

## Back to the Future: The Impact of Perceptions and Experiences of Time on the Lives of British Lifestyle Migrants in Spain

Sociology

1–15

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00380385221096267

[journals.sagepub.com/home/soc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/soc)**Laura Dixon**

Liverpool John Moores University, UK

### Abstract

Increasingly, lifestyle migration research has focused on the ways that social categories like race, gender and sexuality, as well as concepts from post-colonialism to spatialisation, intersect and impact on lifestyle migrants' everyday experiences, in an attempt to complicate its theoretical foundations. Adding to this body of work, this article explicitly investigates post-migration perceptions of time among lifestyle migrants, which have previously been more implicitly explored. It does so, by showing how British migrants in the Catalan tourist town of Sitges remained orientated towards the future in a way that conflicted with the temporal rhythm of the town itself, which was determined by a calendar of cultural festivals and events that was repeated annually, with minimal variation. As a result, participants soon felt so stuck within a seemingly unchanging present, which they were unable to transition fully into, that it often precipitated (or contributed to) return migration to the UK.

### Keywords

British, cosmopolitanism, identity, lifestyle migration, place, return migration, space, Spain, time

### Introduction

Since 2009, when Benson and O'Reilly (2009: 608) first coined the term 'lifestyle migration' as a means to theorise the 'relocation of relatively affluent people within the developed world searching for a better way of life', an expansive body of sociological literature exploring the phenomenon has emerged (see Benson, 2011; D'Andrea, 2007; Dixon, 2019a; Hoey, 2014; Korpela, 2009; Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010). Key to the nascent concept of lifestyle migration, was the opportunity it offered to understand the movement of

---

### Corresponding author:

Laura Dixon, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Business School, Egerton Court, 2 Rodney Street, Liverpool, L1 2UA, UK.

Email: [L.J.Dixon@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:L.J.Dixon@ljmu.ac.uk)

this group of relatively privileged migrants as a mode of consumption-based, reflexive, identity making, while charting the complex interplay of structure and agency that such movements entailed (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 615). To do so, a typology based on choice of migration destination was constructed and it was this typology that was (at least initially), most often applied to specific cases, as a relatively unproblematised conceptual framework (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016; see Hoey, 2014; Korpela, 2009).

As lifestyle migration literature expanded, calls for a more nuanced approach to the topic emerged and as a result, recent research has begun to explicitly recognise the need for a more critical deconstruction of the concept (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016: 409). Consequently, the impacts of macro-structural shifts on lifestyle migration have been emphasised, from neoliberalism and post-colonialism to globalisation (Benson and O'Reilly, 2018). More specifically, lifestyle migration research has begun to examine the ways that such factors work to highlight the limits and possibilities of this specific form of mobility, as individuals both shape and are simultaneously shaped by the 'habitus of the communities within which they live' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2018: 2). On a more intra-locational level, the socio-structural role that class, race, gender and sexuality can play as they intersect and inform the post-migration lives of lifestyle migrants, has begun to be explored too (see Benson, 2014; Croucher, 2014; Dixon, 2019a; Lundström, 2014; Lundström and Twine, 2011).

As a result, this body of literature is broad, ranging from research exploring the motivations behind return migration (Giner-Monfort et al., 2016) and the difficulties faced by retirement migrants entering the 'fourth age' (Ahmed and Hall, 2016: 106); to examining gender and sexuality-based social isolation experienced by female lifestyle migrants (Dixon, 2019a); as well as the performative aspects of heterosexuality and masculinities in the migratory context of Dubai (Walsh, 2011). In seeking to avoid an over-emphasis on socio-economic factors that privilege the individual agency of lifestyle migrants, such work stresses the impact that dialogical social relations have on identity, post-migration, instead (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016: 21; Croucher, 2014; Dixon, 2021; Lundström, 2014).

On a more conceptual level, lifestyle migration research has begun to follow a trend within migration studies more broadly, which has seen recognition of the crucial role that spatialisation plays in the lives of migrants (Dixon, 2019b; Janoschka and Haas, 2013; Torkington, 2012). Such work includes a focus on the discursive construction of 'place' in relation to both individual and subjective identity (Torkington, 2012), the multiplicity and contestation of distinct spatialities as they are negotiated between locals and lifestyle migrants within (and between) migration destinations (Janoschka and Haas, 2013), as well as the impact of locationally specific place-marketing discourses, on individual migrant identities (Dixon, 2019b). This research often implicitly acknowledges the imbrication of space and time, not least because of its vital importance within a construction of contemporary global capitalism that incorporates the idea of individualised, consumption-based, identity-making, which consequently also underscores the 'lifestyle' element within lifestyle migration literature.

Where temporality has been examined explicitly, it has most often focused on less privileged migrants, in scenarios in which movement through space is subject to (especially external) constraints, with a (more or less) implicit understanding that time is similarly therefore, constrained too (Barber and Lem, 2018: 10). The impacts of such

constraints on the subjective experiences of these groups then become the object of exploration (Barber and Lem, 2018: 10). For lifestyle migration on the other hand, the very concept itself is premised on an assumed ability to move freely through both space *and* time. Yet despite the expansion of research seeking to understand the impact of spatialisation, the explicit discussion of temporality within both migration literature more broadly, and lifestyle migration work more specifically, nonetheless remains under-examined (Barber and Lem, 2018: 8; Chen and Bao, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2013). Here then, to add to this area of research, the impact of the way that time was structured, experienced and perceived by British lifestyle migrants living in the Catalan tourist town of Sitges will be explored.

British migrants are drawn to Sitges in large part due its reputation as a famously ‘cosmopolitan’ location; a cosmopolitanism consciously constructed through destination marketing narratives which, crucially, incorporate a distinct authenticity that is made explicit via the enactment (and continual re-enactment) of an annual calendar of traditional festivals and cultural events. As a result, British migrants’ choice to move there specifically, as opposed to other popular tourist destinations in Spain, is explicitly articulated as reflecting their own sense of being cosmopolitan. When seen through this lens of cosmopolitanism, they in many ways exemplify a kind of ideal-typical lifestyle migrant, with the presumed subjective spatial *and* temporal agency that entails.

Their experiences can therefore provide a key insight into the relationship between cosmopolitanism and temporality within the context of lifestyle migration in two specific ways; first, by examining the extent to which concepts of time influence lifestyle migrants’ everyday lived experiences within a cosmopolitan context (in which this is assumed not to matter), and second, in so doing, to investigate what this adds to our understandings of temporality itself. In particular, it will be shown how the town’s annual cycle of traditional festivals and cultural events created a particular temporal ‘rhythm’ (Lefebvre, 2004) that directly intersected with the way that participants both perceived and experienced the relationship between past, present and future. Despite this particular group of British migrants in many ways exemplifying the presumed subjective agency of a kind of ideal-typical lifestyle migrant, the same agency that precipitated and enabled their migration, was ultimately constrained by way that time was socially constructed in this context, jarring as it did with participants’ pre-existing temporal orientations to such an extent, that it ultimately impacted upon their ability to continue living there.

## The Research Setting

Sitges is located on the eastern coast of the Spanish mainland, approximately 35 km south of Barcelona and it is particularly renowned for its long-established artistic and cultural heritage (Boone, 2007). Despite its location on the *Costa Dorada*, one of the most popular tourist areas in Spain since the 1970s, Sitges has nonetheless managed to hold on to a traditional identity, and not least by avoiding the kinds of development catering to mass tourism common in other coastal regions of the country (Boone, 2007). This is most explicitly evoked through the town’s faithful re-enactment of an annual calendar of cultural festivals and events, which continued even during the reign of Franco. The importance of such events was enhanced further, owing to Sitges’ positioning at the

centre of the Catalan *Modernisme* movement when, towards the end of the 19th century, the town welcomed a number of famous artists and their followers, including Federico García Lorca, Santiago Rusiñol and Salvador Dalí (Binkhorst, 2007; Boone, 2007). The legacy of these famous patrons is heavily protected and promoted by the town, providing a further layer of authenticity to the town's cosmopolitan place-marketing narratives (Binkhorst, 2007: 132; Boone, 2007: 176).

Sitges' cosmopolitanism is also heightened by its promotion as a place that is tolerant towards socio-cultural diversity, evinced in its reputation as both a gay tourist hot spot, as well as its increasingly diverse immigrant community, who make up nearly 21% of a population of just under 29,000 (IDESCAT, 2019). Approximately 700 of these are British people, who make up the largest nationality group of migrants living there (IDESCAT, 2019). Out of approximately 200 British people met during the period of research, all except five (two from Northern Ireland, three from Scotland) were English and all except for one self-defined British-Asian family, were white British. Participants were approximately 40% male to 60% female and almost a fifth identified as homosexual. The sole criterion for inclusion in the study was that participants were all over 18 years of age and had migrated to Sitges from the UK. As a result, the sample was diverse, including owners of small businesses, teachers at a nearby English medium private school, retirees, families, professionals who commuted to work in professional roles in Barcelona, as well as those who were wealthy enough to not work at all, some of whom were relatively well known.

By drawing on contacts formed during a two-week pilot study, I was able to initiate a 'snowball' sampling strategy, as those initial contacts introduced me to their own acquaintances of British migrants living in Sitges (Denscombe, 2010: 37). It was among this group that just over 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken. This included participating in multiple facets of British people's lives in the town, including less formal interactions and socialisation, to participating in more organised social gatherings such as sporting activities, like sailing and tennis, to volunteering at a trilingual pantomime and at a bar during the town's Gay Pride events. Just over 100 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with British migrants, which were thematically coded and in-depth field notes supported these findings. Throughout the data collected, and from even the very earliest of interactions with British people in the town, it soon became clear that perceptions of time were deeply embedded within their post-migratory experiences. For this particular group of British migrants however, time functioned in a way that for many, ultimately became increasingly difficult to live with.

## Lifestyle Migration and Time

There is little doubt that the way time is constructed and perceived is fundamental to our everyday lives and often so deeply embedded as to become 'almost invisible' to us, a trend often reflected in ethnographic research – and not least in relation to migration studies (Adam, 1990: 9; see Griffiths et al., 2013). Yet if we accept that time and space are fundamentally co-constitutive, then migration as a form of literal 'spatial displacement' must also equally be a 'means of temporal displacement' too (Barber and Lem, 2018: 8; see Massey, 2005). Where migration research has explicitly taken account of

temporality, it has most often been focused on the way that the passage of time is experienced phenomenologically by migrants, and particularly in relation to mobilities in which there is a disjuncture between the individual and the state and/or judiciary, which become superordinate; institutions that take control, in other words, of an individual's movement – and, crucially, their *non-movement* – through both space *and* time (Barber and Lem, 2018: 10; see Andersson, 2014; Ibañez Tirado, 2019). It is a body of work that tends to focus on refugees, asylum seekers, forced economic migrants; it is more concentrated on movement that is, which is 'dependent on the needs of capital and politics'; instances in which time is more ostensibly structurally determined, operates in a way that demonstrably inhibits individual agency (Barber and Lem, 2018: 10).

It would seem to make sense to suggest then, that 'freer' movement through space (as that undertaken by the ideal-typical lifestyle migrant) would simultaneously lead to freedom from such constraints on experiences of time, too. And yet time understood as socio-spatially constructed, must always therefore, also be context-dependent; time is 'animated, plied with differential meanings and values . . . Time is never neutral' (Barber and Lem, 2018: 5; see Adam, 1990; Cwerner, 2001). Indeed, lifestyle migration itself can incorporate multiple temporalities, from the overall framework of duration, that is, of being permanent/impermanent, repeat/seasonal (Gustafson, 2001), to the way that time functions differently in the places lifestyle migrants move from and to (Benson, 2011; O'Reilly, 2000) that is often highlighted most obviously through the 'discrepant' (Barber and Lem, 2018: 4) or 'discordant temporalities' (Cwerner, 2001) evoked between migrants' experiences of time and those of non-migrants inhabiting the same place. This is not to suggest a 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian, 1983: 32), nor is it to infer that such experiences of time cannot simultaneously be shared or experienced with non-migrants, but it is rather to suggest the opposite; if, as Bloch (1977 [1932]: 22) famously asserted, 'Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others', then it is precisely this multiplicity that opens the topic of time up – especially in relation to lifestyle migration – so clearly to sociological examination.

In Sitges, the overarching view that was key to British migrants, and that will be explored in detail below, was the specific way that the passage of time was understood to be split between different phases of past, present and future. Within participants' narratives, it was the latter in relation to their migration specifically that was given prominence, in a way that is similar to that implicit within research of other lifestyle migrants (Benson, 2011; Oliver, 2011). In many ways, the pre-eminence of this emphasis on the 'future' was rooted in the very first conception of lifestyle migration, posited as it was in part, as being typified by the belief that lifestyle migration represented a specific movement of relatively privileged migrants that was underpinned by the conscious and explicit seeking out of a 'better way of life', referred to above (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 608). The (temporal) future in this formulation becomes embedded in (spatial) 'place' in a way that directly impacts on the individual, with lifestyle migrants often expecting to uncover or embrace a new sense of self-identity through migration wherein authenticity of self is understood to be locationally determined too (Benson, 2011; Dixon, 2019b; Korpela, 2009).

Lifestyle migration is, as a result, often motivated by the hopes and dreams of an aspirational (though usually fuzzily defined) future, in which migration is understood to

offer a means to escape from the past through movement away from the home context (Benson, 2011; Dixon, 2021; Oliver, 2011). The home context is often then simultaneously equated to that 'past' and is as a result, constructed in negative terms, associated with elements such as stress, social obligation, high crime, lack of belonging, poor weather and so on (Benson, 2011; Dixon, 2021; Oliver, 2011). Implicit within this understanding of time is a specific conception of agency, one 'informed by the past and orientated to the future . . . of seeing one's life in a direction, imagining and projecting futures' and that crucially, holds implicit the freedom to move towards it (Olwig, 2018: 45). Yet as Ingold (1993: 159) has argued, despite a tendency to separate time in this way, in fact the 'present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself'.

As lifestyle migration literature from the very outset has highlighted, both the past and the present directly inform the experience of migration, which means that time itself in this context, captured specifically through ideas about the future, is not set either, but is fully open to negotiation instead (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). This suggests that time is not solely, then, an objective, structuring phenomenon but both a cause and a consequence of subjective experience. In fact, among the majority of British migrants in Sitges that participated in this research, it was an emergent consciousness of the collapsing of boundaries between their understandings and experiences of past, present and future that living in the town triggered, which so often became deeply problematic – so much so, that a sense of feeling 'stuck' in both space and time, contributed in no small part to the decisions made by the vast majority (over three-quarters) of participants who had, within two years of the end of fieldwork, left Sitges to return to the UK. This was a phenomenon that both prior to and upon immediate arrival, would have seemed implausible to British migrants arriving in the town; a sentiment that was intimately tied up with how Sitges as a 'cosmopolitan' location, was explicitly constructed and consciously understood.

## **A Cosmopolitan Utopia?**

The idea of Sitges as a 'cosmopolitan' town was deliberately constructed through the town's place-marketing narrative and as a result, it was an idea explicitly elaborated by British migrants living there too, whenever they sought to describe the town:

Sitges is a special place . . . it's incredibly cosmopolitan, very accepting, it has a very nice atmosphere. There's a special attraction to Sitges and there's one thing which is definitely important in the promotion of Sitges, there are lots of fiestas and events . . . it's very different to other nearby villages. (Collette, housewife)

I think Sitges has a special identity, it's very open, very cosmopolitan. It's different, in part, because it's managed to maintain that Spanish and Catalan identity, there's always something cultural going on . . . the car rally, fiestas, and so on. It's not like in the UK where there are hardly any Morris Dancers, or even in Scotland where there are less and less ceilidhs happening . . . they try really hard to pass on the culture and traditions here . . . it's part of their identity and part of Sitges' identity, it wouldn't be the same without it. (Jane, small business owner)



Cosmopolitanism was embedded within the way that British migrants perceived the location, as both Collette and Jane suggest, but it was also a cosmopolitanism that had very specific connotations; connotations that built upon an elitist conceptualisation of the term. This sense of elitism was emphasised most often through Sitges being defined in opposition to 'Benidorm', which functioned as a kind of stand-in, or catch-all term used to symbolise other Spanish coastal towns that participants associated with a stereotypical, working-class, mass tourist aesthetic instead (Dixon, 2021). In so doing, Brits who had chosen to live in Sitges, thereby implicitly positioned themselves as the archetypal, Hannerzian 'cosmopolites' (Hannerz, 1990). Although this formulation of cosmopolitanism has been heavily critiqued across academia (see, for example, Calhoun, 2002; Nava, 2007), British migrants nonetheless understood themselves to have consciously sought out the distinction that the town offered, with Sitges, in turn, seen to be a place that would (in theory at least) allow them to demonstrate that they possessed the 'intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness' necessary for what they saw to be 'genuine cosmopolitanism' (Hannerz, 1990: 239).

For British migrants, the explicit construction of the location as cosmopolitan, which they saw as equally reflecting a sense of their own identity, was also understood to equate to being a place that would offer the opportunity to realise their dreams, and this was often a prime motivating factor behind their migration to the town (Dixon, 2021). Among the small minority of longer-term British residents in Sitges, however, British migrants who explicitly articulated a sense of hopeful aspiration were deemed instead to be demonstrating an acute naivety, one that specifically marked them out as having newly arrived in the town:

Everyone always has a big idea, they all think they've got this one thing that's going to make them loads and loads and loads of money . . . always the same, it's hard here though! (John, small business owner)

You can tell the newbies, you can hear them. They all arrive with these big ideas . . . I've known people come here and try to do everything, open make-up schools, hair salons everything . . . never works. Loads of people go back, they have to. (Antony, photographer)

As both Antony and John implied, any sense of future orientation was used as a form of distinction. It was a key marker of those who were not embedded within the reality of the present and who, as a result, did not really understand life in the town. Perceptions of time were able to function in this way precisely because different migratory contexts have the potential to reflect different modes of temporal integration that each experience of migration itself precipitates (Çağlar, 2018: 26). The immediate arrival into the migration destination becomes a transitional period during which 'a hypothetical and ideal future' is still imagined, while 'the past and the present of the migrant are evaluated from the perspective of this ideal' (Çağlar, 2018: 26). Within Sitges specifically, the longer that participants spent in the town and the everyday realities of living as migrants there began to sink in, their perceptions of time changed significantly as the imagined future became integrated into the present in a contextually specific way:

The first year here, the first two years really, it felt like a total holiday, I mean, I didn't even buy a kettle the entire first year here! It didn't feel real to me, really, it definitely felt more like a holiday. Everything's new, all the fiestas . . . But then the novelty wears off and I think, it seems like as soon as it stops feeling like a holiday, then people go back. Once everyday life kind of seeps through, people just can't cope with it anymore, so they go home. (Lauren, musician)

When I first arrived, I thought it was brilliant, I had an amazing time! I had an immediate group of friends at the school (a nearby English-medium, International school that she taught at), and I was out all the time, it was like the university years *I should have had!* [laughs] Then the second year, it was even better! There was still the same level of hedonism, but I felt comfortable too, you know? But by the third year, I was starting to feel a bit . . . well, broody really! And . . . now I'm in my fourth year I just want to go back, I'm desperate to settle down. (Sophia, teacher)

In many ways, this sense of 'routinisation' is reminiscent of the experiences of many lifestyle migrants, who after a (sometimes shorter, sometimes longer) period of time, experience the mundanity of everyday life in the new location, just as strongly as they had felt in the places they sought to leave, and which had been overlooked in their imaginings prior to leaving (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016: 22). In this context, and as the quotes above highlight, this sense of routinisation was made tangible by the way that time was measured, which was definitively influenced by the context itself, and more specifically, by the annual calendar of fiestas and events, including the town's world famous 'carnaval'. This was key, because events were seen by Brits on one level, to express Sitges' authentic cosmopolitanism, operating as the material retention of a traditional cultural heritage, exemplifying a form of (nonetheless very contemporary) distinction, by feeding directly into the construction of the town's cosmopolitan, place-marketing identity. As Sophia and Lauren both suggest, however, the annual repetition of such events operated to mark the passage of time distinctively for Brits in a two-fold way; first, the shift from the 'newness' of each cultural event as it was experienced initially, was then followed, by recurrent – and crucially, unchanging – exposure. As the calendar of events was repeated annually with minimal variation, they became fully part of the 'known' for British migrants and this created a shift in how participants articulated their orientation towards time, which often came to have significant consequences on their lives in the town.

## Trapped in Space, Stuck in Time

In a strange way, a key part of what made Sitges so special to British migrants – the embrace of tradition and a keen sense of important elements of the town's cultural heritage being kept alive through its calendar of festivals and events, which were thereby passed on from generation to generation – would for many participants, ultimately come to provide a key reason why so many ended up leaving to return to the UK. As Brits re-experienced each event annually, explicit acknowledgement of this repetition marked a movement into the present, as the once imagined 'future' of life in the town fell away, leaving participants faced instead with the reality of the 'now' (Çağlar, 2018: 26). At the point at which this consciousness of the present emerged, to take the place of the previously imagined (but now unrealised) future, Brits often began to feel trapped:



For me, it [migration] was always about trying new and different things, that stretches me, in a way, I suppose. But after a while that stops and it's like, now, I feel like I'm just treading water. (Mona, independently wealthy)

I think that we all tend to live in a bubble in Sitges, it's not real life somehow. (Evie, teacher)

Sitges has this sunny, beach-town image, like those messages on t-shirts, what do they say? Like, *life's a beach*, that kind of Western, beach-culture fantasy . . . There's no . . . recognition of awful things that happen, they stay away from the awful things, from the outside world. You're here and you're all supposed to be happy and that's it. (Patrick, Lecturer; Dixon, 2021: 84)

As Lefebvre (2004) has argued, the entanglement between space and time creates particular 'rhythms' that are subject to contextually specific attributions of meaning and, therefore, can be the focus of analysis (see Adam, 1990; Ingold, 1993). As the quotes above suggest, the circularity and repetitiveness of the annual calendar of festivals and events set a specific 'rhythm' to the way that Brits experienced their lives in Sitges, so that after a certain number of rhythmic repetitions, these same events operated to highlight an explicit shift from future orientation, to recognition of the present in a way that made participants feel 'stuck'. Once this feeling of 'treading water' set in, it then often also created a dilemma; a sense, that is, of being torn between a feeling of inertia, and at the same time, a collectivised pressure of 'having to be happy' (or at least, having to appear so), which Patrick referred to above. Intriguingly, when discussing this feeling of liminality, Brits often also articulated a sense of guilt, too. One afternoon in early summer, I was sitting in a cafe conservatory, looking out over the seafront with a British woman who had lived in Sitges for just under three years and who was trying to decide whether to return to the UK. The sun was shining brightly in the beautiful clear blue sky that Sitges is renowned for, and as we watched a tall ship bobbing along the horizon she remarked: 'I mean, you look out here when it's like this and you think *how the fuck* can you possibly be unhappy?!' Other participants shared similar sentiments:

I think that sometimes, people who come here have too high expectations, they don't try to integrate, they moan that it's too hot – you just have to go with the flow. You have to make the most of life here, recognise how privileged it is, the beach, skiing . . . (Jack, businessman)

You know, you kind of go home, you miss the sun, you come here, you miss *everything*! (Lauren, musician)

This usually happened after Brits had been in Sitges between three to four years and at this point, the sense of being 'stuck' made participants feel like they had to make a choice, to stay or to leave, as one interviewee called Matt, who worked as a TEFL teacher, put it:

The thing is, it's easy to come here and expect a perfect life, but it's not just automatic. You have to work for it. See, that's the mistake people make. It's like you have all of these expectations and all of these dreams and then one day out of nowhere, it's like you wake up and you realise that it's a bit like the *Emerald City* really. It's like the *Emerald City*, only with the curtain thrown back; the tin man doesn't get his heart, the lion doesn't get his courage, Dorothy

never gets home again . . . And . . . well I suppose then, you have to try to decide if you can close the curtain back over again. (Dixon, 2021: 65–66)

For the vast majority of participants however, ‘closing the curtain back over again’ was impossible and leaving Sitges seemed to them to be the only way to change this sense of being ‘stuck’ – in both space and time. There is little doubt that for lifestyle migrants, portrayed as the kind of archetypal agents of reflexive, consumption-based, identity-making said to characterise modernity (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009: 615), these shifts in experience and perception of time actually highlight the intricate interaction between structure and agency that reflects broader shifts in contemporary capitalism too. From the 1990s, as Harvey (1990) famously argued, technological advancements meant that life moved more quickly and the world seemed to shrink, as distances could be travelled (both literally and metaphorically) faster and more easily than ever before; shifts of course that lifestyle migrants were perfectly positioned to take advantage of (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009). This is not least because socio-economic positioning also determines how such macro-level shifts are experienced at the level of the individual; those less privileged ‘are frequently compelled to move. Their portability is often a condition of their survival’, as is fixity in place – freedom to move, or indeed not to, is itself a form of socio-economic (and political) privilege (Brennan, 2013: 148).

By the 2000s, space in this sense had been ‘conquered’ – the new aim of global capitalism was instead to ‘eliminate’ time in a way that positioned people ‘in spatio-temporal’ terms premised on ‘speed of acquisition’ instead (Brennan, 2013: 149). This is of course, in direct opposition to capitalism at its outset as defined specifically by Weber, who suggested that it was in fact delayed gratification determined by a ‘Protestant Ethic’ that underpinned the emergence of capitalism, so that ‘unlike today’s subjects, while the subjects of Protestantism were prepared to wait’ this deferral of gratification has been replaced contemporarily by ‘the desire for instant gratification’ instead (Brennan, 2013: 151; see Weber, 2001 [1904]). Among British lifestyle migrants in Sitges, this shift became manifest in a desire for authentic self-realisation that movement to this specific location was understood to automatically and immediately precipitate; a prospect that was by definition not open to everyone to take advantage of, precisely because it was predicated on an elitism constructed via the medium of the town itself – literally, owing to the high cost of living there, and less practically, via its cosmopolitan reputation – both of which constituted key parts of its primary appeal to participants.

For Weber (2001 [1904]), it was of course, famously the ‘middle classes’ who represented the archetypal Protestants on whom his theory of the emergence of capitalism relied; Protestants who were, according to a Calvinist doctrine of predestination, inherently future-orientated precisely because the Protestant Ethic relied on a belief that ‘good works’ in the present were undertaken in relation to future salvation – they were not an end unto the ‘now’, in and of itself. As capitalism advanced, and its enactment became more diverse, its adoption more sophisticated and widespread, such religious overtones may have fallen away, but nonetheless a clear sense of a Weberian-style temporal orientation remained amongst participants:

There's definitely that idea, that work is something you suffer through and then there's retirement, you have that to look forward to, it's a reward. But I think Kate Fox [British anthropologist, author of bestseller *Watching the English* (2004)] was right about the differences between a 'wet' and a 'dry' culture too . . . We use alcohol massively in the UK as a kind of mini-Puritanical reward. You work the week, then binge at the weekend . . . It's not like in Spain, they might have wine at breakfast, but it's like marking time or whatever, it's not a 'reward' it's just something you do. (Mona, independently wealthy)

British people, Mona suggested, remained future orientated in both long- and short-term ways; living for each weekend on one level, and for retirement on the other. There is little doubt that this remained the case among this particular group of Brits too, despite the fact that they possessed the agency to benefit from the 'collapsing of space' and to access the specific kind of gratification through the 'conquering of time' that contemporary global capitalism supposedly enables (Brennan, 2013: 149–151). In a sense it is this experience of time that contrasts with how temporality is perceived more broadly, perhaps highlighting the fact that it is itself subject to structural constraints, even among those with supposedly the most agency to experience it so freely. Those for whom time is more obviously socio-structurally determined, those whose agency is, as a direct consequence, negated or denied, may well find adaptation to the present forced upon them, so that they define past, present and future very differently (Cwerner, 2001: 7). Yet despite being in the aspirational 'position where it all comes to you', or indeed being able to move to a specific place (itself a form of active consumption) to explicitly facilitate the immediacy of acquisition – here, particularly in relation to consumption-based self-realisation – (Brennan, 2013: 150), the majority of Brits in Sitges were unable to adapt to being anything other than future orientated:

For me, Sitges is a way out for people, it's a way out for people to live there. It's like they want to press 'pause' on their lives and so they live in Sitges and then when they leave, they press 'play' again . . . For me, it's like a link place, an undefined place, like a dream. (Juan, PhD Student)

When I think about my life here . . . sometimes I feel like I'm living in *The Truman Show*! Every morning there's an artist who sets up outside my window, in exactly the same way, every day! When I think about the future, I just can't see it here in Sitges. (Sophia, teacher)

Where previously in the UK, participants' lives had been future-orientated, following migration, the 'future' literally became 'the present'. The imagined future migration with all of the potential possibilities participants assumed such movement would automatically entail became, in other words, actually *having migrated*. Yet after a relatively short period of time – usually around three years – because of the particular rhythm of the town, which saw time structurally determined by a calendar of events repeated annually with minimal deviation, participants experienced time itself as unchanging. This ended up reflecting an inability to transition from being future orientated, so that by far the vast majority of British migrants found this akin to being forced to consciously live in the present instead, which was actively debilitating.

Consequently, British migrants felt stuck or as Juan put it, having 'pressed pause on their lives' to such an extent, that this experience of time far more often than not,

ultimately precipitated (or in large part contributed to) return migration. British lifestyle migrants moved back to the UK, which they had prior to migration often associated (negatively) with the 'past', because they perceived this as being the only way to reclaim an orientation to the 'future'; a future that as Sophia stated, they were often unable to even imagine, if they were to remain in the town. Out of the 12 British migrants quoted in this article, for example, only three remain living in Sitges today. The other nine participants referred to, had returned to the UK within a year of the end of the fieldwork period and none of those nine participants had stayed in the town for longer than four years.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that Brits living in Sitges were initially attracted to the town, owing to its construction as a cosmopolitan location. Just like the original conceptualisation of lifestyle migration as an attempt to examine the freedom of movement of a relatively privileged group of migrants seeking a 'better way of life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 608), the appeal of the cosmopolitanism that Sitges offered was two-fold; first, it articulated a sense of openness and tolerance that participants saw as reflecting an important part of their own identities, and second, that moving there would as a result, offer an opportunity to fully actualise an 'authentic' (cosmopolitan) self-identity too (Dixon, 2021; Korpela, 2009). In this key sense, Brits in Sitges were almost ideal-typical lifestyle migrants, taking advantage of macro-level shifts in global capitalism that placed an emphasis on the individual as an active agent, engaging in reflexive, consumption-based identity-making, in a way that perhaps, overlooked the reality of socio-structural factors, such as race, gender, sexuality, class and so on, and the determining role that such factors play as they intersect within people's everyday lives.

Although hinted at in its initial conceptualisation, as lifestyle migration literature expanded, the impacts of such socio-structural factors began to be explored in more depth and detail (Ahmed and Hall, 2016; Croucher, 2014; Giner-Monfort et al., 2016; Walsh, 2011). Following a trend in migration literature more broadly, this development of lifestyle migration research also began to investigate the tangible impact of more macro-level and/or abstract elements from neoliberalism and post-colonialism to spatialisation (Benson and O'Reilly, 2018; Janoschka and Haas, 2013; Torkington, 2012). Although implicit within lifestyle migration literature from its inception, temporality has nonetheless remained explicitly underexplored, despite the fact that there is 'no *sui generis* temporal experience of migrants', which in and of itself leaves it open to sociological investigation (Cwerner, 2001: 15). Despite being a group of people with the assumed ability to move freely through both space and time, it was clear that for participants in this research, perceptions of past, present and future and crucially, how these perceptions themselves shifted through time, were crucial in how they managed their lives within the town.

Initially, participants retained a sense of future orientation as they articulated ideas and plans that they intended to undertake; aspirations that among the minority of longer-term British migrants, were seen to evoke a naivety that operated as a way to mark out those newly arrived in Sitges. However, it soon became clear that as participants spent more time living in Sitges, they experienced time as being highly structured, operating to a particular rhythm (Lefebvre, 2004) that was determined by a calendar of cultural fiestas

and events repeated annually, with relatively minimal variation. Although it was precisely this element of Sitges that British migrants recognised as a fundamental element of the town's distinct cosmopolitan offering and a key part of what attracted them there in the first place, after experiencing it two to three times, participants became explicitly conscious of this temporal rhythm and began to feel as though they were stuck, crucially, in both place *and* time.

Despite this particular group of migrants being some of those most well positioned to take advantage of contemporary macro-level shifts in global capitalism, premised in particular on speed of acquisition (Brennan, 2013: 147), participants nonetheless expressed a temporal orientation with Weberian echoes instead. They remained, in other words, fixed on working towards a 'future'. Far more often than not, however, Brits in Sitges found themselves unable to manage the temporal transition of migration. In a fundamental sense, this emphasises the fact that migration itself is an action or form of movement through space *and* time, which are co-constitutive. Migration for participants here, was a movement through space, in other words, which had the simultaneous temporal effect of bringing an only previously imagined future, into the reality of the present. Although they possessed the practical agency to move through space and time on their own terms, the socio-structurally determined perceptions of time participants possessed prior to moving, clashed with the temporal rhythm of the location itself to such an extent, that after a period of usually three to four years, more often than not they made the return journey to the UK; it was only by moving back, they felt, that they could try to reclaim a sense of the *future*.

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: this work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number: ES/G014604/1.

## References

- Adam B (1990) *Time and Social Theory*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ahmed A and Hall K (2016) Negotiating the challenges of aging as a British migrant in Spain. *Gerontopsychology* 29(2): 105–114.
- Andersson R (2014) Time and the migrant other: European border controls and the temporal economics of illegality. *American Anthropologist* 116(4): 795–809.
- Barber PG and Lem W (2018) *Migration, Temporality, and Capitalism: Entangled Mobilities across Global Spaces*. London: Springer.
- Benson M (2011) *The British in Rural France: Lifestyle Migration and the Ongoing Quest for a Better Way of Life*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Benson M (2014) Negotiating privilege in and through lifestyle migration. In: Benson M and Osbaldiston N (eds) *Understanding Lifestyle Migration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.47–68.
- Benson M and O'Reilly K (2009) Migration and the search for a better way of life: A critical exploration of lifestyle migration. *The Sociological Review* 57(4): 608–625.
- Benson M and O'Reilly K (2016) From lifestyle migration to lifestyle in migration: Categories, concepts and ways of thinking. *Migration Studies* 4(1): 20–37.

- Benson M and O'Reilly K (2018) *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama*. London: Springer.
- Benson M and Osbaldiston N (2016) Toward a critical sociology of lifestyle migration: Reconceptualizing migration and the search for a better way of life. *The Sociological Review* 64(3): 407–423.
- Binkhorst E (2007) Creativity in tourism experiences, a closer look at Sitges. In: Richards G and Wilson J (eds) *Tourism, Creativity and Development*. Oxon: Routledge, pp.125–145.
- Bloch E (1977 [1932]) Nonsynchronism and the obligation to its dialectics. *New German Critique* 11 (Spring): 22–38. Translated by Mark Ritter from 'Erbschaft dieser Zeit'.
- Boone ME (2007) *Vistas De España: American Views of Art and Life in Spain, 1860–1914*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Brennan T (2013) *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Çağlar A (2018) Chronotopes of migration scholarship: Challenges of contemporaneity and historical conjuncture. In: Barber PG and Lem W (eds) *Migration, Temporality, and Capitalism*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.21–41.
- Calhoun C (2002) Imagining solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, constitutional patriotism, and the public sphere. *Public Culture* 14(1): 147–171.
- Chen J and Bao J (2021) Chinese 'snowbirds' in tropical Sanya: Retirement migration and the production of translocal families. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(12): 2760–2777.
- Croucher S (2014) The gendered spatialities of lifestyle migration. In: Janoschka M and Haas H (eds) *Contested Spatialities, Lifestyle Migration and Residential Tourism*. London: Routledge.
- Cwerner SB (2001) The times of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27(1): 7–36.
- D'Andrea A (2007) *Global Nomads: Techno and New Age as Transnational Countercultures in Ibiza and Goa* (Vol. 10). London: Routledge.
- Denscombe M (2010) *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Dixon L (2019a) Gender, sexuality and lifestyle migration: Exploring the impact of cosmopolitan place-marketing discourses on British women in Spain. *Current Sociology* 68: 281–298.
- Dixon L (2019b) 'Placing' space: Exploring the sociospatial impacts of cosmopolitan place-marketing approaches on British migrants in Spain. *Space and Culture* 24(4): 604–616.
- Dixon L (2021) *Gender, Sexuality and National Identity in the Lives of British Lifestyle Migrants in Spain: Chasing the Rainbow*. London: Routledge.
- Fabian J (1983) *Time and the Other*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Fox K (2004) *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Giner-Monfort J, Hall K and Betty C (2016) Back to Brit: Retired British migrants returning from Spain. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(5): 797–815.
- Griffiths M, Rogers A and Anderson B (2013) Migration, time and temporalities: Review and prospects. *COMPAS Research Resources Paper* (March): 1–31.
- Gustafson P (2001) Retirement migration and transnational lifestyles. *Ageing & Society* 21(4): 371–394.
- Hannerz U (1990) Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. *Theory, Culture and Society* 7: 237–251.
- Harvey D (1990) Between space and time: Reflections on the geographical imagination1. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80(3): 418–434.
- Hoey BA (2014) *Opting for Elsewhere: Lifestyle Migration in the American Middle Class*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Ibañez Tirado D (2019) 'We sit and wait': Migration, mobility and temporality in Guliston, southern Tajikistan. *Current Sociology* 67(2): 315–333.



- IDESCAT (2019) The municipality in figures: Sitges. Available at: <https://www.idescat.cat/emex/?id=082704&lang=en> (accessed 31 July 2019).
- Ingold T (1993) The temporality of the landscape. *World Archaeology* 25(2): 152–174.
- Janoschka M and Haas H (2013) *Contested Spatialities, Lifestyle Migration and Residential Tourism*. London: Routledge.
- Korpela M (2009) When a trip to adulthood becomes a lifestyle: Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi, India. In: Benson M and O'Reilly K (eds) *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.15–30.
- Lefebvre H (2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Elden S and Moore G (trans). London: Continuum.
- Lundström C (2014) *White Migrations: Gender, Whiteness and Privilege in Transnational Migration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lundström C and Twine FW (2011) White migrations: Swedish women, gender vulnerabilities and racial privileges. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18(1): 67–86.
- Massey D (2005) *For Space*. London: SAGE.
- Nava M (2007) *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Oliver C (2011) Pastures new or old? Migration, narrative and change. *Anthropologica* 1: 67–77.
- Oliver C and O'Reilly K (2010) A Bourdieusian analysis of class and migration: Habitus and the individualizing process. *Sociology* 44(1): 49–66.
- Olwig KF (2018) The timescape of post-WWII Caribbean migration to Britain: Historical heterogeneity as challenge and opportunity. In: Barber PG and Lem (eds) *Migration, Temporality, and Capitalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.43–61.
- O'Reilly K (2000) *The British on the Costa del Sol*. London: Routledge.
- Torkington K (2012) Place and lifestyle migration: The discursive construction of 'glocal' place-identity. *Mobilities* 7(1): 71–92.
- Walsh K (2011) Migrant masculinities and domestic space: British home-making practices in Dubai. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36(4): 516–529.
- Weber M (2001 [1904]) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge Classics.

Laura Dixon is a social anthropologist and the programme leader of events management at Liverpool John Moores University. Her publications to date focus on recognition, cosmopolitanism, gender and sexuality among elite British 'lifestyle migrants' in the tourist town of Sitges, in Spain. She is currently working on exploring ideas of spatialisation and temporality in relation to Britons who have recently returned from Spain to the UK.

**Date submitted** 16 August 2021

**Date accepted** 5 April 2022