

A Culture of Volunteering: Charitable Activities among British Retirement Migrants in Spain ***Cultura do voluntariado: solidariedade entre migrantes ingleses aposentados em Espanha***

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Abstract Volunteering and doing charity are a widespread activity among the British retired community in Spain. Based on extended ethnographic fieldwork on the Spanish Costa Blanca, this article seeks to analyze why volunteering plays such a prominent role in the context of British retirement migration to Spain and explains some of the personal benefits of volunteering for the elderly people actively engaged in charitable endeavours.

Keywords International retirement migration, lifestyle migration, charity, volunteering, Spain, United Kingdom, philanthropy, leisure

Resumo Voluntariado e fazer caridade são actividades difundidas entre a comunidade britânica aposentada, em Espanha. Baseado numa extensa pesquisa etnográfica na Costa Branca espanhola, este artigo pretende analisar por que é que o voluntariado tem um papel tão proeminente no contexto da migração de aposentadoria britânica para a Espanha e explica alguns dos benefícios pessoais do voluntariado para os idosos que participam activamente nos esforços de caridade.

Palavras-chave Migração internacional por aposentadoria, migração por estilo de vida, caridade, voluntariado, Espanha, Reino Unido, filantropia, lazer

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In times of hyper mobility, cheap air travel, and individualised possibilities of ageing, retiring to a foreign country has become a popular option among pensioners worldwide. Scientifically known as lifestyle migration, residential tourism, or retirement migration, amongst many other terms, the strategy to move to a different place for retirement is now a growing phenomenon with destinations worldwide alluring elderly people with the prospects of agreeable climates, attractive landscapes, different cultures and ways of life, and often economic advantages due to cheaper living conditions.¹ Within Europe, Spain represents by far the most popular retirement destination among Northern and Central European pensioners of which the British constitute the largest national group.² Yet, the phenomenon is hard to quantify, since many retirement migrants do not register locally for reasons ranging from the accessibility of health care in their homelands, to the fear of bureaucratic efforts or the evasion tax inspections. Additionally, retirement migration is factually situated in a continuum between tourism and migration, and many migrants only spend the winters in their homes in Spain, thus maintaining transnational social and physical attachments to dwellings in different countries. Due to this massive flux of people and the manifold individual strategies of mobility and settlement enabled by the freedom of movement within the European Union, exact figures are hard to come by. According to some estimations, more than 1.000.000 British people live in Spain, whereas the official Spanish municipal register of 2009 (*Padrón Municipal de Inhabitantes*) only registers 374.600 citizens of the United Kingdom in Spain, of which 176.952 are older than 55 years of age and can therefore, in most cases, be considered as retired or early-retired.³ In the *Comunitat Valenciana* (Autonomous Region of Valencia) – the regional example of this case study and better known as *Costa Blanca* among tourists and retirement migrants alike – 76.713 British persons above the age of 55 were officially registered, making it the most popular destination among British retirees within Europe.

Irrespective of the actual statistical data of the phenomenon, British retirement migrants are a highly visible group in many of the tourist areas along the Costa Blanca, and probably the most demonstrative, too. Therefore, in most places with a significant group of British expatriates one can find a vast amount of British businesses, such as butchers, hairdressers, supermarkets, pubs, bars and restaurants. Additionally, there are English radio stations and print media catering for the demands of their English speaking audience. Yet, one of the most outstanding and noticeable cultural features of the British retired population in Spain, not only in comparison to the Spanish local population, but to the other Northern European senior residents as well, is their impressively high inclination to engage in charitable activities. The popularity and

prevalence of volunteering and charitable endeavours among the British residents in Spain has been perceived as an important social praxis (King, Warnes and Williams, 2000; Huber and O'Reilly, 2004; Oliver, 2008; Haas, 2010; Haas and Janoschka, 2011) and the disposedness of the British expats to volunteer is publicly displayed in many forms. The English language newspapers are usually teeming with reports on charity dinners, fund raising events and announcements of the manifold charity organisations, and the expat radio stations regularly broadcast news and feature on the topic, and in most towns with a considerable British population there is at least one charity shop to be found raising money for philanthropic causes.

But how can this massive affinity to volunteering and engagement in charitable activities be explained? On the one hand, the British expats are predisposed to volunteer due to their high socio-economic profile, because, voluntary work – just like retirement migration – is clearly linked to middle and higher social classes (Hall, 1999; McMunn *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, Britain has a very old and grown tradition of charity (Tarling, 2000; Wright, 2001; Woodroffe, 1964) and some authors even speak of a “British charity heritage” (see Mulgan and Landry, 1995:14). While studies on the spread of volunteering in Europe generally state a high level of voluntary engagement in all Northern and Central European countries, in strong contrast with very low levels in Mediterranean countries and especially Spain (Boersch-Supan *et al.*, 2005, Erlinghagen and Hank, 2006), Britain seems to have a special status, and Political scientist Peter Hall (1999), for example, describes how, due to certain political and historical developments, Britain has one of the most vital and distinct cultures of volunteering worldwide.

The fact that volunteering presents a British cultural resource that many of the active volunteers have been socialised with throughout their life course was also mirrored in many of the interviews with elderly volunteers, as the following answer of an old lady to the question how the great popularity of volunteering could be explained, emblematises:

“I think it's because it's an English way of doing things. Well, it's a charity, so we all work for a charity in England so we automatically come and join a charity out here. It's very much a way of life for the English.”

Likewise, in many other descriptions the volunteers explained charity to be a specific and constitutive part of British culture which is deeply ingrained into their everyday lives and many explained how they had “grown up doing bits of good” and been working for a charity often since their childhood. Therefore, the pronounced charity culture in Britain and the cultural repertoire of philanthropic action accumulated by the social actors throughout their individual life course must be understood as an important framing for the fact that this cultural tradition is so successfully transported into a new country and life context.

Finally, there are the personal benefits of volunteering in the context of retirement migration. Migrating after retirement must be seen as a twofold rupture, since both factors represent profound transformations of the personal quotidian life and a rearrangement of social roles and positions. In this regard, engagement in a charity for many British retirement migrants represents a popular strategy of making new social contacts and establishing new timely structures and routines in a culturally and socially new environment. The experiences of fun, friendship, companionship and social cohesions, as well as the feeling of being needed, were described by many of the volunteers as highly valuable personal profits gained from their engagement. The interrelation between physical and mental activity and well-being in higher age in general is well known (e.g. Howie, 2007; Wray, 2003) and many studies verify the positive influence of volunteering on personal health and well-being (McMunn *et al.*, 2009; Siegrist and Wahrendorf, 2005; Knesebeck *et al.*, 2007), or explain how volunteering offers an alternative strategy to gain occupational satisfaction after retirement (Parry and Taylor, 2007). Therefore, volunteering in retirement migration must be considered an extremely positive strategy of coping and adaptation to a new and exciting life context indicating high levels of reflexivity and agency among the British elderly residents in Spain.

Notes

¹ Retirement migration has now become a world expanding phenomenon and global market for the tourism and real-estate sector alike. Apart from intra-national retirement moves and classic destinations such as Florida in the US and the Southern European and Mediterranean countries like Spain (Rodríguez, Fernández-Mayoralas and Rojo, 2004), France (Benson, 2009), Italy and Portugal (King, Warnes and Williams, 2000) new areas are constantly evolving as destinations for international retirement migrants. In Latin America, Panama (Jackiewicz and Craine, 2010), Mexico (Sunit, Rojas and Bradley, 2007, Croucher, 2009) and Costa Rica (Janoschka, 2009b) are among the most popular countries hosting mainly Northern American retirees, while in East Asia Malaysia (Ono, 2008) and Thailand (Howard, 2008) are popular countries for western and Japanese pensioners alike. Other upcoming countries for retirement migration encompass Morocco (Escher and Petermann, 2009), Turkey (Nuzrali and O'Reilly, 2009), Bulgaria (Kaneff, 2009), and China (Ma and Chow, 2006).

² For a selection of research done on international retirement migration in Spain see Ackers and Dwyer (2002), Gustafson (2008), Haas (2010), Huber and O'Reilly (2004), Janoschka (2009a), Janoschka and Haas (2010), King, Warnes and Williams (2000), Oliver (2008), O'Reilly (2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010), Rodríguez *et al.* (2004), Schriewer and García Jiménez (2008).

³ The figure of up to 1.000.000 Britons in Spain stems from a radio interview held on January 22nd 2008 with the English ambassador in Spain transmitted on the local British radio station REM.FM. All other statistical data are available at the website of the Spanish National Institute for Statistics at www.ine.es [Accessed May 2011].

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