Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

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To cite this Article: Rodríguez, Vicente and Egea, Carmen, ‘Return and the Social Environment of Andalusian Emigrants in Europe’, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 32:8, 1377 - 1393
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/13691830600928771
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691830600928771

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Return and the Social Environment of Andalusian Emigrants in Europe

Vicente Rodríguez and Carmen Egea

This paper analyses the return of Andalusian emigrants from Northern European countries to their regions of origin. The aim is to discover the reasons that led to the original emigrations and those that, after several decades and when in or approaching old age, motivated the returns. The factors and relationships involved in migrants' decision-making are discussed at the family and social network levels, and interpreted through the notion of a 'life project'. This reveals that the decisions and plans to return were to an extent linked to the original emigration decision and grounded in individual and family behaviour. The material and socio-demographic contexts of the original emigration from rural Andalusia (economic hardship, high fertility and large families, and family households as units of production) facilitated selective emigration, with many of the emigrants having characteristics of social exclusion. At the destinations, the migrants developed a distinctive social structure, based on work and family relationships, which enabled integration and the forging of ties with the host society. When the emigrants reached the end of their working lives, many of the same personal and social factors reappeared and conditioned the decision-making process to return.

Keywords: Immigration; Return; Family Structure; Social Capital; Andalusia; Spain

Introduction

Immigration is a much-debated political and social issue in Spain today and a major contributor to demographic change. And yet, from the very start of the twentieth century until the end of the 1970s, the Spanish emigrated in large numbers, especially before the 1930s and the Civil War. Overseas (trans-continental) migration
dominated until the 1950s, when it was replaced both by strong flows towards North-West Europe (García 1965; Ministerio de Trabajo 1986; Palazón 1998), and by internal migration to the more developed Spanish provinces (García and Delgado 1988; García and Pujadas 1997). Although these flows have not stopped, they have decreased and certain of their parameters have changed (García and Stillwell 1999; Hernández 2000; Ocaña and Navarro 2001). Alongside, however, there is another trend, namely return migration, which arises as part of a circular life-cycle process, and for which there is a potential from the moment of the initial emigration (Pascual de Sans 1993). It has, however, attracted far less research attention (Cazorla 1981, 1989). Such return migrations raise significant problems both for theory and for practical research methodology (Rodríguez et al. 2002).

While there is presently little information about the return migrants to our case-study region of Andalusia, studies of other flows suggest that the scale of returns is highly contingent on economic conditions (Constant and Massey 2002), personal characteristics (age, sex, marital status), the length of stay abroad (Waldorf 1994, 1995), the characteristics of the areas of origin that influence the perception of their suitability as return destinations (Ocaña and Navarro 2001), the level of assimilation and membership of national groups in the destination areas (Entzinger 1985; Newbold 2001; UN Population Division 1986), the social contexts (Kulu 1998) and the effects on the people and families who return (Dumon 1986). Return migrations challenge the common assumption that rural–urban international migration is a permanent, one-way event (King 1986), and support the alternative conception of a rural–urban move as a conditional emigration, which at any time may be reversed. As emigrants proceed through the life-course, many arrive at another decision-making phase, where not only personal and structural circumstances, but also their own emigration experiences come into play. This directs attention to the biographies of the migrants’ lives, and emphasises that successive migration events cannot be viewed as independent from each other (Egea and Rodríguez 2002).

The factors in return migration are normally associated with the conditions that produced the original emigration, the emigrants’ acquired personal and social circumstances, interaction with the host society and ties with the society of origin. In this scenario, the host society has not usually concerned itself with the situation of first-generation migrants (Bolzman et al. 1999). Although a large majority of southern European emigrants were unmarried young men, with little education and few professional skills, with the passing of time emigration has shifted more towards family reunification in the European destination countries (Cazorla 1989; Lewis and Williams 1986; Ministerio de Trabajo 1986). New generations have been added, and family and social relationships have evolved in many different forms, and with different connections with the host and origin societies, although this has been highly dependent on the ethnic background of the migrants, the nature of the migratory project and the children’s expectations of upward mobility (Bolzman et al. 2001; Serra 2000). The family, in a broad sense, promotes intergenerational solidarity and acts as
‘a reservoir of resources’ that meets substantial needs (Lillo 2000). At the destinations, the emigrant family members have differential opportunities for assimilation that are structured partly by gender, with women often disadvantaged (Fibbi et al. 2001; Goodman 1987), by their contacts with the host society, membership of ethnic associations (Schaeffer 2001), and the level of their achievement in the world of employment. In various ways, these factors can alleviate the social exclusion that many migrants encounter.

Although substantial return flows of migrants just months or years after they had emigrated were observed as early as the 1970s and 1980s (King 1986; Lewis and Williams 1986), it was clear that many of the migrants had postponed the decision to return until the end of their working lives. This necessarily means that they would make such decisions under very different conditions to those that they anticipated when they first arrived. Both academic and journalistic commentaries readily adopted the notion of ‘the myth of return’, and observed the ‘sedentarisation’ of life at the destination. In other cases, many emigrants divide their time between their places of origin and destination when they retire, in order to enjoy the best of both worlds (Bolzman et al. 1999), thereby generating patterns of circular mobility (Schaeffer 2001).

The paper sets out to identify the individual, family and wider social parameters at the destination that have led retired emigrants from the province of Jaén (Andalusia) to return. It will be argued that ethnic networks, intergenerational relations, and social and family commitments have all contributed to the emigrants’ three-way decision whether or not to return definitively to the area of origin, where some older family members are probably still living, or to stay abroad permanently where their nuclear family has grown up and where they have significant social capital, or to circulate between both places. A central concern is to discover how deeply grounded they are in particular places, as a result of their migration experiences accumulated at the end (or close to the end) of their working life as emigrants.

Data and Methodology

The paper draws on 25 in-depth interviews with emigrants (and a few non-migrants) in various municipalities in the province of Jaén. The municipalities were selected according to the criteria of population size, the number of returnees and their location, gender, return situation and original destination country (Table 1). The interviews were semi-structured and focused on three stages of the emigration process: departure from the area of origin, arrival and stay at the destination, and return to the area of origin. All the return migrants had been born in the province of Jaén and had migrated to other European countries, where all had remained abroad for many years (in most cases, over 20). At the time of the interview, all had retired or were close to retiring. In the absence of reliable lists of all returnees, purposive sampling was used. The respondents were contacted after consulting local officials, social workers and the representatives of returnees’ associations in the municipalities.
The in-depth interviews used a biographical method and sought ‘the subjective testimony of an individual in the light of his or her life course, experiences . . . and the manifestation of a life that is the reflection of an era, of social norms’ (Pujadas 1992: 44). In short, they sought to construct life stories (Santamarina and Marinas 1994). This approach allows the use of qualitative research methods to reconstruct the history of migration, while exploring the personal circumstances of those involved in such mobility.

The interviews explored the conditioning factors, prospects and desires surrounding the return, and many of the key aspects of the lives of individual emigrants. They also shed a different light on migratory movements, by engaging with the memories of those who have been, and still are, involved in migration. Finally, they facilitated the reconstruction of the history of emigration in the province of Jaén. The interviews were taped and transcribed, checked for transcription inconsistencies, and analysed using ATLAS.ti.

Findings

The Emigration Decision

Emigration cannot be understood without referring to its temporal and geographical contexts, and the characteristics of the people who emigrate. It is also necessary to consider the specific traits that set emigration apart from other population flows, and the particular elements that distinguish certain groups from others, both in the same flows and in specific social and geographical environments (Serra 2000). In other words, studying the Andalusians’ decisions to emigrate requires identifying the conditions that made those emigrants similar to other Spanish labour migrants, whilst also taking into account the particular features of the geographical environment of Jaén and Andalusia. To some extent, this is a matter of acknowledging that they had been subject to a degree of social exclusion in the area of origin (King et al. 1985), and that their decision to return may be conditioned by the reasons for emigrating (Lepore 1986). This hypothesis provides a starting-point for our analysis.
Most interviewees emigrated during the 1960s. They believed that they had been ‘forced’ to leave Spain during the ‘long’ post-Civil War period; emigration was a way of ‘getting through’ that period. To put this into context, the classical form of anarchism, which featured in rural Andalusia, was not well organised before the Spanish Civil War, and did not endure after that War, especially in the face of social and economic changes (Hobsbawm 2001). Hundreds of thousands of desperate braceros (farm labourers) in rural Andalusia lived lives characterised by bitter desperation and poor education. In spite of a strong tradition of political activity among Andalusian farm workers, the difficult postwar social environment was shaped by the socio-political oppression exercised by the señorito andaluz (the ‘Andalusian master’ landowner), who had been at the leading edge of Franco’s rebellion, and among the principal beneficiaries of his victory. This was the situation that prevailed in Andalusia in the 1950s and 1960s. Several of our interviewees commented on this, such as a returnee from France who said:

The reason I left was because I was fed up with all the caciques [local bosses]. I spent one year working for one of them, and in the end I said to myself ‘I’ve had enough of this, I’m going to emigrate’. If I was going to be exploited, at least it wouldn’t be the same people that we’d lived with all our lives, so I left.

The dependency that sprang up in those years between the landowners and ‘their’ workers gave rise to very harsh living conditions, which many could only overcome by working ‘like mad’ or by leaving the countryside in search of a better life. The ‘master’ was not only present in employment relationships, but also in the non-monetary, ‘in-kind’ economy, and in wider non-material servitude-like relations. As a man returned from France stated, there were poor women ‘who used to go to the master’s house, and do whatever chores they were given, and when they left, all they got in return were the leftovers, but in those days the leftovers were better than a paella nowadays’. The structure of agricultural production was based on ‘peaks’ of work at certain times of the year, such as the olive harvest, which many workers combined with other rural activities (poaching, collecting firewood and acorns, or doing different jobs in the mountains). This amounted to ‘scratching a living’ and prolonged their precarious economic situation, characterised by hunger and scarce resources. All these factors contributed to ‘emptying’ the Andalusian countryside, inducing emigration but bringing down the rate of unemployment (Gregory and Cazorla 1987; Palazón 1998). For our informants, the long years spent as ‘emigrants’ had certainly not erased their memories of the harsh lives that they had endured as young men and women working in the fields of Jaén.

Many families responded to this difficult situation by sending their members out to work in whatever unskilled job they could find, as their sole guarantee of survival, given the highly seasonal farm employment. The nuclear family, as a productive and reproductive unit (the parents as workers, the children as ‘helpers’), decided whether one of their members should migrate. At that time, families had many children in order to ensure their reproduction in the face of high death rates. In these conditions,
there was little or no felt need for the children to be educated, and in any case there was scant provision (Fernández Asperilla 2000; Houtart et al. 2000). Young people were poorly educated, but they did acquire a work ethos that became part of their daily lives when they emigrated. A man who worked in Belgium described the process as follows:

That was what happened, you know. I was told that I couldn’t go to school any more, so I said, well, I can learn to work here in the fields; I started working like my father, doing the same job as him, and earning the same salary, 40 pesetas a month... digging olive groves, tidying up vegetable patches, where they sent us, digging holes for pine trees.

On the other hand the extended family, especially the older members (parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles), and the social network formed by friends, indirect relatives, acquaintances and ‘fellow countrymen and countrywomen’, provided conditions that encouraged future emigration, and offered a compendium of knowledge about what it was like to emigrate and settle abroad. Thereafter, stability was achieved in the key elements (work, house, relationships) in the emigrant’s everyday life, and in reconstituting the social and economic basis of the family. This contributed to extending the migratory chain to other family members through a process of ‘family reunification’. Especially for women going into service abroad, working in the home of people who were known to their family allowed them to start their lives as emigrants with some support to help overcome the initial difficulties they faced (Lillo 2000). The employers were ‘ladies’, and they knew the families providing them with domestic servants. The daughters of such families were considered very ‘resourceful’—women who had been accustomed to hard work from an early age in their homes in Jaén, while men were employed in agriculture.

Indeed, even if individuals’ self-confidence was not that strong, what mattered was that the system of reference provided opportunities to be ‘trial emigrants’, whereby they could evaluate the demands and rewards of migration. Several respondents emphasised the importance of the reference system, in ensuring that potential migrants found paid work. This mainly involved direct relatives who played a decisive role in asking their employers to hire the potential emigrant, thereby providing direct access to a job. Even if this only occasionally generated a true migration ‘chain’, some connections were established and involved various levels of the family structure and, to different degrees, family reunification.

Another set of reasons for emigration sprang from the need to overcome the family’s precarious economic situation in Jaén, the desire to improve their financial situation, and to control their futures, giving their children the chance to aspire to better personal, educational and professional positions than their own. These desires were strongly boosted at the time of emigration by two feelings or emotions that have only subsequently come to light. The first was a sense that a strong attachment to the land they worked contributed little to their futures, because it did not belong to them and they could not make decisions about it. The only solution for the farm workers
was to move, either in Spain or abroad, and offer their labour as ‘target workers’, whose objective was rapid accumulation of income through long hours of hard work (Entzinger 1985; Lillo 2000), then to improve their social position (Gregory and Cazorla 1987) and then, in some cases, to return (Bolzman et al. 1999). The second element of self-awareness was recognition that their limited education would hinder job prospects in Spain; linked to this was a desire to prevent their children being trapped in the same way.

Enhancing the social mobility of one’s children entails improving their education as the critical instrument of occupational advancement. A number of unequivocal stances (in relation to language skills at the destination, professional promotion, and maintenance of a Spanish cultural background) reinforced this predisposition towards social mobility as a means to improve their material conditions and satisfy their family’s most pressing needs (Cazorla 1989). This left no room to consider other, more intangible assets, as parents who had spent time abroad as emigrants readily acknowledged. A man who had migrated to France stated that: ‘Like many others, I took the plunge because I wanted a better life, that’s what I was looking for; and I found it in France’. Their improved financial status helped their children acquire professional and linguistic skills. The parents are proud that their children have progressed by making use of the learning opportunities they had as emigrants. But for older people themselves, emigration is associated with achieving a satisfactory financial status, especially the ownership of a house as the principal material asset upon which to base the future household economy, rather than striving to enhance their professional skills (Cazorla 1989). The importance of striving to ensure their children’s education was underlined by a man from Germany who commented:

As soon as my daughters were old enough, I said ‘No, no, each one of them is going to go to university’, but I wasn’t earning enough in the shop to pay for their university education. So I said to myself ‘I’m going to go wherever needs be to find the money to give them an education’—and I made it.

Although these are retrospective opinions expressed during the interviews, it is likely that the emigrants had a general idea of what they wanted at the time they emigrated, and that took a more precise form throughout their life stage as emigrants, and has been informed by their children’s educational and employment experiences.

Family and Social Networks and Return Migration

The following section portrays social capital as a social and space-embedded operator which has general ‘beneficial effects on both individuals and communities’ (Mohan and Mohan 2002). It facilitates useful strategies for migrant adaptation and mediates conditions of life in origin-based communities, sometimes hindering integration into destination contexts (Hardwick 2003). Although social capital has been explored in studies of immigration to demonstrate that diffuse social networks in communities clearly influence migration behaviour, using both quantitative and qualitative data
(Newbold 2001; Palloni et al. 2001; Phillips and Massey 2000; Portes et al. 1999), there has been only limited research on the relationship between return migration and social capital (Constant and Massey 2002; Kulu 1998; Traphagan 2000).

Social and family networks among Andalusian migrants abroad play a key role in channelling migration decisions. Relationships with partners and children, the ‘privileged family network’ (Schaeffer 2001), act as the ‘closest’ level of social capital. Most of the decisions are taken by the couple (the parents), but with the man usually leading the process: ‘We’re here because my husband doesn’t want to live there, in London, otherwise I’d live there’, said a woman returnee. Generally, however, the family as a whole is involved in the return process in some way. The relationships with their children, at the time that they decided to return, were usually strong and in almost no case did deterioration in the parent–child relationship contribute to the decision to return. Even though the children were very young when they had emigrated, most were old enough to be aware of what life was like in the early years of migration, and had some direct experience of the hardships. They had been involved in the collective effort of the family to overcome the difficulties facing them, and in making headway in the destination area, and many took a job as soon as they were legally old enough to do so, or even earlier. They had also lived at home until they had married, and sometimes had looked for a home near their parents.

When the emigrants retired, or took early retirement, they usually increased their help for their children, many of whom had married nationals of the host country and by then were parents themselves. More specifically, many took on the responsibility of caring for young grandchildren while their parents went out to work (Lillo 2000). This led many emigrants to postpone the decision to return. The age at which they retired or took early retirement allowed them to shoulder this responsibility. Some have seen these instances of delayed returns as ‘forced stays’ (Alvarez Silvar 1997), which is inevitably differently assessed by gender (Bolzman et al. 2001; Fibbi et al. 2001). In the interviews, women were more prone than men to comment positively on helping their children in this way.

The children’s involvement in the return decision had various manifestations and an unevenly developing ‘momentum’. In some cases it began when the children returned to the origin area before their parents who were still tied to work in the destination country; subsequently the latter came back, amounting to a ‘family return’ and ‘reverse family regrouping’ at the place of origin. In other cases, the emigrants who have returned are forging closer ties, not so much with their children (who have not returned), but with their grandchildren who spend their holidays with their grandparents and, in some cases, longer periods for study or work. Some parents indicated during the interviews that they did not feel the need to be close to their children as a precaution against future health or disability problems, not least because they feel ‘independent’ enough to cope with this possibility. The sadness of the children being at a distance is offset by the satisfaction of having returned. They do not depend so much on their immediate family’s help, because they never lost
touch with close and extended relatives, friends and acquaintances in the areas of origin.

The ‘second level of the network’ is formed by the emigrants’ brothers and sisters, but they rarely constitute a reason to return or not to return. In these families there tends to be a significant migratory tradition, and many or all of their siblings may have migrated (to metropolitan Spain, Europe or Latin America), so that the emigrants lost touch with them sooner than with other, less closely related individuals. The ‘third level’ is formed by more distant relatives (cousins, aunts and uncles), friends and acquaintances. This level is significant because it contributes most to broadening the network, diversifying and expanding the group of people with whom emigrants are likely to spend most time when they are elderly.

It is worth stressing that government initiatives in the destination country play a significant role in prompting migrants’ opportunities to participate in the wider society, particularly by providing time and opportunities for social activities and learning the host country’s language. This is in contrast to their focus on work and earning money, which for most was their prime goal from the moment they emigrated (as manifested in working double or long shifts, overtime and weekends, and ‘moonlighting’). Saving as much as possible has also meant leading austere lives, and limiting spending on leisure, with the exception of the Spanish social clubs, where they met up with other Spanish emigrants. As a couple from Switzerland said:

We’ve been very thrifty, we went to save money rather than waste it. For instance, we’d drink mineral water instead of drinking wine, even though later on my husband would buy a bottle of wine every so often ... but in the beginning, all we did was save, save, save.

Most activities were gender-differentiated, with men dedicated to working in manufacturing, building or service companies, while most women had been employed in domestic service or in small, family-run businesses, where a closer employee–employer relationship was possible. As a man from Switzerland explained, ‘(she worked) there in the same building company as me ... they had canteens, so she got a job working in the kitchen’.

One indicator of how emigrants adapted to life at their destination is the way in which they solved their initial problems, as with access to basic services or goods (schooling, health, interpretation of documents, housing). For instance, they were immediately supposed to be allocated housing if they arrived with a legal contract of employment, although the terms of the contract were not always observed to the letter. Anyhow, securing housing, their prime objective, was essential in order to bring in the rest of the family. As a couple from Paris told us:

Some of the people who came did so via Irun (on the Basque–French border) and the Institute of Emigration, and already had housing and a job waiting for them. But if you wanted to reunite your family, the government would only let you if you already had housing, otherwise they wouldn’t let you bring your family.
If they did not manage to do this (for example, if they had arrived illegally), life was far more difficult, and initially they would have had to rely on the support of relatives and acquaintances. In other cases, they managed to solve their problems or obtain aid through legal channels (official interpreters, the consulate, embassies, Spanish trade unions) or by relying on themselves. One couple, for example, changed their jobs to be able to work different hours, which allowed them to take turns in looking after their children and home. The occasions when they relied on help from the native population were few and far between, probably due more to a lack of communication than a lack of solidarity, so that living in a neighbourhood where there were other Spaniards was a considerable advantage in an adjustment process that sometimes lasted several years.

The emigrants did not consider that the aid they had received from the Spanish government addressed their situation. At the onset of the 1973–4 economic crisis, the Spanish government’s return migration policy was virtually non-existent because return meant further unemployment and reduced remittances. Consequently, as Cazorla argued (1989: 90–1), ‘the return emigrants were left to the adventure of returning in uncertain conditions. . . At most, the government enacted a few customs exemption measures for certain goods that the returnees brought with them, created the emigrant savings account . . . and looked after their Social Security payments’. Since the 1990s, regional governments in Spain have enacted policies to help returnees to make the move back and to facilitate access to the Spanish society and economy.

To some extent, the social network was important from the very start of the migratory process. There is no denying the ‘pull effect’ and the role played by certain relatives or acquaintances when it came to looking for work or lodgings at the destination. Moreover, after their emigration, their families in their places of origin played an essential role in helping them settle at their destination, especially through the help given by grandparents, who looked after young grandchildren until the parents were settled in a new home. Furthermore, if the couple were working and their children were too young to go to school and/or be left alone at home, it was not uncommon for one or more paternal or maternal grandparents to migrate to the place of destination.

They could have settled in and adapted to the new society quicker, but they went to work to save and return as soon as possible, not to learn the language as part of their migratory project. They had not invested in anything that they would have had to dispose of when they returned home, and they often had not even bought their own home, which is so important and deeply-rooted in Spanish culture. Although they earned more than in Spain, the costs of living were higher and it was too expensive to buy a home—it was seen as a luxury good, not to mention the legal obstacles in some countries for foreigners who try to buy property. According to the term coined by Cerase (1974), theirs was a return of conservatism, involving individuals who have spent their lives as emigrants, working and saving to live better in their place of origin. Some felt obliged when returning on holiday to make conspicuous displays of
their economic assets to their fellow countrymen and women. When they returned home, people criticised them if they said anything positive about the destination country or compared it favourably with Spain or Andalusia. There seemed to be a reluctance to acknowledge the economic benefits to Spain enabled by the destination countries’ economies and the emigrants’ hard work. As a woman returned from Paris said:

You can’t imagine how many millions (of pesetas) have been sent back to Spain. If Spain has solved its (economic) problems, it’s thanks to those of us who went abroad and sent so much money back home.

Once a return is made, the only ties with the former destination are social, in most cases limited to relationships with any children who remain. These have given rise to occasional visits for family events such as weddings and christenings. Sometimes they stay in touch by telephone or letter with a few friends, mostly other Spaniards. The comment made by a man who had been in London was exceptional: ‘We made very good friends with the British. They phone me, I phone them, they write me letters’. Otherwise, what are notable are the scant references made in the interviews to the indigenous populations in the destinations, despite the fact that many emigrants had lived in neighbourhoods where the former were in the majority.

What kind of feeling of belonging did the Spanish emigrants construct in the destination countries? The emigrants did transfer certain customs, such as organising meals or tastings based around national products, parties, or participating in Spanish associations. However, belonging to their own country is everything, as an emigrant woman in Germany stated: ‘Whether they go to Belgium, or anywhere else, there’s no place like home’. Their children have had more time and opportunities to adapt to the new society, although their success was relative, and some returned earlier than their parents. When they have started a relationship, they have done so mainly with Spanish nationals, and very often have married people from the same municipality, whom they met abroad or in Spain while on holiday. In the parents’ opinion, the main sign that their children have adapted is that they have learned the language of the destination country, which most have done because they were taught at school in the host-country language and came into contact with native children. The other indicator is that some have acquired citizenship of the destination country, in order to enjoy benefits such as being able to get particular jobs, as well as the satisfaction or security of knowing that they are ‘regarded as being from there’. If the children migrate back to Spain, their cultural and language skills are seen as economic resources that facilitate employment opportunities. In other cases, emigrants have objective difficulties in arranging a return. We found that many parents cling to the idea of returning, the ‘myth of return’, though most have no opportunity to return (Bolzman et al. 1999; Cohen and Gold 1997; Entzinger 1985; King 1986; Schaeffer 2001). This perspective was confirmed by both the returnees and the non-returnees whom we interviewed. In such cases, many children tend to be condemned to remain where the family is. Circular migration may be the solution in some cases
(Bolzman et al. 2001). As a male emigrant from Toulouse said, ‘Even if we’re here, we’re there, because we come and go, we don’t live here (Andalusia) permanently’.

Many emigrants made a substantial effort to stay in contact with their areas of origin, although in different ways. Most made visits once or twice a year, especially during the Christmas and summer holidays, to keep themselves and their children in touch with their roots. Some used the holidays to build their own house or work the land, while other visits were prompted by illness or death in the family. In all cases, the visits were facilitated if they still had a home in the area, or could rely on the hospitality of close relatives. Such an arrangement was described by a woman who had returned from Paris:

His mother was getting on in age, and here we had a place to live. There we didn’t have any relatives or friends. . . . Here I’ve got a house, my family, I’ve got my father who’s come to stay with us now, my sister’s in Vilches, my niece’s kids, who are almost like grandchildren to us.

The social ties refer to the presence of relatives such as children who have returned before them, or who have never left; while the illness or death of their parents, if they are buried there, all create a feeling of nostalgia. The material ‘moorings’ are almost exclusively to do with owning a home, an asset on which they have spent a substantial part of their savings as emigrants. This may be a newly-built or a refurbished inherited house. It is understandable that, for their old age, they have preferred to invest in a high-quality house in their home area rather than invest at the destination. A man who migrated to France explained the rationale:

I may have time to build myself a house for my old age, and give my children an education—that’s been a constant concern for Spaniards, for Spanish emigrants: to have something to come back to, even if it’s your grandfather’s house and it’s falling to pieces. At least you can patch it up, and move into the house where you were born, after doing it up nice and tidy.

The need and desire for a home at one’s place of origin was so great that everything they earned during the early years, above all when the head of the household emigrated alone, was spent on buying that home. Sometimes, they achieved this within the first three years, before the whole family emigrated.

Conclusions

Since the 1950s, rural Andalusia’s economic structure, which then depended on quasi-subsistence farming and low-productivity crops (cereals, olives), has been reconstructed with new land–labour relationships and means of production. Capital was represented by the highly concentrated land ownership in the hands of the ‘masters’, who exercised economic and social control over other classes. There was a plentiful supply of labour for the agrarian production system, but these insecure rural workers were immersed in a deep and long-standing social depression that had
intensified after the Civil War. The capacity to work was a function of manual strength and practical, specific skills, and did not demand even basic literacy, numeracy or general education. Andalusia acted as a labour reserve, boosted by high fertility rates, but limited by relatively high mortality and disability rates. This reserve was essential for the low-productivity agrarian economy, but during the 1960s became a population ‘surplus’. Moreover, the social structure made it possible to constitute the family not only as a reproduction unit, but also as an economic resource to facilitate the survival of all its members in an economy of limited inputs.

All these conditioning factors contribute to an understanding of why emigration was such a clearly-defined process in Andalusia, and one that conditioned emigrants’ individual behaviour from its inception. The migrants were young, generally unmarried, unskilled, had strong family ties and needed to earn money to counter their precarious economic situation and break free from the enveloping atmosphere of social oppression. The family was a key decision-making unit both at the time of emigration and of return. Although each individual emigration decision involved different players at different times, invariably the family played a decisive role in favouring or limiting its members’ interests. Arguably an individual has less freedom when making the decision to return than when they originally decided to emigrate. The ties forged as emigrants have helped them to build up ‘social capital’ at different levels and this has been essential not only for the family’s economic structure but also for the communities formed through emigration. Maintaining close relationships with their children does not always influence the emigrants’ decision to return, but usually plays an important role. The young age at which emigrants retire means that they do not usually try to remain close to their children in order to secure their help in future, because they are confident that they can count on them when such needs arise. In the case of non-returns, which are more frequent but not considered in this paper, closeness to the nuclear family is usually the key consideration among Spanish migrants abroad, as in Spanish society at large.

The people who return, once they have retired or are close to retirement, cannot be said to do so as a result of exclusionary processes in the host society. Most have probably always been foreigners, in both their self-perceptions and the attitudes of the local population, but this sense was probably stronger during the early years. As time went by, they learnt to ‘cope’ more or less with the language, to establish routines for the daily activities of life such as shopping, how to move about the city, understand and get to know the nature of their host society, and steadily adjust to their new situation. These experiences enabled them to surpass their initial problems. In turn, neither the initial hardships nor the security afforded by the migratory experience stopped them thinking about returning, because more often than not they had never intended to stay for good. They did not know how long it would take them but, in their eyes, the time that passed (15, 20 or even 25 years) was a long wait. They have only had to wait for the right moment in order to return, because they had taken the decision to come back at the very moment that they emigrated.
In contrast to our findings, other studies of return migration have portrayed very different situations, above all when retirement approaches. Martínez Veiga (2000), for example, argued that, when that time comes, it may be the emigrants who are better placed—in economic, social, physical and psychic terms—who consider and actually do return. In this case, the contention is that return has been selective, just as emigration had been. Of course, different interpretations may reflect different methodologies. Our research examined only those who had returned at some point, but nonetheless found several different processes and situations among the returnees in Jaén. The first and most common type was that of emigrants who returned to their birthplace. Most live at almost the same material level as the emigrants who have not returned and still live at the destination place; that is, the returnees were selective of neither successful nor unsuccessful emigrants. A second but quite unusual type were failed return migrants who, after returning, reversed their decision because they did not adapt to their place of origin. Finally, there were some circulating emigrants, who are halfway between returning and not returning, and stay for variable times in the origin and emigration locations. This pattern appears to be of increasing importance: see also the paper by Bolzman et al. in this special issue.

In conclusion, given the growing importance of other migration trends, at least for Spain, return migration may have lost, or be losing, its importance as a major geographical phenomenon with implications for the national ‘demographic account’ and for private monetary transfers and economic relations with other countries. It has never become a major topic in migration research, and only sporadically has attracted research attention. We argue, however, that there is a need for a major interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon because, with the ageing of many emigrant communities, their outcomes are of great interest for those concerned with the welfare of older people, for social planners interested in the local environments where returned emigrants settle, and for social psychologists interested in individual and group behaviour.

It is unquestionable that return migration, of whatever type and for whatever reason, in Europe and other world regions, is an intrinsic manifestation of the globalisation of economies and societies. Emigration and return migration are one way of realising the benefits of mobility in today’s world. Return is of increasing importance because it involves people who have ‘aged’ as emigrants, so their return may be seen as a significant part of their personal ‘migratory process’. The forms of return migration are also markers of the historical evolution of migration in Europe and of the consolidation of cultural communities in the destination countries (King 2001). Migration and return are two necessary points of a time sequence in the emigrant’s life course, and their expressions are closely related both to people’s characteristics, their nationality or ethnicity and the length of time that they spend as emigrants, and to the effectiveness or otherwise of the assimilation or integration process at the destination (Waldorf 1994, 1995). It should not be difficult to establish some general principles that describe return as a consequence of emigration, given its consistency in time and in space (Newbold 2001). However, like other social
phenomena, return has a substantial social and psychological component, so care must be taken in making generalisations, and there is a need to analyse individual, family and social patterns of behaviour. The general criteria usually applied in measuring it, such as nationality, the emigrant’s prior status and the length of their stay, give rise to different types of return emigration to which researchers need to be sensitive (King 1986, 2002). Social workers and social policy planners need to be mindful of what is likely to constitute a growing challenge, and this underlines the need for further research into international return migration.

References


