

Contextualizing migration

It's the quality of life. I wish I could have done it much earlier than I did. But then, having said that, I did enjoy every minute of my working life. (Ron Stampton)

To move to France had always been my husband's dream ... he really wanted France ... At that time [the French] were more concerned with how they lived than what they had ... It felt so much like coming home ... it was just so different to England. (Samantha Harris)

So you come away from it and you find a different life, and people are living longer in the Lot. (Susan Sparrow)

The fact that it is a more relaxed way of life is good ... the way of life was so frenetic there, so you'd just collapse in the holidays. (William and Victoria Cardew)

The property in the Lake District was very expensive. And the season up there is so short and you get good weather about five days a year, and that wasn't very suitable after having spent a long time in Hong Kong. I find Britain ... a very aggressive place. I'm amazed at the aggression on the radio, on TV, on advertising, everywhere, everywhere ... and so, we kind of couldn't quite face going back to England. (Robert and Justine Grange, who had lived in Hong Kong for thirty years)

I'd made the break, so going back, I'd been living in the Savoie (department in the French Alps), been skiing. I couldn't go back to work in an office after that. We'd just moved office buildings to this smoked-glass, air-conditioned, no-opening-windows building. You couldn't see whether it was sunny, or whatever, outside. That was it. I went back and, I think it was six months or so, and that was it really. (Jon Morris)

Southern French culture, it's like stepping back into an England that you do remember as a child; it's very much like 50s/60s England, our social and cultural norms ... there's more respect for the elderly built into the children's culture ... Children are more respectful, and possibly because of the environment, the elderly are more active ... France represents something we've lost. (Simon Glass)

This selection of extracts from the migration narratives of some of my respondents demonstrates the various motivations behind migration and reveal the constituent parts of the better way of life that they seek. These include quality of life, migration to rural France as a long-held dream, the rural idyll, migration as an escape from the rat race, lower cost of property, climate, a healthier environment and nostalgia for French culture. While it is seen that rural France had a particular cultural significance for my respondents, there are also indications that they took into consideration other more pragmatic concerns, financial and health among others (cf King, Warnes and Williams 2000; O'Reilly 2000). These brief extracts give an initial insight into the complexity of the decision to migrate, representing views common to other narratives. Broadly, a tale of dissatisfaction with life in Britain emerges, whereby rural France offers salvation and the possibility of self-realization.

Nevertheless, generic explanations of the decision to migrate, which contrast the decline of society in Britain with the perceived life on offer in the Lot, are limited. On one level, they can help us to understand the migration of people to and from the same places. However, they cannot account for flows of migration taking place at different points in time and under different circumstances. Indeed, with the migration of my respondents taking place over a period of twenty years, the timing of migration could correspond to very different social, economic and political contexts (Buller 2008; Benson 2010a). Similarly, reducing the decision to migrate to its cultural dimensions does not allow for the point of view of the individual to emerge or for the presence of individual agency within migration choices (Ong 1999). While my respondents all presented a similar overarching rhetoric about the decision to migrate, further inquiries reveal that these were articulated to account for often very different individual circumstances. To account for these nuances in this section I present a more detailed examination of British migration to the Lot.

Historical contexts and individualized migration stories

The circumstances of life before migration could, to a degree, be read in the timing of migration and how this related to wider social, political and economic events. As my respondents were lifestyle migrants, their migration was broadly facilitated by relative economic privilege and ease of movement (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; O'Reilly and Benson 2009). On the one hand, the latter is a result of globalization; our place in the world is different under the conditions of time-space compression (Giddens 1990) and a sense of the world as a single place (Robertson 1992). Indeed, this migration trend, which has been growing in recent years, reflects the increasing levels of travel within the world (Faist 2000; Papastergiadis 2000; Castles and Miller 2003; Urry 2007). On the other hand, this ease of movement was specific to my respondents' position as European Union citizens who are entitled to freedom of movement within Europe. Given the timing of their migration and the specific context of the Lot, unlike contemporary tourism and labour migration flows which have been positively affected by low-cost air-travel (Williams and Baláz 2009), this particular migration had not, as yet, been facilitated by low-cost air travel.³ While these broad structural conditions can facilitate migration, there are time- and space-specific contexts that need to be recognized.

For my respondents in the Lot, it was evident that subjective experiences of life in Britain influenced migration. In this respect, the decision to migrate needs to be understood within an individualized context of pre-migration life. For example, the migrants regularly drew on their disillusionment with life in Britain on a political level, stressing how this had influenced their migration. For those who had migrated in the 1980s and early 1990s, this was directed towards the Conservative government; these migrants had felt the effects of the economic recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which had resulted in wide-scale redundancy. Indeed, several of my respondents had been made redundant. Turning