

Retirement Migrants

The Global Flow of the Non-Working

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The US Census 2000 reported that there are over 82 million individuals who fall within the baby boom generation. By 2010 a demographic shift will commence moving huge numbers of workers out of the labor force as those 65 and over become the fastest growing segment of the population. This increasingly visible group of retirees and aged will bring greater public attention to the later years of the life course.

Many of the challenges that come with aging are well understood, such as inevitable physical demise and the end of self-identification with certain activities of our youth, like work. We know that mass longevity has shifted the way aging is experienced, particularly in industrialized nations. People are living longer today than when retirement policy was initially enacted, making retirement an area of rapidly changing experiences and signification. Not only will baby boomers have perhaps the longest period of retirement in North American history, but they will likely change the way we look at and experience retirement—just as they have done with every other phase of life they have passed through.

Baby Boomers Abroad

The international migrant population is aging as baby boomers enter retirement. In 1981 there were just over a quarter of a million British pensioners living overseas and today estimates are just over a million. By 2050 as many as one in five British pensioners (3.3 million people) will live abroad. The numbers are similarly impressive in the US. Currently over 400,000 retired US citizens have Social Security checks mailed to them at addresses outside of the United States. While these measures certainly do not include all retirement migrants, this is still a size-

able population that many scholars argue will continue to grow. British nationals, perhaps due to a heritage of colonization, have long settled outside their natal home later in life while US nationals have only recently started venturing beyond Florida and Arizona to international retirement destinations. Regardless of when or why one retires, the decision to migrate to a different country near the end of the life course has never been so popular. This begs the question, how can these older, arguably less adaptable members of society make such a move?

One aspect of contemporary retirement making this mobility feasible is its disassociation from old age. It is common to find retirees who are in their early 50s and beginning the negotiation of their new life stage, their new identity and, in the case of retirement migrants, their new physical and sociocultural environment. For many baby boomers, hard work, a prosperous economy and the dot com industry have created the possibility of a relatively early retirement. For others, if moving to another country means they can retire earlier, they are willing to take that step. This is especially true of a population that has traveled more extensively than previous generations. With the Internet, leaving home isn't necessarily as daunting as it once was. The world is, indeed, smaller and more easily navigable than in decades past. Because they are younger than previous generations' retirees and medical advancements make living a healthy, independent and mobile life well into your 80s feasible, baby boomer retirees will arguably have an increased amount of time to develop themselves in the sociocultural stage of retirement.

New Life Stage, New Identity

A common struggle retirees face is the lost ability to connect their identity to their work. For retirees who remain in the community where they worked prior to retirement, the post-retirement rupture between past and present identities can be all the more poignant.

By fleeing to a new country, they can occupy a new space, one that lacks the sociocultural scripts of their old identity. Without reminders or expectations based on their earlier lives, retirees can explore new paths and activities, perhaps even some that might be met with disapproval back home. In addition, travel enables retirees to find communities where retirement and aging have a place of greater value, thus making the transition to this stage of the life course easier.

Some retirement migrants claim that relocating across international borders allows them to leave all of

locals to cook, clean and care for them? If destination localities come to rely on international retirees, how will local power relationships, economies and cultures change? In some northern market economies there are older populations who can't afford medical care. Many also can't afford to maintain the affluent lifestyles to which they have grown accustomed. Although some baby boomers are wealthy, many upper-middle class retirees who look at having thirty or more years ahead of them see their pensions stretching much further south of the border. Will



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the baggage of their former lives—and cultures—behind and makes the transition to retirement easier. In Caren Cross' film *Lost and Found in Mexico*, retirees claim that by fitting in with neither the home culture nor the new culture, they find a sense of anonymity and freedom that enables them to reinvent themselves without the forced cultural expectations of their home culture—liberation in liminality. The betwixt and between space becomes a sought-after relief rather than something to fear or resist. One can finally find a way of not having to keep up with the Jones', a cultural artifact that unfortunately seems to persist even into one's retirement. When travelers arrive in new territory, they can relate to each other on the basis of shared status as migrants (or immigrants) rather than carrying their past identity narratives with them into their later years.

Room for Future Research

There are many germane questions to ask about the lives of international retirement migrants. The literature has not deeply examined whether there are salient differences between retirement migrants who move southward from the United States and Canada and those who move from the United Kingdom and northern Europe to southern Europe. For example, has the creation of the European Union made retirees feel less like they are making an "international" move than prior to this amalgamation? When US retirees find themselves in Mexico, are there subtle forms of patron-client relationships that are repeated through the hiring of

the US send its aged southward, along with its manufacturing, in an effort to cut costs?

Some forms of cultural capital travel with retirement migrants and there are likely differences between how these manifest in southern Europe and in Mexico. In Mexico some retirees have noted that they do not develop close friendships with the locals, and one wonders if international retirees in southern Europe have the same experience. How do retirees' levels of interaction with locals impact their needs to find emotional and social satisfaction in their retired years? The growing trend of creating insular expatriate retirement communities might ignite a new retirement colonialism. A final critical question is how local residents in receiving countries feel about these "permanent" but "unproductive" migrants. Despite the fact that they bring their retirement funds with them, when a community is losing its youth to South-North economic migration, how open is that community to receiving a nonworking migrant population? While both sides stand to benefit, the story is a complex one that will only continue to develop in years to come.

Liesl L. Gambold is an assistant professor at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. Her interests include postsocialist society, culture and economic change in rural communities as well as the relationship between employment choices and emotional well-being. As an aging immigrant, she finds herself thinking more and more about international retirement migration. ☐