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'There's more to life': why the British migrate to rural France
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'THERE'S MORE TO LIFE': WHY THE BRITISH MIGRATE TO RURAL FRANCE

Abstract:
In this paper, I draw upon substantive material on British lifestyle migrants living in the Lot, a rural inland *département* in the southwest of France. By their own admission, these migrants believe that they come 'from all walks of life'. They readily dissociate from some of their compatriots in the region, while aligning themselves with others. This has implications for understanding why they choose to migrate, and what they anticipate of life following migration. While their move to France can be explained in terms of the search for the rural idyll, anti-modern and anti-urban longings, and their eschatological cravings, the migrants themselves discuss these desires in a variety of ways and emphasize how they understand what constitutes a meaningful and authentic life. In my analysis, I contextualize their discussions in terms of the broader notion of authenticity. I explain the process of distinction the migrants use to differentiate themselves from tourists, their compatriots, and other migrants living in the Lot and I highlight the connection between distinction as a social process and the presentation of the 'authentic' in rural France.

Paper:
British migrants living in the Lot, a rural, inland *département* (administrative district) in the southwest of France come from various backgrounds and have diverse experiences of life once they live in France. My respondents often told me that their compatriots came 'from all walks of life', actively embracing this seeming diversity. However, the migrants all had one thing in common, they were all members of the British middle class. As such, distinction was a ubiquitous feature of their narratives (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Central to the way that they

distinguish themselves from others are their perceptions of what constitutes an authentic life.

In this paper, I examine their classifications of others which they imply in their accounts of life in the Lot. On one hand, they distinguish themselves from those they perceive as 'less authentic', such as tourists, and other Britons living overseas. In this manner, the migrants imply that their lives in the Lot are 'more authentic' than those of selected others, stressing the different aspects of authenticity that they value. On the other hand, they also recognize that there are those who lead 'more authentic' lives than they do. They admire these others, and their stories show how they aspire towards the lives they lead. Through the comparisons of their lives to those of more and less 'authentic' others, my respondents position themselves on a sliding scale of authenticity; they have 'more' authentic lives than some others and than they had in Britain, but they perceive a gap between their experiences of life and what is still possible.

The authentic that my respondents look for is a response to what they believe has disappeared from life in modern Britain (cf. MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1988). As Handler and Saxton (1988) argue, their authentic experiences of life in rural France put them in touch, once again, with 'real' life and their 'real' selves; everyday life back in Britain was not 'real' to the migrants. Although they gaze on the rural idyll around them, they simultaneously emphasize that they live within it. It is this participation in the landscape that they believe makes their lives authentic and in their narratives, they stress that they 'really' live in the Lot. In this manner, they differentiate them from those who they perceive as having only artificial engagements with life around them. Importantly, their perceptions of others, themselves, and the landscape emerge, as Bender (1998) argues, from social construction and individual experience. This demonstrates that in all cases, their perceptions are constructed.

In this paper, I outline how the migrants position themselves on the sliding scale of authenticity. I present two brief ethnographic examples to illustrate this model,

drawing out the features of authentic living that my respondents imply in their accounts. My research found evidence of the way that the migrants distinguish and align themselves with a variety of other social actors, such as tourists, and Britons living in Spain, and the local French. However, the examples I incorporate into this paper focus specifically on the way that my respondents talk about the British in the Dordogne, and a woman who has lived in the Lot for approximately fifty years. Through the contrasts presented in these two examples, I argue that the process of getting to authenticity is a central feature of the migrants' daily lives, living and working in the Lot.

The sliding scale of authenticity

My respondents in the Lot take great care to distinguish themselves from other categories of people who they perceive as different. Although these categories themselves may at first sight appear self-evident, the particular way they are defined and put into use bears the signature of the migrants as their author. This specific system of classification is organized in concentric circles. When they discuss those 'less authentic' than themselves, they place the self as the author at the centre. Closest to this centre are the migrants' compatriots in the Lot, followed by the British residents of the Dordogne, Britons in Spain, and then tourists. The migrants' discussions about the British still living in Britain suggest that they also place them in the outer circle, at a safe distance. This reflects their self-presentations as 'different', 'not normal', as 'adventurers' and 'pioneers', as fundamentally unlike other Britons. However, when they discuss those who lead 'more authentic' lives, the lives that they aspire towards, they place these actors at the centre of the circles. Over time, they perceive that they will slowly approach this centre, but never quite achieve the fully 'authentic' life. Indeed, the longer they live in the Lot, the more they realize there is to learn about living there. As their accounts reveal, there are always more challenges to be had and, consequently, new explanations and understandings of the authentic to be reached.

More authentic others

The successful 'integration' of first wave migrants provides one example of how the migrants commonly discuss those who they perceive as leading 'more authentic' lives than their own. In conversation with migrants living to the east of Cahors, one name surfaced time and time again. It was the name of a British woman now in her seventies, Catherine Duval. I compile the following romanticized account of her migration and subsequent life in France from the stories that a number of my participants told me.

Catherine first came to the Lot as a student during the 1950s when she was in her early twenties. She was studying French at university and stayed in France to teach for a year. By the end of the year, she had fallen in love both with Cahors and a man who live there. Although she briefly returned to Britain, the pull of the Lot and the man she loved proved too strong and she soon decided to try and make a life for herself in France. She married her sweetheart, set herself up as a professional translator, and had lived in the Lot ever since. Her career and her marriage were a great success; her skills as a translator were always in high demand. She had children and then grandchildren. For many years, she was on the committee for the *Association France Grande-Bretagne*, but when I carried out my research, she had recently given up this position.

By the time of my research, Catherine's reputation had reached mythical proportions. She had successfully 'integrated' into the local population – this was an assessment by other British migrants based upon her ability to speak French and the fact that she socialized as easily with the French population as with the British, seeming to bridge the gap between them effortlessly – and migrants of all waves upheld her as a role model. Each of them seemed to have a story to tell about her, and these broadly fell into two categories. On one hand, many of my respondents told me of moments when she had been their saviour. One couple recalled an incident where they had had problems with their car. When they reached the garage, they could not understand the mechanic and vice versa. Fortunately, he knew of Catherine and rang her, requesting that she come down

to the garage to act as a translator. The way the couple presented it to me, she came straight down to the garage to help them out, accepted their thanks, and then went home. They wanted to return the favour with a drink or a meal, but Catherine declined. The couple never saw her again.

On the other hand, the accounts of some migrants revealed that they were protective towards her. One hot summer day I sat on the terrace of Harry and Connie's house while the *French Times*, a British publication focussing on life in France, interviewed them and Jane Campbell. At some point Catherine's name entered the conversation and Jane expressed admiration for what she had achieved for the British living in the Lot as well as her success at becoming accepted by the French population. The interviewer took great interest; where could she find Catherine? The response was immediate and was the same as the one given to me months earlier: over the years Catherine had been inundated with media attention and now it was time to leave her in peace. This was an interesting reaction as there was no indication on either occasion that this respect for her privacy was at Catherine's own request. Jane, Harry, and Connie took it upon themselves to speak in her place.

I argue that both the awe and protection expressed in the migrants' statements about Catherine reveal more about what she signifies to my respondents than her actual character. My respondents with their stories implicitly present her as living the most 'authentic' life of all their compatriots. As their accounts demonstrate, they admire her ability to speak both French and English, and the opportunities that this presents for her in terms of socialization. Importantly, they perceive that she has achieved their goal of living in the landscape; she has successfully adapted to the French way of life, been integrated, and effectively 'disappeared'. This, I argue, is what many of the migrants have as their goal. In this manner, Catherine represents the authentic lives that they strive towards.

The above example shows the goal that the migrants generally seem to work towards – a more authentic life characterized by blending into the background.

However, in their accounts this presentation of the 'more authentic' gains further potency from the contrast to the less authentic (or inauthentic) lives of others.

Less authentic others

In particular, this was evident when the migrants discussed their compatriots living in the Dordogne, the adjacent *département*. For example, recalling her initial decision to migrate to the Lot, Sarah Hammond told me, 'The last thing we wanted to do was join an English circle. You know? One of these expat groups, which we knew was very dominant in the Dordogne region, which is why we didn't choose the Dordogne region'. By associating stereotypes of the British in the Dordogne with those held of expatriates, Sarah simultaneously distances herself from other migrants who do participate in the 'English circle', expatriates in general, and specifically from Britons residing in the Dordogne. In their accounts, Sarah and David, evoke the idea that British residents of the Dordogne are a homogeneous group who lead a stereotypical, colonial lifestyle abroad. This clearly resonates with the ways that other migrants speak of the British in Spain.

Jon and Kay Morris discussed the Dordogne in detail when explaining their reasons for living in the Lot. As Jon explained, 'It's known as Dordogneshire…people have got their own shops [British people in the Dordogne]; there are village cricket teams'. They continued, distancing themselves and other Britons living in the Lot from their perceptions of their compatriots in the neighbouring *département*:

> Kay Well, I think that the people who've moved to live here have chosen not to live in the Dordogne… therefore, there's already a huge difference.
>
> Jon Well, it's interesting. We had some Australian people staying in one of the gîte last summer who were touring a bit, and they'd been to the Dordogne. And they said to us, "It's bloody awful. Everywhere we moved or went… we went to

> the baker's and it was an English person who owned it; we went to get canoes, it was an English person who owned it. You know, no offence, but it felt like we were living in England. And, you know, we wanted to be in France".

Recalling the accounts of some Australian tourists who had stayed in their *gîte* gives their account further emphasis. The local population in some parts of France is no longer what tourists anticipate – British and, indeed, Dutch migration impact on the demographics of the countryside. The Australian visitors were disappointed to find that the population was, in some places, not exclusively French. Drawing on the accounts of these tourists, Jon and Kay confirm their perceptions of the Dordogne as 'inauthentic' because it is becoming anglicized. The 'authentic' life that they seek is specifically French.

My respondents present the Dordogne as undesirable place to live. In their perceptions, it does not offer the 'traditional rural community' central to the rural idyll (see Rapport 1993). They perceive that this quality is available to them in the Lot.

Reconceptualizing the 'quest for authenticity'

While the quest for authenticity has been the subject of the anthropology of tourism for thirty years or more, the dominant theoretical frameworks do not provide an adequate explanation for my respondents' experiences. Urry (1990) follows Turner (1982) to argue that the search for the 'Holy Grail', the sacred, can only happen during leisure time. This does not explain how the quest for authenticity is experienced by those seeking to experience an authentic way of everyday living and working. The narratives of British migrants living in the Lot therefore displaces Urry's (1990) argument that such a quest can only occur outside everyday life, such as tourist encounters. My respondents however, emphasize that they are not tourists. As one of them told me,

> When you go abroad, it's on holiday; it's an association that builds up in people's minds, understandably. Abroad equals leisure,

> equals fun, equals, you know, relaxing… the reality is never, of course, quite like that.

They perceive that their lives in the Lot are about living and working, rather than the visiting and leisure enjoyed by tourists. In their perception, it is only through both living and working can 'real life' be experienced.

Authenticity as distinction

My research reveals that the migrants have very confident ideas about what constitutes authentic and inauthentic lives. In their narratives, this is evident in their discussions of what they believe to be real, or genuine, ways of living (see Nash 1996). It is important however, to recognize that these are not categories that my respondents unanimously agree upon; Deconstructing the tourist experience similarly reveals multiple variants of the authentic (see for example Cohen 1988). Despite this lack of consensus I argue that, using the contrast between what they perceive as 'authentic' and 'inauthentic', or in this case identifying those more and less authentic than themselves, the migrants invoke a particular notion of authenticity which, as Fine states equates it to the 'recognition of difference' (2003: 155). Thus presenting the authentic is a demonstration of difference, as Handler (1986) and van Ginkel (2004) assert. Therefore, by locating the migrants' accounts within the context of broader discussions of authenticity brings to light the processes of distinction that they use in their everyday lives. This has resonance with Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of class distinction.

The processes of distinction that Bourdieu (1984) highlights, operate to classify both the self and others. In order to distinguish themselves, migrants align themselves with those whose 'tastes' – 'the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices' (Bourdieu 1984: 173) – confirm their own ambitions of how to live, while rejecting those of others on the grounds of vulgarity, in this case their lack of knowledge of 'how to really live in the Lot'. I argue that they perceive

those who lack this knowledge as having 'less authentic' lives than those which they lead. There are others, however, who they perceive to lead 'more authentic' lives than their own, such as migrants from the first wave. They perceive these others as having successfully mastered rural French living. Migrants explain how those in the first wave have the knowledge of how to live a 'genuine' life in rural France; they are living the 'real' dream that so many of the migrants aspire towards.

The quest for 'authentic living' as part of mundane life

My respondents' search for the authentic is in some ways reminiscent of that proposed to be central to the tourist experience (see for example MacCannell 1976; Urry 1990). For the tourist, their experiences offer them a contrast tot he superficiality of modernity (MacCannell 1976; Urry 1990). This point is certainly an apt description of the migrants' quest; as I show throughout the previous chapters, their narratives reveal that they are dissatisfied with modern life as they experience it in Britain and they present their lives in France as a direct contrast to these lives. However, the studies linking the quest for authenticity with tourism also stress that the authentic is found outside everyday experience (see for example MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1988; Urry 1990; Franklin 2003). As Urry states

> [T]he journey and stay are to, and in, sites which are outside the normal places of residence and work. Periods of residence elsewhere are of a short-term or temporary nature. There is a clear intention to return 'home' within a relatively short period of time (1990: 3).

In respect to this point, I argue that the migrants' quest for authenticity does not resemble that claimed of the tourist. This distinction is primarily apparent in the permanent character of their migration to France. Additionally, unlike tourists who experience the authentic through visiting and leisure, my respondents' search for authenticity takes place in their everyday lives, where they both live and work. I argue, therefore, that my research demonstrates the need to examine the quest

for authenticity as it occurs in the mundane. While Urry (1990) states that it is only possible to gaze on the authentic, and MacCannell (1976) argues that it is impossible to gain the authentic because this act destroys the authenticity of that sought (cf. Handler and Saxton 1988), I strive to show how the migrants continually engage in the process of getting to authenticity. In other words, interrogating what my respondents perceive as more and less authentic, and how this changes over time reveals their motivations for moving to rural France and for continuing to live there. This is reminiscent of Bruner's (2005) argument that the perception of the authentic, when understood in terms of credibility, changes over time and is therefore a process. The narratives of my respondents in the Lot thus reveal that they have devoted their lives to the quest for an authentic life.

'There's more to life'

The question remains however, what does this search for more in their lives do for my respondents? I argue here that they primarily embark on this journey as a response to the particularities of their lives in the run-up to migration. As lifestyle migrants, their motivations are already distinct from those of expatriates who move for work (see for example Fechter 2001). Even those who plan to work once they live in rural France rarely have the stability of a job waiting for them there; it is rather the case that they want to live in France and have some idea of an enterprise that they can run from home. It is the migrants' individual circumstances, which make their migration a possibility. This is particularly, although not exclusively, evident when examining their employment status back in Britain. For example, many of them had recently taken voluntary redundancy, early retirement, or radically decided to stop work and break out of the rat-race. Each of these situations is unanticipated in the sense that it is out of line with what the habitus of individuals, or society more generally, predicted or expected. For example, Jon and Kay Morris told me about how their friends had responded to their decision to migrate,

> Some of our friends thought we were absolutely bonkers… because it was just moving out of that line that everybody takes – you work, you have kids, you get a house, then you retire sort of thing.

My respondents' migration stories echo Bourdieu's (2000) discussion of how people can experience the previously improbable once they disrupt the link between expectations and chance. To expand on Bourdieu's (2000) argument, ordinarily the past shapes habitus so that the individual has some insight into what their future holds. An untimely event presents an interruption to the otherwise impermeable link between expectation and chance. This results in the individual losing some sense of who they are, and opens a space where the previously improbable can occur. It had been unlikely that the trajectory of their lives would anticipate migration to rural France (after all, how to live in rural France was not second nature to them back in Britain); without the assurances of the future they had previously derived from employment, the migrants looked for other ways to live. Outside the constraints of their prior expectations, these become reality. In this respect, there are more options in life than had been available to them. It becomes possible for the migrants to redefine their lives because they break free of what society would otherwise expect of them. Their migration is an indicator that they have successfully ruptured the link between expectation and chance. Through this process, a margin of freedom appears where they discover the possibility of leading life defined in their own terms.

I believe that my respondents' claims to increased agency following migration reflect that they have regained the power to define the world around them and their place within in. In terms of how they subsequently define the social world, their descriptions of life in the Lot are interesting because of what it symbolizes to them. Those who moved with their children in the late 1980s and early 1990s anticipated a better future for their children than what Britain could offer. Similarly, those who left their jobs in southeast England to move to rural France in the early 2000s explained how they had wanted to escape the daily grind of

the rat race, believing that they could have a more relaxed, healthy, and enjoyable way of life in the Lot. The retired migrants reveal in their accounts that their lives in the Lot are more fulfilling than those they believed were waiting for them in Britain.

Through their presentations of their daily lives, my respondents intimate that they are in the process of acquiring more meaningful and authentic lives. Their lives in France are relative, not only to their lives in Britain before migration and to those of others, but also to the lives they anticipated leading had they stayed, and to their early lives in the Lot. As with the quest for authenticity, the process of gaining a more meaningful life never reaches a climax. Through their continual juxtaposition of their lives to those of others, they imply that they are always learning that there is more to life in the Lot.

Conclusion

The stories that Britons living in the Lot tell about migration and their lives in rural France present migration as a way to overcome the discomfort that they feel about life in contemporary Britain. This is, in part, inspired by how they imagine and represent the Lot and its people as leading genuinely rural lives. In this respect, they believe that the life available to them in the Lot embodies the sense of traditional rural living that they aspire towards.

However, this move is also motivated by their middle class ambitions to be different (cf. Bourdieu 1984). As their narratives demonstrate, the migrants perceive that following migration their lives are more 'authentic' than those they previously led. This response to the ills of modernity allows them to distinguish themselves from their compatriots still living in Britain. In other words, through their quest for authenticity they strive to present their different way of life as a credible and convincing alternative to the lives they led in Britain. The endeavour of moving to the Lot thus represents their search for a particular lifestyle, which they understand as different. Through the distinctions that they draw, they reveal what constitutes 'real' life and show how, over time, their lives increasingly come

to resemble this. They thus show why they believe that their lives in the Lot are both meaningful and fulfilling in contrast to their previous lives in Britain.

The rural France that my respondents inhabit is one that they define and redefine in their own terms. In this manner, they reveal their aspirations to become part of it. This route to leading a truly authentic life is, however, interminable; there is always 'more' to be had from life. As their accounts reveal, there are always more challenges to be had and, consequently, new explanations and understandings of the authentic to be reached. While in Britain the migrants felt constrained, by moving to a new place where they can negotiate and manipulate what it means to be authentic and different, they augment their agency. Their perception that there is always 'more to life' is instrumental. The quest for authenticity and difference evident in their stories shows that through migration, they gain more agency to make narratives about who they are and the lives they lead. And so it seems that stories about migration are always in the making.