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## **Book Review**

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**Nordic Seniors on the Move. Mobility and Migration in Later Life'**

**by: Anne Leonora Blaakilde and Gabriella Nilsson (Eds.)**

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When the sun is fading from the domestic skies  
well, then I'm off, on my way  
southwards, to Spain, in my luxury exile  
to act like a happy fool  
at Costa del Sol where the sun is dancing  
an exhilarating flamenco  
in my swimming pool  
and 'keep cool'  
has always been my motto  
my name is Gunther, but down here people call me Otto

As soon as I saw everything falling apart  
I was gone, whoosh-over the hills and far away  
Diligently chilling out in my Dane-colony  
with my Danish pension as a backup  
at Costa del Sol where the sun is dancing  
an exhilarating flamenco  
in my swimming pool  
and 'keep cool'  
has always been my motto  
my name is Gunther, but down here people call me Otto  
[...]

C.V. Jørgensen, Costa del Sol, 1980 (translated by MS)

Already in 1980, the Danish singer-songwriter C.V. Jørgensen wrote with blatant sarcasm about the invasion of Spanish Costa del Sol by Danish retirement migrants. These seniors were notorious for pursuing an easy later life enjoying cheap long drinks in the everlasting sun while ignoring the local culture. The retirement migrants were allowed to bring their public pensions and, perhaps most importantly from the perspective of their Danish fellow citizens at home, the 'Costa del Sol seniors' avoided Danish tax; hence the reference to the double moral of the senior migrants in Jørgensen's lyrics.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, retirement migration has increased. There seems however to be a great deal of difference between the shabby Costa del Sol escapists and the present-day celebration and even admiration of senior mobility, which is often coupled with ideals of freedom, independence and healthy aging. This raises the questions of how and why the practices and the discursive images of senior mobility have changed so dramatically in character over the past few decades.

The volume *Nordic Seniors on the Move* (2013), edited by Anne Leonora Blaakilde and Gabriella Nilsson, provides some answers. Whereas the climate and the weather are still important factors for mobile senior migrants, contemporary seniors, the so-called 'baby boomers generation', in general have more robust finances than previous generations. Also, they have traveled extensively as tourists, which aids mobility in later life. Infrastructural changes, which facilitate the transformation of rural localities into resorts where seniors can enjoy a later life 'close to nature', are also relevant to national retirement migration in Nordic countries.

The collection comprises a rich variety of ethnographic and qualitative studies of Nordic senior migrants, framed not by chronological age but by their life stories related to migration. Stressing the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways of entering old age, the edited volume highlights the strength of ethnographic and qualitative approaches to the heterogeneous phenomenon of retirement migration. Among contributors are ethnologists, social gerontologists, theologians, and an architect, composing a spectrum of interdisciplinary approaches to retirement migration.

### *Meatball dependence and transnational skills*

It is commonly asserted that national identities tend to strengthen when performed abroad.

The contribution by Karisto on eating habits of Finnish retirement migrants in Spain shows however that 'Finnishness' is not only maintained but also changed and reconstructed through eating habits, choice of food and the performance of culinary antinomies among the retirement migrants. Based on interviews, questionnaires and diaries collected among the migrants (aged 55-70+), Karisto identifies the phenomenon of 'mixed eating habits', fusing the Spanish and Finnish cuisines. The so-called 'Meatball dependence' suggesting that retirement migrants only seek to eat familiar, traditional foods is thus rather a figure of speech used among the respondents with irony in order to distance themselves from the Finns who are completely ignorant of Spanish food.

Woube explores retirement migrants at Costa del Sol with a focus on voluntary transnational exchanges in which Swedish senior migrants assist fellow expats in various translating and mediating tasks, such as communicating with authorities. Woube presents different types of voluntary work among a selection of four seniors, who have been long-term migrants in Spain during their professional lives. Although this type of assistance may lead to distress and annoyance, as many long-term retirement migrants are

not able to speak any Spanish, Woube shows that the voluntary mediating work is beneficial not only to the fellow retirees but also to the volunteers themselves. The voluntary work underlines the trans-locational skills and independency of the volunteers and adds important cultural and social capital to their status. Using these skills and capitals enables a smooth transition from professional life to retirement.

### *Faith and religion*

The role of religion and the church is discussed by Spännäri as well as Grassman and Larsson, who illustrate, how religious faith and traditions seem to become more important for Nordic seniors abroad. Spännäri contributes another case study of Finnish retirement migrants from Costa del Sol. The focus is on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Pentecostal/Evangelical Tourist Church. According to the author, the use of religious services are not to be interpreted as strictly religious but rather a mixture of religion, culture, ethnic and national dimensions. Based on interviews, observations and 64 free-form texts on the subject of religion written by Finnish senior migrants, the author shows how religious life provides a meaningful framework for reflection, coping, social connection and self-expression for the senior migrants.

Grassman and Larsson focus on the Church of Sweden Abroad to discuss the construction of familiar spaces among Swedish residents living abroad. Using examples from Swedish parishes in urban metropolises such as New York City and Paris as well as a variety of resort destinations in Europe and Asia, the authors show how religion plays an increasingly important role for Nordic seniors living abroad, due in large part to the religious community and network connected to the Church.

### *Transnational health promotion*

Blaakilde's investigation of the clash between Danish welfare policies, international retirement migration and transnational health promotion aims to combine an analysis 'from above' of the welfare policies (related to pension, public health and taxes) with a 'from below' examination of how these policies affect the everyday lives of retirement migrants. Though her material comes predominantly from a study of Danish migrants living in Alanya, Turkey, she provides context with ethnographic fieldwork from Costa del Sol. The broad definition of retirement migration includes all people living on a public pension, which incorporates health migrants of 40+ years of age. Blaakilde presents a critique of the disparate ways in which the Danish welfare state treats its migrating populations; for the privileged there seems to be much less regulation and even higher rates of pension than for the less affluent.

### *International and intra-national migration*

A strength of this edited volume is the discussion of intra-national migration. While Abrahamsson describes the rationales behind moving into senior housing in Sweden, Nilsson offers new perspective on international retirement migration with an ethnographic study of intra-national migration patterns of Swedish seniors moving from Stockholm to 'Swedens Florida', Österlen, in southeast Scania. Nilsson shows how the 'baby boomers' focus on the values of mobility, physical strength and freedom as

opposed to previous conceptions of the elderly as fragile, stagnated and sedentary. Interestingly, Nilsson illustrates that the ideals connected to retirement migration in later life are not necessarily seen as the opposite of settling down. The participant group is composed of well-off former managing directors and their wives. Nilsson discusses the themes of strategic function of specific places, the cultural meaning of home, and freedom as intimately related to security, and she shows that migration is not necessarily indicative of an urge for changeable lifestyles. It also encompasses a quest to establish a permanent base in a quiet (rural) and safe place.

By comparing residential areas in Spain (Costa del Sol) with two 'Third Age' Villages in Florida and Arizona, USA, Simpson depicts similarities and differences between European and American forms of retirement migration and gives important perspective to the Nordic case. The experimental residential areas are an attempt to counterbalance the "... lack of privacy of the extended family, (...) the impersonal and institutionalized stigma of the nursing home and (...) the burdensome maintenance and social isolation of the 'empty nest'" (p.205). Furthermore, Simpson shows how these areas support specific forms of retirement mobility: whereas the Spanish *urbanizaciones* form a hybrid between a leisure resort (with golf, swimming pools and bars) and a gated community, the Florida Villages provide a theme park setting called hometowns to evoke 'good old' childhood memories and the small towns in which the seniors presumably grew up. In contrast, the Arizonian RV community represents a nomadic retirement lifestyle, offering housing in a recreational vehicle that enables living 'on the road'.

### *The multiplicity of Nordic seniors?*

This edited volume, rich in ethnographic examples and case studies, leaves the reader with several questions. What are the similarities and differences among Nordic seniors on the move? Why do North American seniors tend to settle in thematic enclaves in contrast to the Nordic seniors? What are the long-term effects of retirement migration? The volume's introduction by Blaakilde and Nilsson gives a brief overview of some of the central concepts surrounding retirement migration, such as health and lifestyle migration. However, it neglects to make important connections with the broader field of migration studies, such as a discussion of migration as compared to the concept of mobility (both concepts that appear in the subtitle of the volume). Further, a relevant discussion of the relationship between international and national retirement migration is missing. Although qualitative in approach and scope, it is problematic that the introduction does not reference a single statistic to illustrate the extent to which retirement is an increasing phenomenon.

There is a clear selection process behind the choice of Nordic seniors, and we are presented to cases from Sweden, Finland and Denmark; however, Norway is excluded without explanation. The seven texts in the volume are not connected, despite the fact that several of them deal with related themes and geographical settings, most notably Costa del Sol (Blaakilde, Karisto, Simpson, Spännari, Woube). This gives a scattered and disjointed feel to the volume. Further, the collection lacks an organised structure relating to themes, regional settings or national backgrounds of the migrant groups.

Despite its few notable weaknesses, this volume offers a strong selection of ethnographic studies of the Nordic later life migration. Future studies of this kind will hopefully continue to describe the complexity of retirement migratory practices related to different aging experiences. The sunburned, leather-skinned escapists of Costa del Sol

maybe an extinct race; and, owing to new aesthetic ideals and regulations surrounding healthy aging, Jørgensen's lyrics would presumably take on another tone in the contemporary context. However, it will undoubtedly be interesting to observe the development of future retirement settlements in southern Europe and the countryside of Nordic welfare states.

**Notes**

- 1 This was due to a double taxation agreement between Spain and Denmark until 2008, ensuring that senior migrants were only taxed by their host countries (see Blaakilde, this volume). Since Denmark is notorious for high taxation rates, this agreement benefited the 'Costa del Sol migrants'.