I wanted to create or rebuild and this is what I am doing. And when we are working downstairs, I don’t have a plan and when they do some work, I think no, I’ll change it. I’m building the house of my dreams. At the end of the day I want to say, yes, I created this. Shane, 50*

For others not even the fact that they were allowed to participate in choosing finishing touches to their built houses, but the mere fact that houses were built specifically for them made a great difference. Others could afford houses with much more room, so that they allocate different activities to separate rooms. In that way one could watch favourite western movies and the other one practice violin without being on each other’s head. Some people felt privileged being able to live in the houses which had a lot of character to them. Those features like archways, little



sculptures on the walls, big windows, big wooden doors, mouldings and decorative finishing brought the house to life, and safely kept its history and its secrets.

A lot of the people actually named their houses. Partially it was done in accordance with the local traditions where houses are named with the first name of a most important woman living in the house, but for quite a few British it was an act that they already thought of back in the UK, but never really did it, as at that time it seemed to be not appropriate for them. Now, however, once in their status and lifestyle changed, it fitted perfectly.

As it was mentioned before, the lifestyle that people considered acquiring together with their move to the village, related to informants' memories and nostalgia towards the UK in the 50s and 60s. Even though some of the academics suggest that those characteristics of the destination community were imaginary and simply existed in migrant's minds mixed with some stereotypes exchanged with their compatriots, one could argue that these characteristics were sharp observations mixed with the nostalgic feeling with the past.

My informants were touched how local children played on the streets and their parents not being worried about them (that some paedophile would attack them), people would greet each other on a street and actually take an interest of how you are doing, younger people respect the elderly and actually listen to them and take care of them (even if they have to send their parents to care homes, one of the siblings will move to the town to be able to visit them every day). May be those things have to do with a small community or with the fact that the town is situated in a relatively rural environment (they just got an asphalt road put to pass the town to the regional centre 12 years ago), but one can see why the British migrants will be charmed about the idea of such a new environment:

*These are the things that I admire. I never had a family in a sense of my own family. What I mainly admire how the young people respect the elderly family. In England you wouldn't see a 13 year old teenage punk boy holding a small sister's hand walking down the street because it's not cool for a British boy. For a Spanish boy it's a way of his life if he is punk head or not. It's part of his brothers and sisters. Neil, 60*

Such images that my informants were so fascinated about were not the ones from the magazines or TV programs, but were gathered from those limiting but nonetheless no less real experience with their interaction with the Spanish (all of which I can an encounter with myself during the year when I was residing in the village). Most of the British were really friendly with their neighbours, and even though in majority of the cases their Spanish was only good enough to exchange a few words, they still knew a lot about each other and looked after each other's houses when either was going

away. You could walk in the middle of the night wearing some jewellery without having a second thought that something could happen to. In the shops they would deliver a product to you and would ask you to use it and when you're satisfied with it, you could come and pay them, as a lot of relationships are still based on trust in that area. That nostalgic resemblance with the UK in the 60s extended over the practical part of life where a lot of the British were not able any more to buy such goods as ready-made gravy and pulverised custard in the shops and similarly to their Spanish neighbours and acquaintances started making jams, chutneys and fruit brandies at home.

### iii. New type/chance for kinship

Another and in my opinion the most important reason of making a move was people's willingness to recreate/improve/commit to kinship relationships - the idea of a second chance. In that way parents who try to take care of their children offered them a chance to become bilingual and spend more time with them; older couples which needed a second chance in their relationships were going away from worries about their children and other daily matters and actually focused on their relationship; newer couples usually formed by people who already had 2-3 marriages behind them for whom the move to Spain was a way of escaping from the previous lives in order to commit and become finally happy and content.

A lot of the parents and future parents with whom I was talking with mentioned that the village where they moved was a great place for children to grow up. Also most of them felt proud about themselves giving their children not only a chance to learn another language, but also not be 'limited to one perspective' as one of my informants put it, if they would have stayed in the UK. Also, by having a chance to work more flexible hours or in some cases not to work at all, would have allowed them to spend more time with their children, which they could not afford doing back in the UK.

The mature couples, on the other hand were somewhat happy that their children flew the nest and they have seen it as an opportunity to do something for themselves. Other couples after going through serious personal cataclysms, misunderstanding, separation, being cheated on, etc, so they decided to give their relationship a second chance, where a move becomes a material embodiment of another chance both of them are willing to give their partnership. Finally other mature couples having a lack of communication with children and grandchildren back in the UK feel themselves very lonely in a context of anonymous neighbourhoods in the UK and see the move a way of

escaping their loneliness by substituting those kinship relationships with the kin of their neighbours and friends in the destination country, who are much more family orientated.

Quite surprisingly an enormous amount of the British with whom I was conducting this research happened to be newer couples, having already been married 2-3 times and having children from their previous back in the UK. The common phrase 'we have 5 children together' got another meaning for me after so much time that I spent with the informants. Those people usually were either newly married or just together trying to build a new reality just of two of them. The whole process of bringing two very different people with rich past together was a challenge and doing it in a foreign environment was even a bigger one.

Those inner desires of people made me realise that the move as such was the vital part of the equation. The move made them stronger: they created a chance for themselves to dwell on their inner eagerness to learn something, become a part of something bigger and better, create better relationships, and become a person they always aspired to be but somehow forgot in the everyday routine, stress and responsibilities.

### **Instead of a conclusion...**

This phenomenon that is commonly referred to as 'lifestyle migration' is an excellent example of the economic rationale and family values of the current changing times. The idea to leave a family and move to a new country buying a house that would allow for immediate social upgrade has proved to be worth deeper examination. As it has been discussed, liberalisation of the market forces brought more responsibility to people to become in charge of their personal success. At the same time people became hostages of the flexible economic models which imposed greater employment flexibility and decreasing social security. The character of this movement, however, shows that people sometimes are not willing to obey the suggested economic models and realising their absoluteness and unattainability create their own rebel strategies of moving to different countries.