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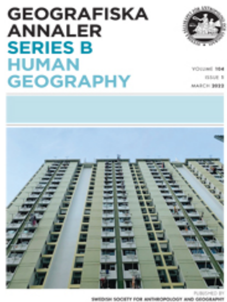

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Situating spatial justice in counter-urban lifestyle mobilities: relational rural theory in a time of crisis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has renewed the rural idyll, as urban-dwellers seek greener, safer spaces. If the counter-urban trend appears for novel reasons, it does so along lifestyle mobilities' well-worn paths. These paths often depend upon spatial inequalities. Yet, despite awareness that inequalities undergird mobilities, spatial inequalities have remained under-theorized in the lifestyle mobilities literature. This article remedies the gap through the concept of spatial justice. Initially asserting the 'right to' urban space, spatial justice has been recently re-thought at a regional scale, and is an emerging interpretation of rural marginalization and redress. As a normative concept, however, spatial justice risks simplistically measuring the distribution and presuming sedentarism. By applying spatial justice to lifestyle mobilities pre-pandemic and looking ahead to future shifts, we offer a nuanced, relational perspective on the theory and the field. Through qualitative case studies from rural and peripheral regions in Wales and Ireland, we show how inequalities and mobilities are complex and inter-related, with significant implications for regional sustainability, cohesion and identity. As the discourse of being 'all in this together' has rapidly unravelled, we argue that theorizing spatial inequalities is an urgent task for futures beyond recovery – and that lifestyle mobilities are deeply implicated.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has renewed the rural idyll, as cramped urban-dwellers seek wider, greener, (seemingly) safer spaces. Although predictions of a longer-term trend are premature, lock-downs in the UK and Ireland have seen house price growth in rural areas converge with that of urban centres, and buyers preferring larger detached properties (ONS 2021; Irish Independent/Real Estate Alliance 2021b). A widely reported survey by British property listing company Right-Move (2020) found that over a third of home buyers claim to be rethinking their priorities due to the pandemic, and a third again are contemplating a move to the countryside. An Irish Independent/REA report (2021b) similarly indicates that the trend of homebuyers moving out of major cities has gathered pace despite reduced restrictions and reopened offices.

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The pandemic introduces novel circumstances, but counter-urbanizing patterns follow well-trodden paths. Research on lifestyle mobilities shows how the aspirational pursuit of the 'good life' is framed through relocation to more attractive – often more idyllic – settings (Benson 2013; Benson and Osbaldiston 2014; Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Buller and Hoggart 1994). The literature also offers a reminder that these mobilities typically entail the privileged capacity to move (Sheller and Urry 2006; Benson 2014). Pandemic era counter-urbanizers are unlikely to be poorly paid 'key workers', beholden to a physical workplace – yet nor will new digital commuters all represent an elite 'new squirearchy' (Heley 2010), squeezing into the same small set of desirable, expensive destinations. Inequalities in income, affordability and local development mediate *who* can pursue lifestyle mobility, and, crucially, *where*.

This article explores how lifestyle mobilities intersect with spatial inequalities: disparities in resources and opportunities between territories and the consequent ways in which 'places themselves become the markers and makers of inequality' (Hooks, Lobao, and Tickamyer 2016, 462). We do so through the concept of spatial justice. Initially asserting the 'right to' access and use urban space (Lefebvre 1970), spatial justice has been recently re-examined at a regional scale (Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins, and Woods 2020) and is an emerging interpretive lens on rural rights (Woods 2019) and redress (Nordberg 2020a, 2020b). Because spatial justice explicitly responds to spatial inequalities, we ask what the concept reveals about lifestyle mobilities as at once spatial and inherently relational.

We reflect on and apply spatial justice to lifestyle mobilities pre- and post-pandemic, drawing upon qualitative case studies from two peripheral regions in Wales and Ireland, respectively. These cases show how spatial inequalities and mobilities are complex and inter-related, with significant implications for regional sustainability, cohesion and identity. In turbulent times in which the discourse of being 'all in this together' has rapidly unravelled, we argue that the making (and breaking) of 'just' outcomes for rural areas depends less on normative answers to regional disparities, and more on the relational differences between places and the people who move through them.

The article proceeds as follows. Immediately below, we introduce a relational lens to contextualize lifestyle mobilities within spatial inequalities, identifying key issues for 'just' outcomes before continuing our conceptual discussion of spatial justice. In the following section, we introduce our Welsh and Irish case studies, and outline our methodology. Turning to the empirical analysis, we focus on four key themes. First, we consider the construction of West Wales and the Valleys and western Ireland as lifestyle destinations: a construction that embeds rurality, even in the larger settlements of Swansea and Galway. Second, we examine the effects of spatial inequalities on housing and relative affordability, noting how these factors link to the purchasing power inherent in lifestyle mobilities. We further consider the factors that contribute to this relative affordability, namely a relatively lower income and cost of living, but not, necessarily, a lower standard of living. Third, we explore the implications of relatively privileged mobilities for belonging, and how these ideas translate into the kinds of lifestyle movers deemed (un)acceptable. We also note the limitations of relative affordability and privileged mobility, reflecting on often fraught questions of who can move – and who must stay and suffer a decline in lifestyle quality. Finally, we illustrate spatial justice through the 'right to' access services, which in rural areas have become further limited and contested during the pandemic. In our concluding discussion, we return to COVID-19, and to the headline hopes for lifestyle mobility.

Lifestyle mobilities and the relational rural

Literatures on counter-urbanization (e.g. Halfacree 2008, 2014) and lifestyle migration (e.g. Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Benson and Osbaldiston 2016) have called important attention to the non-economic determinants of mobility. In contrast to classic migration analyses that focus on higher wages in receiving areas and movement up the urban 'escalator' (Fielding 1992), lifestyle mobilities research reflects how perceptions of different places – and how these matter to individuals –

often prove more meaningful than abstracted socio-economic indicators (de Haas 2011). Much lifestyle mobilities research has examined aspirations for 'the good life', subjectively perceived, in which migrants 'follow dreams' (Smith and Phillips 2001, 465) from renovating a farmhouse or opening a guesthouse (Hoggart and Buller 1995; Benson 2013) to more counter-cultural pursuits (Jones 1993; Vannini and Taggart 2014). As this suggests, rural areas often feature in lifestyle mobilities literature, with common motivations for relocation including closeness to nature (Smith and Phillips 2001), self-sufficiency (Vannini and Taggart 2014) and, less benignly, 'white flight' (Neal and Agyeman 2006).

Regardless, lifestyle mobilities often carry privilege (Benson 2014; Osbaldiston 2014), including the cultural capital accrued through professional 'service class' roles, which offer opportunities for a comfortable living almost anywhere (Spencer 1995). Relocation itself can also generate social mobility (Scott 2019). For example, 'greentrifiers' seeking sustainable lifestyles become 'successful' by relocating to desirable rural areas and demonstrating green credentials (Smith and Phillips 2001). As this latter example indicates, bundles of capital and relative privilege 'come into play differently for different individuals' (Scott 2019, 1741) in mobility decisions. Affluence in lifestyle mobilities is thus '*relative* rather than absolute' (Benson 2014, 48, original emphasis).

Classic studies have indeed shown how the *un*affordability of desirable properties in the British countryside prompted migration to rural southern France (Hoggart and Buller 1994), where productivist agriculture, urbanization and de-industrialization had created a supply of vacant rustic buildings, and 'authentic' lifestyles could be enabled by migrants' affluence compared to local incomes (Benson 2014). Southern France has since become the aspirational stuff of magazines and television property programmes (Benson 2012; O'Reilly 2014), yet lifestyle mobilities also occur in 'less popular' regions (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2012, 2013). Compared to dominant narratives, these regions reflect 'often unlikely places … [and] unfamiliar geographies of movement' (McAreavey 2017, 28). They also reveal geographies of affordability, facilitated by price *differentials* rather than prices per se (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2012, 2013; Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones 2021; Stockdale 2014). Here, lifestyle mobilities intersect with spatial inequalities in incomes, housing markets and living costs – all of which are embedded in the broader structures and socio-economic processes that describe and inscribe uneven development.

Woods (2011, 43) observes that rurality 'has always been defined and imagined in relational terms, as relative to urban space and society'. The relational rural we emphasize here is constituted materially as much as imaginatively (Halfacree 2006). In recent decades, geography has critically shifted from viewing space as a 'container' towards thinking space relationally (Heley and Jones 2012). For critics, however, a theoretical over-emphasis on mobilities, fluxes and flows has tended to downplay the specificities of spatial relations and their reproduction (Jones 2010). In other words, specific spatial relations have observable effects. Jones's (2010, 251) definition of relational space as 'the active product of reciprocal relationships' between economics, politics and power geometries is good to think with here. Applied to counter-urban lifestyle mobilities, this relational approach helps us to hold the interlinkages between subjective aspirations, bundles of privilege, relative affordability and spatial inequalities. As Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, space is not independent of economic processes and contingent social practices, but actively produced by these. We need then to interrogate whether the outcomes are just.

Conceptualizing spatial justice

The concept of spatial justice emerged in the late 1960s, primarily through Marxian theorists echoing contemporary anti-capitalist protests by urging a transition to a more just society. Lefebvre's (1970) 'right to the city' meant the rights of people to access and use urban space, and to participate in transformation processes. For Lefebvre, when economic inequalities, social discrimination or state edict obstructed these rights, spatial *in*justice resulted.

Over the past decade, spatial justice has gained fresh academic attention as a normative ideal associated with progressive politics (Fainstein 2010; Soja 2010; Storper 2011). This re-emerging scholarship recognizes that spatial inequalities need not be inevitable, and argues for the 'fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them' (Soja 2010, 2). Research takes up two fundamental concerns: first, how spatial patterns of inequality are produced and perpetuated; and, second, how more just outcomes might be achieved. Crucially, although the 'right to' space is experienced by different people in different ways according to social and economic structures, conceptualizing spatial justice aims towards more than simply social or economic justice in space (Dabinett 2011; Papadopoulos 2019; Soja 1989; Dikeç 2001).

Recalling Lefebvre (1970) and Harvey (1973), the new wave of spatial justice scholarship has largely profiled urban struggles and social movements. Yet, because 'justice and injustice are infused into the multi-scalar geographies in which we live' (Soja 2010, 20), there is no intrinsic link between spatial justice and the urban scale. A recent turn to rural spatial justice (e.g. Nordberg 2020a, 2020b; Woods 2019) has begun questioning how the unequal spatial distribution of rights and resources affects the ability of individuals to access, inhabit and use rural spaces. Related calls to 'regionalise' spatial justice (Jones et al. 2019, 2020; Kearns, Meredith, and Morrissey 2014) also raise the important point that spatial in/justices may not necessarily play out in the same ways at regional and rural scales as they do within urban space.

Merely counting resources by region or comparing indicators between rural and urban is too simplistic here (Israel and Frenkel 2017; Papadopoulos 2019). As Amartya Sen (2009) points out, there is no single, perfectly just imaginary against which all realities, everywhere, can be compared and counted. Of course, 'freedom and liberty; the ability to live our lives and be happy' (Storper 2011, 19) are shared aspirations, but socio-economic indicators are not always good proxies, nor are spatially even distributions always already just. For Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins, and Woods (2020), spatial justice at a regional scale depends on three premises: first, that regions should be able to assert their own capacity to actively define and pursue justice; second, that promoting justice must involve considering the implications of space and scale, including rural and urban differences; and, third, that regions should be able to define well-being, development and the 'good life' in ways that reflect their priorities and capabilities. The notion of a region having the freedom to locally define a preferred development trajectory and future place vision also influences assertions of the right of regions 'to not catch up' (Demeterova Fischer, and Schmude 2020) – that is, to value sustainability and development progress in ways other than through quantitative growth indicators. Lifestyle mobilities might thus act as barometers of rural development, illuminating the resources and capabilities that sustain (or detract from) preferred place visions as expressions of spatial justice.

Having outlined the interplay of mobility and regional inequalities, we now introduce our two case study regions: West Wales and the Valleys, and western Ireland.

Methodology

This article draws upon research undertaken for the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project, which investigates territorial inequalities in Europe through a spatial justice lens. We specifically draw upon the semi-structured qualitative interviews that comprised the respective Welsh and Irish cases in a thematic work package on the subjective determinants and spatial effects of migration.

The Welsh interviews (61) were conducted in Ceredigion (pop. 72,000) and Swansea Bay (pop. 300,000), respectively, rural and post-industrial areas within West Wales and the Valleys – one of only two NUTS2 regions in the UK classified as 'less developed' (GDP per capita <75% EU average). Interviewees were approximately split between each location. The Irish interviews (30) were conducted in the county of Galway (pop. 258,000), in western Ireland. Interviewees were recruited from two areas within the municipal boundary of Galway City (pop. 80,000), and three small rural towns in agricultural settings within working and travel distance. Both West

Wales and the Valleys and western Ireland can be understood as economically peripheral regions within Europe. Although they do not match the criteria for 'less-popular' regions first proposed through research in the Netherlands (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2013, 584) – which focussed on the landscape, land use and hospitality sector size – they share a distance from major centres of urban growth and their rural areas are characterized by comparatively sparse populations with limited access to services. As a mid-sized regional city, Swansea is the least 'rural' of our research sites, but is surrounded by a relatively deprived (semi-)rural hinterland and has long been peripheralized by the stigmatizing discourses of regional decline.

Interviews in Wales and Ireland each engaged with approximately equal numbers of long-term local residents (10 years or more), residents who had moved to the region from elsewhere in the UK or Ireland, and migrants from select EU states. The latter group represented statistically significant mobility flows: in Wales, migration from Germany and Romania; in Ireland, migration from Poland. Clearly, our sampling methodology introduces considerable complexity, reflecting the needs of the larger multi-sited, multi-institutional project of which these cases were a part. Space does not allow us to represent the wider research findings here, nor to attend closely to disambiguating the different mobility experiences among our participants (but see Ulceluse, Bock, and Haartsen 2020). Rather, we focus on the *commonalities* that the Welsh and Irish cases reveal.

Both sets of interviews used a common interview schedule, and were conducted face-to-face in English (or, in a few cases, Welsh). Interviews in Ireland took place between March and August 2019, and in Wales between March and September 2019. All interviews were transcribed, and then analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis package, which facilitated pairing a common coding system with subsequent identification and thematic analysis of emerging patterns in the interview texts (Clarke and Braun 2018; Terry et al. 2017). Because the two cases were analyzed separately, in the empirical sections that follow we do not present a complete side-by-side comparison, but show how similar themes emerge in each region and reflect the interplay between lifestyle mobilities and spatial inequalities.

West Wales and the Valleys and Galway County as counter-urban lifestyle spaces

All interviewees reflected on County Galway as a rural destination. The rural way of life, sense of community and an opportunity to become part of the community was very important to those who chose to move to a rural location. Over three quarters of the Polish migrants had already experienced life in other EU countries, and although they chose Galway for a variety of reasons, rurality was an appealing lifestyle factor. As one interviewee stated, 'I love the village, because it is quiet, you know everyone, and everyone knows you. You're not, how do you say that – you know – in a big city you vanish' (Abel, Polish).

Ceredigion in Wales was similarly celebrated as a space for rural lifestyles. Many interviewees reflected on the natural environment, like Sandra (English), who: 'did quite a lot of research on where we could find the seaside and mountains, and some culture for wet afternoons'. For Rowan (English) and their partner, with three young children:

> We both had quite rural upbringings … I think there's a sense of wanting to offer [the children] something that we really benefitted from when we were children and that we couldn't really find in London – beaches and cliffs and woods, that sort of thing.

Many German interviewees further spoke of a romanticized notion of Wales and Welshness, which was seen as wild, rural and semi-mythical.

Interestingly, rural – and even idyllic – characterizations were also applied to the urban areas in both the Welsh and Irish cases. Notably, Galway City is identified as the 'most multicultural city' in Ireland (CSO 2020), with the highest percentage of non-Irish residents (18.6%). Younger interviewees were often attracted by the city's international arts and culture profile. Nevertheless, most

Polish migrants viewed Galway City as overtly rural in comparison to the large cities they had lived in Poland or elsewhere in the EU. One explained:

> This part of Galway … for me, it's like my village. It's very green, it's more rural. I go to the city centre … when I need anything, but I am happy with going for a walk here, going on the Silver Strand on the beach. … I used to live in the big city, Krakow, where I was in the traffic every day after my study. I didn't like it. So, I know there is a town, but still this town is small, if you compare it with Poland. (Julia)

Maja similarly commented that, 'Most of my Irish colleagues perceive Galway as a big city, and of course there are things happening, but … it is too small to be a city. But the sense of community and rurality, it is here definitely.'

Similar sentiments were applied to Swansea. Tamara (English) had moved for a job offer but, 'I'd also heard that [Swansea] was next to the Gower, which is really beautiful, and I love being in the outdoors, so … I was thinking that sounds like a good place to be.' For Lee (English), 'One of the big draws was the people are different … having worked in other cities where you walk pat them down the street … [here] there's a bit of a sense of community.' Swansea, he added, was 'still quite traditional in a way of life … a little bit set back in times, but in a really nice way'.

Importantly, however, lifestyle is not necessarily a straightforward *cause* for migration (Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones 2021). As other studies have shown, some migrants stumble 'upon their (imagined) "paradise", rather than carefully choosing it' (Salazar 2014, 133); for others, lifecourse events that trigger mobility, such as return migration (Farrell, Mahon, and McDonagh 2012) or retirees relocating to free capital (O'Reilly 2000), lead to new lifestyles in consequence (Halfacree 2014). In Wales, Llywelyn, a Welsh-speaker from the outskirts of Swansea, spoke about returning to the region after graduating from an English university: 'I was expecting to go home [after university], see what happens. At the time, I was thinking that it would be for about a couple of months, but I changed my mind.' At a different stage in the lifecourse, Hanna (Romanian) highlighted how her husband's family provided the relational draw to Swansea from southern England:

> The three boys were born and raised by the sea, so we were travelling back and forth all the time to see his parents and just to be on the beach, and then as I wasn't working he managed to find a job in Cardiff [neighbouring city]. So we moved back to Swansea to be closer to his parents.

As this suggests, different motivations around migration intersect with both lifestyle aspirations and 'found' lifestyles at the destination.

Partner-following migration (Benson and O'Reilly 2009) – a noted feature of migration to 'less-popular regions' (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2012) – was also apparent in Ireland, with female migrants, in particular, following a Polish or Irish partner. Zofia (Polish) described her experience:

> This wasn't my choice. It was chosen for my heart. In Warsaw, when I was working in the government, I was invited for dinner to the house of my Polish friends, and they told me they also expected a guest from Galway. I never heard about Galway before. So, I met this gentleman on this dinner, and exactly six months later, I changed all my life and I moved to Ireland.

Lifecourse migration (Ní Laoire and Stockdale 2016) more broadly has been associated with providing opportunities for young migrants from central and eastern Europe to experience western cultures and lifestyles (Horváth 2008). Although all Polish interviewees in Ireland alluded to the financial incentives for migration, most also referred to additional factors influencing their decisions, especially expanded travel experience and enhanced knowledge of other societies and cultures. For example, qualified teacher Joanna stated that, although 'economic [migration] was the main reason' for her move to Galway, 'I believe that whoever travels and explores to have just great knowledge, you're more open to things that happen to you, and that was another reason [for moving] as well.'

By understanding our two case regions as spaces for counter-urban lifestyle migration, we simultaneously understand lifestyle as complex and changing, rather than as a distinct mobility flow

that is separable from other material and relational factors. We continue to explore this theme as we move to consider the intersections of housing markets and local incomes with lifestyle aspirations.

Affordable property and material lifestyle

Declining agricultural profitability and land-based or industrial employment in our case regions have produced patterns of demographic change over time that, in turn, create surplus properties and often sluggish housing markets. For example, in Wales 2020/2021 council tax data shows that both Ceredigion and Swansea have higher quotients of long-term empty properties compared to Wales as a whole (StatsWales 2020). In 1999, the median house price in rural Ceredigion was £59,500–18% lower than the aggregate median for England and Wales (House of Commons Library 2021). By the eve of the pandemic in 2019, Ceredigion's median had risen substantially to £185,500, yet the aggregate gap had widened to 22% (House of Commons Library 2021).

The relative cheapness of property proved a boon for many interviewees. As Peter (German) approvingly observed, 'Obviously [in] places like Ceredigion, it's certainly possible to find a cheap house.' In Swansea, Cristina (Romanian) was also 'definitely into the housing' because, in a large urban centre like Bucharest or London, 'I would not have had a chance of owning a house for a long, long time.' The comparison to London is particularly stark: in 2019 the city had an average house price of £484,000 (ONS 2019). These relative differences offered particular opportunities for first-time buyers, like Bradley (English) in Swansea:

> [I]t's far cheaper to buy something here than it was anywhere else in the UK … My brother was living in London at the time [I moved], and if you compare the rent that he was paying for a room … it's more than what I would pay for a mortgage here. I think that's one of the big pluses, really.

In this sense, the relative affordability of housing enabled aspirations for property ownership and, as we will illustrate in the next section, freed income.

Some interviewees in Wales had taken further advantage of housing market differentials by selling property in London or surrounding areas and converting capital into greater purchasing power in Wales. Nigel (English), for example, had been able to acquire 'a bigger house, a bigger garden' in Ceredigion, reflecting findings on the lifestyle value of spacious, comfortable housing in other 'less-popular' areas (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2013). Affordability could thus directly enable lifestyle aspirations. Although moving to Ceredigion had initially left Carola (German) with a 'lot, lot, lot, lot lower' standard of living – and we will turn to the downsides of affordability in a later section – purchasing property had enabled home improvement aspirations (Rosenberg 2011), and they had since 'built an extension and did up our house and everything'. *Relative* differences in affordability can thus provide both the pre-conditions for counter-urban lifestyle mobility, and lifestyle opportunities on arrival. We continue this theme, turning now to the cost of living.

Income and cost of living as relative lifestyle enablers

Affordability is not only produced through national comparison, but interacts with the incomes available locally. In Ireland, Polish migrants juggled the appealing social and environmental qualities of rural Galway with financial decision-making. John, for example, was one half of a couple who lived in a cheaper rural area for the lifestyle and reduced rent costs, but situated their business in a larger market town: 'You pay more money for rent in the big cities, but we like the small places. We never planned to move to a bigger place, but it's better for the business in the bigger town.' While the role of migration in upward social mobility is well-established in the research literature (e.g. Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2005), this tends to be associated with opportunities for higher-status employment, rather than the subtle spatial negotiations we see here.

Most interviewees in Ireland did seek an improved standard of living, and viewed elevated employment opportunities and associated income as a method of achieving these aspirations.

The picture differs somewhat in Wales, where interviewees often gave up higher urban salaries on relocation. Nevertheless, spatial differences in the cost of living mitigated the financial effects:

> The benefit of being here is, everything is cheap. So, I could get by. I'm sure I couldn't earn what I earned there [in urban England], but equally it doesn't cost so much to be here … noticeably less, I would say. Two thirds maybe. It's really noticeable. (Sandra, English, Ceredigion).

In Swansea, Bradley (English) made a similar observation:

> It's [Swansea] quite cheap, and if you earn a relative amount you can live really comfortably. I think if we both [couple] lived in London on our current salaries, it would be very difficult to make ends meet.

Again, we see how lifestyle could emerge after migration, as incomes were found to stretch further and aspirations for the 'good life' became more affordable in turn.

Crucially, however, interviewees' relatively lower incomes in Wales still typically remained relatively *higher* than that of the local population. Margot (German) recognized this, stating:

> I have a comfortable standard of living in [Ceredigion]. I think I wouldn't necessarily have if I was not a [qualified professional] … Two [professionals] with high incomes. So, we have a good standard of living.

Many other interviewees in Wales similarly reflected on their relatively privileged status, typically related to working as a professional, or to having the means or opportunity for mobility. Some more directly noticed the differences in lifestyle this created: 'I think our standard of living is a little bit higher than the general population of Swansea. I get the feeling driving around, some of the houses look a little bit … [trails off]' (Olly, English).

The Welsh and Irish case studies expose the complexities in comparing lifestyle opportunities between the places counter-urban migrants leave, and the destinations to which they arrive. Different forms of spatial inequality mediate these relational differences between places, possibilities and experiences. This also leads us to complicate the 'elephant in the room': relative privilege.

Complicating counter-urban mobility as privilege

While we have highlighted the recognition of relative privilege among interviewees, especially those in Wales, this cannot be viewed as a straightforward manifestation of inequalities. In both Wales and Ireland, internal and international migrants alike could find themselves living in poor quality accommodation, working in low-paying or demanding jobs and experiencing xeno-racist abuse (including for many English in-migrants, who had experienced anti-English sentiments in Wales). Similarly, while we have highlighted the possibilities to release capital or take advantage of comparatively lower house prices, this tended to be an enabling factor rather than directly causative. As we have seen, many interviewees were more explicitly 'pulled' by family or relationship connections, while Ceredigion, Swansea and Galway each have university campuses that attract students who stay on for lifestyle opportunities after graduation. Those who bought homes, which they would not have been able to do in major urban centres, also found new security in contrast to previous experiences of precarity. Recognizing this relational dimension of mobility to 'less-popular' regions is not novel (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2012; Haartsen and Stockdale 2018), but does need to be re-emphasized, as many migrants remain depicted as detached from the places to which they move.

The privileges of mobility are particularly associated with elite amenity migration, personified in Wales through rural second home ownership. Recent media attention to the sale of Seion Baptist Chapel in Gwynedd (neighbouring Ceredigion) or sales of small cottages at headline-grabbing prices serve as a synecdoche to frame all migration into the region as elitist. While the classic gentrification 'rent gap' is partly at play, characterizing all counter-urban mobility as gentrification is simplistic, and holds less explanatory power in areas that have *not* transformed and remain 'less-popular' (Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones 2021). Although housing affordability rightly

remains a critical issue in rural areas, housing is always embedded within a wider rural development frame (Gkartzios and Scott 2014), raising relational questions about good lives in rural space.

Constructions of counter-urban mobility can also strike a note of 'taking' from or burdening rural communities. Rural incomers in Wales are widely presented in public discourse as a homogenous group of older English people who drive up the price of housing, require care and drain health services and threaten Welsh as a community language. While some studies (Heley and Jones 2013; Jones and Heley 2016) have challenged this construction by highlighting retirees' roles in community volunteering, there remains scope for more refraction of rural incomers' different contributions to place. Unsurprisingly in this context, several interviewees in Wales were keen to distinguish their benign intentions:

> When we first came into the little village where we live and bought the house … because it was the time when everyone was buying houses, doing them up and then selling them … [locals] thought we were some of these developers. It took the community a couple of years to realise we were actually there to stay. (Carola, German, Ceredigion)

Many interviewees in both regions indeed spoke positively of their commitments and contributions to the region. Some, for example, mentioned the contributions they made to sustaining particular services, participating in community groups, or learning Celtic languages. While much attention has been given to younger Welsh speakers leaving the 'heartland' of western Wales, incomers with children, who saw value in the language, could also help sustain Welsh as a community language in the region. For Gwen (English) in Ceredigion, for example: 'I wanted my children to be brought up bilingually. I thought that was an education advantage … I thought it would sensitize small children to minority culture issues.' In Galway, Polish migrants often valued the shared link with Catholicism as a primary religion, and several celebrated recent Irish societal changes, such as the 2015 Marriage Equality Referendum.

In some respects, comments such as these undergird a conscious distinction between incomers who contribute and integrate, and those who do not. Carys, a long-term resident in Swansea, drew attention to this distinction by recounting a conversation with a new neighbour:

> It turned out this was a holiday home she had. Her main house was in London. Then she started a tirade about how … the Welsh Government were going to charge them extra for having a second home. She said, 'well, I'm here in the summer. I use the restaurants. I don't use the schools.' She saw that as a virtue! I didn't like to tell her the restaurants need to be going twelve months of the year, not the three that she was down for the summer and … actually, the house she was in would have been perfect for a starter family, but of course they're just only being used for three months of the year. People can be very blinkered.

Although criticizing the spatial effects of seasonal mobility (Smith 2012; Willett 2021), this conversation begins to suggest a more positive role for particular forms of counter-urban mobility, such as families relocating for child-friendly lifestyles, in sustaining services and contributing to regional renewal. We return to service access as a constitutive element of spatial justice shortly below, but first describe the downside of relative affordability.

Affordability as a material trade-off in housing markets

We previously noted the enhanced affordability available to those who had sold property in more expensive urban areas. While this might be seen as a significant advantage in counter-urban mobility, there is a distinct downside: lower house prices in more peripheral regions, and slower (if any) increase reduce the relative affordability of further mobility elsewhere:

> The houses [prices in origin region] have gone through the ceiling, and at the moment if we looked to go back now, we'd be selling our four bedroom detached here [in Ceredigion] and looking for a two bedroom semi [-detached house] on a huge estate in that area, and it's not what we want. In fact, the house that we've left there now would cost £150,000 more than this house because the house prices have gone up so much

> around there. But, in saying that we don't want to go back because of the traffic, and I think the friendliness around here. (Trish, English, Ceredigion)

For Trish, lifestyle advantages made Wales a comfortable place to settle, but they were nevertheless keenly aware that they might become 'stuck' if their circumstances or aspirations changed.

Furthermore, although the cost of housing was often celebrated by interviewees, the condition of housing stock in both Wales and Ireland was equally bemoaned. 'I remember my Aunt coming for our wedding', recalled Trude (German) in Ceredigion:

> They thought it was very 'scenic' [intended ironically] in terms of the maintenance level of houses and hotels. They were not impressed … [by the] quality of the fittings inside, things falling apart.

On the rental market, Mia (German, Ceredigion) was similarly unimpressed:

> A lot of [rental properties] were very small … A lot of them were very dirty as well. That's to do with the property rather than the people who lived there. A lot of them seem to have mould in the rooms … I don't know who designed this [current] house, but I don't think he was very smart, [to] rent a place that's absolutely shit.

For Peter (German), Ceredigion's housing stock was 'like a time warp' – a statement less evoking idyllic nostalgia than 'left behind' materiality. In these examples, German migrants compared the condition of housing in Wales to relatively higher levels of prosperity in Germany. In Ireland, Polish migrants made similar comparisons, despite the income differentials that had often prompted their mobility. Abel, for example, recounted:

> When I came into that house [in Galway], the mushrooms were everywhere, dampness. There is a difference in Poland, it's a different building structure. You have two walls with a cavity in it. We have one big wall half a metre thick, and insulation outside would not give you any dampness inside to the building.

Multiple comments of this nature indicate that, just as migrants could be pleasantly surprised by the lifestyle opportunities they found in Wales and Ireland, mobility could also entail making trade-offs with more unfavourable local conditions.

For Polish migrants, in particular, these trade-offs could be poignant. Maja, who had moved to Ireland for postgraduate-qualified work and life experience, felt her life in Poland was of a higher standard:

> I think my standard of living has changed, and the main thing is that, back in Poland, I have my own flat. I bought it and I'm the owner. So, I feel that I do whatever I want, and I live along with my husband. Whereas here I have to share a house with other people, and it's a very humbling experience when you do it in your thirties. I think it's okay when you do it when you're a student, but once you're older, it's just getting more difficult.

Most Polish interviewees were renting accommodation, and several, like Maja, were sharing with friends. This could be more than a matter of the comparative standard of housing for rent. Galway residents were acutely aware that some migrants were being exploited in renting sub-standard accommodation. As long-term resident Kevin commented:

> Migrants rent houses that locals wouldn't take. Some of those people have no option but to take them, and they will settle for less. And what is more, is that they are given less by ways of housing, and the facilities and all that. They are in houses that were idle for years. Now I don't know how good or bad they are inside, but they don't look great on the outside.

Such exploitative conditions emerge at the intersection between migrants' aspirations for mobility, and a national housing shortage in Ireland, which has incentivised bringing poor quality properties onto the market while narrowing migrants' choices (Kenna 2016; Fetzer 2016). In this sense, the spatial inequalities that enabled some to embrace the opportunity, could equally limit the options available – and sometimes both, at once. We keep this thought in mind as we move to address the underlying issues for spatial justice more explicitly.

Mobility, services and the rural penalty

In both Ireland and Wales, underinvestment in rural public infrastructures and services since the 1980s reflect the globalizing pressures impacting national economies and the related adoption of growth and market-led governance priorities. An emphasis on deregulation and competitiveness – including achieving public service cost efficiencies – has led to the concentrating of economic activity in dominant urban centres, with government decisions on infrastructure and investment informed by the same logic (Woods 2019). The inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in government responses to the evolving political economy of rural and peripheral regions has been widely critiqued (e.g. Woods 2007, 2019; Halseth, Markey, and Ryser 2019; Cheshire, Higgins, and Lawrence 2007); for example, bottom-up initiatives are encouraged to fill local infrastructure and service gaps, while centrally decided policy and financial strategies continue to bring these about.

In Ireland, the 2008 global financial crisis revealed an economic model based on short-term growth alongside severe underinvestment in infrastructure and public services (O'Callaghan et al. 2015). Public service provision was achieved through Public–Private Partnerships, deregulation of state-controlled sectors, and outsourcing local authority functions like waste collection (O'Callaghan et al. 2015), with wider implications for rural populations. In areas like County Galway, services such as information and communication technology (including broadband), transport, housing, primary health care and childcare are increasingly delivered by private providers operating in a competitive market. In a competitive marketplace, low population density and low market density combine to produce a 'rural penalty' (Malecki 2003), with knock-on effects for rural residents. For example, inadequate public transport services reduce independence and access to other services, while increasing isolation (O'Shaughnessy, Casey, and Enright 2011). Extensive rural bank, post office and police station closures have also been justified on grounds of economic rationalization and greater urban need.

Both Irish and Polish interviewees described a lack of adequate services, especially highlighting issues with health services and rural transport. Polish interviewees were quick to adversely compare services in Galway to those in Poland, particularly as they return to visit Poland regularly. Transport often fell significantly below expected standards:

> In terms of public transport, it's not great, I would say, in Ireland. It's completely different to Poland. There you have buses pretty much 24/7. If you have to get to the coach station from my house, that would be no problem in Poland, but here [in Galway] if it's any time after 11 o'clock at night, you need to order a taxi or know somebody who can actually take you there. (Joanna)

Thomas (Polish, Galway County) similarly observed, 'I live in the centre of a small rural village, but unless I have a car, I cannot go anywhere. There are no buses, and definitely no trains.' Although some interviewees were complementary of Irish health services, most felt that local services were particularly poor, as Kim explained:

> I'm thinking about University Hospital in Galway. I think they are short of staff. It's hard to see a specialist, you know. In Poland, it's very easy because a lot of them have private places … where you can make an appointment to just see the doctor … Here, it's [that] they need to put you on the waiting list, and you're waiting ages before you see consultants.

Julia shared this opinion, describing how, in Poland:

> You take a car, and you drive, like ten minutes. You have plenty of places. You just open the door and ask for an appointment and they take you. They take you, they help you, you pay, you're fine. Here [in Galway], even if you want to go to a specialist you need to go to the GP and you need to wait. Of course, there are private clinics but … it is harder here than in Poland, I find anyway … generally I find our system in Poland a little bit better than here.

As we outlined above, decisions to relocate to rural areas are often associated with the search for a better quality of life. But the quality of life – along with rural sustainability and development more

broadly – remains predicated on the availability of basic infrastructure and public service provision. This means that the level and quality of services, along with predominant perceptions about the 'right to' a minimum standard of provision, can be a key deciding factor for both residents and newcomers to stay or to leave.

Of course, there are considerable disparities within rural and peripheral regions, as well as between these areas and dominant urban centres. Some of these disparities are borne of differing mobility experiences. Others are regulated at the confluence of material and social conditions, ranging from housing and income to infrastructure and social cohesion (Hanlon and Kearns 2016). Just as we must complicate the picture of counter-urban lifestyle mobility as a coherent and causative flow, we need equally approach spatial inequalities as produced and reproduced in ways that are always complex and inherently inter-related (Willett 2021). This returns us to spatial justice – and more presciently to COVID-19.

Discussion and conclusions

We undertook interviews for our case studies prior to the COVID-19 crisis in Europe but have continued to engage with both regions (including as locales where we ourselves live and work). For us, the pandemic reinforces the ways that multiple crises intersect in regions like West Wales and the Valleys and western Ireland. Some challenges, like COVID-19 and (in Wales) Brexit, continue to emerge, while others, like housing, service decline and minority language vulnerability, are longer-standing. Peripherality can prove a turbulent contrast to more idyllic imaginaries of counter-urban mobility – even as peripheralizing processes open relational gaps between regions, in which lifestyle aspirations might be found.

In the preceding sections, we traced two inter-related aspects of spatial inequalities. First, we observed the role of spatial inequalities in *producing* effects of relative affordability, namely through differential incomes and housing markets. While what could be earned through mobility mattered significantly for some interviewees but much less for others, what could be afforded almost always contributed to the lifestyles they pursued, found, or foreclosed. Second, we outlined the role of service provision in *perpetuating* spatial inequalities. Levels of service provision to rural and peripheral areas emerge against a complex backdrop of multi-level governance, macro-economic conditions, existing infrastructures and legacy models and place-specific capacities and constraints. Amidst this, Bresnihan and Hesse (2020) argue that an enduring spatial imaginary that elevates urban progress over rural 'backwardness' cannot but impact the level and quality of rural service provision. The same binary ideals of slowness and simplicity often celebrated in accounts of counter-urban lifestyle mobility can result in the unequal treatment of rural needs, ironically diminishing residents' quality of life.

By illustrating the varied ways in which these processes play out in rural and peripheral regions, we have also shown the different quality of life experiences taking shape in the complex interplay between relative privilege and spatial inequalities. Spatial justice here cannot be read in terms of one-dimensional conflicts between homogenous locals and equally homogenous (but contrastingly drawn) incomers, nor simplistically pegged to house prices. Indeed, our cases suggest that destabilizing the ways in which mobility flows are categorized or their effects are coloured has implications for conceptualizing the 'right to' good lives in rural space. This leads us to question both the premise of and outlook for the increased reduction of lifestyle to a mobility draw for rural regions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The much-publicized rise of remote working has been eagerly grasped among rural development practitioners and policymakers. This reflects accelerating awareness that delivering digital technology, encouraging entrepreneurship and improving human capital are key challenges for shaping and sustaining rural economies. Unfortunately, the anticipated urban exodus overlooks evidence that entrepreneurs are attracted to rural areas for a combination of reasons (Akgün et al. 2011) – lifestyle and digital connectivity may be the insufficient impetus, especially for 'less-popular'

regions. More so, as telecommunications markets resist deregulation, the digital rollout to rural areas and particularly more remote locales, is far from assured.

In 'less-popular' regions, idyllic imaginaries of green space are inevitably counterbalanced by the realities of decline. Potential rural service solutions have often been cancelled out by central government failures to follow through on innovating fiscal and governance structures in ways that would devolve more meaningful forms of local and regional autonomy and balance out the adverse effects of state roll-back (Woods 2007, 2020). The experience of earlier crises, including the 2008 global financial crisis, further warns that public services are among the first casualties in government efforts to get national economies back on track, and that cuts to rural provision generally come before those to urban services. Reports have already begun to emerge of rural service withdrawal being attributed to COVID-19 necessity (Irish Times 2021; Irish Independent 2021a).

The perceived promise of counter-urban mobility undoubtedly manifests a deeper desire for the spatial redistribution of talent, capital and resources. Yet mobility to more peripheral regions can do little, alone, to change the broader structural forces that limit local prospects. The lessons from our stories of mobility on the eve of the pandemic serve a reminder that lifestyle and in/justice are always relational, always interlinked, but rarely met with neat resolution.

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