

Long read: let's ditch the stereotypes about Britons who live in the EU



*Our images of Britons living in the rest of the EU are dominated by twin stereotypes: the sun-seeking, patriotic pensioner in Spain and the upper-middle-class English couple renovating a Dordogne property. **Karen O'Reilly and Michaela Benson (Goldsmiths University of London)** make a plea for the true complexity and diversity of the British diaspora to be recognised, and explain how these stereotypes feed into a wider notion of migrancy as deviant and problematic.*

Stereotypes pervade popular and political understandings of who the British abroad are and what their lives are like. These stereotypes – most notably those of patriotic pensioners living lazy lives in the sun – fail to reflect the complexity of the lives of this richly diverse population. They are damaging because they continue to be reproduced and make it easier to dismiss the needs, worth and value of these people's lives.

One response, from some members of the populations, has been to portray themselves specifically in opposition to such stereotypes. In this way – among others – stereotypes have consequences. They also tell us a great deal about those who produce (and reproduce them) – even more than about those they pretend to describe. These stereotypes communicate ideas about what Britain is (or should be) and about who is (or can be considered) British. They are thus caught up in broader concerns about who is thought to belong and who not in (Brexit) Britain.



New Year's Eve in Paris, 2011. Photo: [Adrien Mogenet](#) via a [CC_BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

These narratives reinforce, rather than debunk, ideas about migrancy that see it as deviant. The migrants in question are portrayed as not integrating, as nostalgic, as old colonials. This serves to treat them as other, as not like 'us', and so not only to dismiss them but also to dismiss the colonial traces, the nostalgia, the little Britain mentality that is ubiquitous (but also contested) both here in Britain and amongst its diaspora.

We have recently found ourselves returning yet again (and with some frustration) to the familiar theme of the misrepresentation of British citizens who have made their homes and lives outside Britain. Because this theme has dogged our academic careers to date, one of our ambitions in the BrExpats [project](#) has been to [change the conversation](#) about Britons living abroad through the website, social media messaging, and through [blogposts for other platforms](#). It is clear that these stereotypes continue to pervade public understandings of who the British abroad are. At a time when the rights of the Britons living in the EU27 are being re-evaluated because of Brexit, these stereotypes are more of a problem than they ever were before, haunting the media coverage of their plight in relation to Brexit and UK parliamentary debates.

We have been frustrated with every news report about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU27, because even pieces by commentators most sympathetic to this group find themselves reproducing unhelpful stereotypes as the editors insist on attention-grabbing headlines, and as the images selected evoke ideas that the British in Europe are all older pensioners who remain painfully patriotic, and spend all their time in bars. In documenting how [British populations living abroad](#) are represented in the UK parliament, we have registered how these stereotypes have also permeated the discourse and narratives of political agents. Further, in careers built on researching British citizens living in France and Spain, we have regularly been called on by academic colleagues to defend our choice of research and analyses, and in conference presentations been presented with lay interpretations through questions from the floor that bear an eerie resemblance to precisely the stereotypes that circulate through the media.

But why do these stereotypes and misrepresentations frustrate us so much, and why should anyone care? A simple answer is that they do not reflect the real lives that, between us, we have spent 40 years understanding and documenting. While important, the problem goes much further than that. We argue here that, since their intention is clearly not to communicate the complexity of the lives they allege to describe, there is an urgent need to reflect on the question of what work these stereotypes do, how they are used, and by whom. As we go on to discuss, stereotyping serves to create an 'other', who can not only therefore be dismissed but from whom those doing the stereotyping can distance themselves.

So, in thinking about the stereotypes of the British abroad in the British media, and parliament, we hope here to change the conversation to think about what can be read about Britain and Britishness through these stereotypes. These misrepresentations should be a cause for concern not only because of the harm that they potentially do to Britons living abroad, but because they are caught up in critical questions of national identity and belonging that also influence public debate on migration and race relations in Brexit Britain.

We have long noted that British abroad are subject to stereotypical representations. In brief, they are portrayed as older and retired (and therefore problematic or escapist); as residential tourists or second-home owners (and therefore as frivolous, and not worthy of serious attention); as 'expatriates' (who are elitist and make no attempt to integrate), or as nostalgic counter-urbanites (who are seeking a lost world).

As [Karen observed](#), during the 1980s and 1990s "a set of collective representations emerged about the British in Spain which had been fed by the media and which had become 'common knowledge' for the majority of British people" (O'Reilly 2001, p173). In these representations, the British in Spain were either upper class, colonial style expats, or lower class, mass tourists searching for paradise, living an extended holiday in ghetto-like complexes, participating minimally in local life or culture, refusing to learn the language of their hosts, and generally recreating a little England in the sun. These representations have their origins in television soap operas such as *Eldorado*, documentaries such as *Coast of Dreams* (Channel 4), and magazine programmes such as *A Place in the Sun*. In the case of British in Spain, these stereotypes also emerged in newspaper reports, in the 1980s and 1990s, depicting them as criminals and layabouts. The Sun newspaper has variously labelled the Costa del Sol as Costa del Bonk, Costa del Crime, and Costa del Cop. The Independent and The Guardian contributed with tales of "British in the coastal areas living in ghettos, speaking very little or no Spanish, watching satellite television, shopping in Gibraltar for British goods, and drinking too much alcohol" (O'Reilly 2000, 2001).

Although they have attracted relatively little direct attention, discussions of Britons living in France can be found hidden away in the Sunday supplements, and in the travel and property sections of the broadsheets. Stereotypes here tend to focus more on the nostalgic, and other associations with rural living. The British in France have especially featured in literature, particularly within the genre of travel writing. Among these, perhaps the best known is Peter Mayle's *A Year of Provence*. Writing in the 1980s, this is widely remembered for its problematic parodies of his French neighbours and its tone of nostalgia, from which many UK citizens living in rural France are (understandably) keen to distance themselves.

As for Britons living in other EU countries, there is still very little in the way of popular, public, media or political representations. It is in Spain where misrepresentations hold sway. Even today, these homogenising stereotypical representations continue to have a hold on the popular imagination. As the coalition group *The British in Europe*, have argued, 'there is a common misconception that the majority of Brits in Europe are retired'. Chantelle Lewis has [discussed](#) how people of colour tend not to be included in the imagination of who is British abroad. And in a [further blog](#), Michaela and Chantelle discuss how politicians discussing voting rights for British living in the EU evoke a demos that includes people in the armed forces and pensioners, but not younger people, communicating an implicit focus on the relationship between national pride, British identity, and the right to vote.

The work of stereotypes in the lives of Britons living abroad

It is clear that stereotypes of the British abroad inform the way that British populations living abroad present and describe their lives – in contradiction to the ways they have been portrayed. We have already seen this above with respect to the coalition group, [The British in Europe](#), who also use case studies to illustrate the diversity of the population they represent. As Karen has conducted her ongoing research in Spain, she has been continually confronted by the frustration people feel about being represented in such stereotypical and homogenising ways. And in our current project, our participants were vociferous in response to our request for thoughts about how they are represented.

For those Britons living in the Lot, southwest France, who took part in Michaela's research for the book [The British in Rural France](#) (2011), stereotypes formed the basis of repeated claims that the lives they led in rural France in no way resembled those of their compatriots in Spain; they made similar claims about the difference of their lives to those of the renowned British communities of the Dordogne. In short, they want to distance themselves from associations with these insular and / or elitist migrant communities.

Participants highlighted how their lives were different, how they sought opportunities to become part of local communities and not just socialise with other Britons who like them had made the decision to live in rural France. This is clear case of what we mean when we say that [stereotypes tell us more about the people using them](#) than the people they allege to describe.

The power of stereotypes is further reinforced even when the ambition is to disrupt them. Simply saying 'this is what we are not' implies that somewhere there are others whose lives do closely resemble these stereotypes. It is questionable whether an objection to stereotypes that simply states 'my/their lives are different' — a strategy that we have used in this project, and that we see campaign groups engaging in their efforts to make a case for their rights — can really work to dispel their hold on the popular imagination, or whether this inadvertently contribute to the prominence of these stereotypes. Nevertheless, these reactions in turn illustrate the hold of the stereotypes in the popular imagination.

Britain and Britishness revealed

If stereotypes tell us more about those who construct and employ them than about those they pretend to describe, then what do these stereotypes of Britons living abroad tell us?

On the one hand, while representations of British abroad have the potential to counter the ubiquitously negative image of migration, instead – as stereotypes – they serve to ‘other’ and to distance ‘us’ from ‘them’. To explain, migration is almost universally viewed as being a threat to the supposed norm of stasis and national coherence, and mass media and other collective representations are coloured by this purported abnormality of migration as deviant and a challenge to stability. The [‘breaking point’ poster](#) that has become emblematic of the EU referendum illustrates this point most clearly.

Within this context, images of Britons living elsewhere might have been mobilised as a way of highlighting that British people are migrants too. Indeed Britain has a long history of emigration, and even now the [emigration rate](#) of British citizens (at 6.5%) is exceeded globally only by Ireland, Mexico and Poland. But rather than portraying British lifestyles abroad in a positive way and illustrating their ordinariness, which would help to debunk otherwise negative images of migrants, they instead reinforce the notion that migration is aberrant. What does it do to say that British populations abroad fail to integrate – whether this is the working-class pensioners in their ‘English ghettos’ or the expatriate elite with their British clubs – in a context hostile to migrant communities in Britain, who are accused of failing to conform to British values and norms? Our argument is simple: these narratives reinforce ideas about migrancy that see it as deviant.

But the reproduction of stereotypes of British abroad has even greater implications. By locating colonialism in the actions and practices of the expatriated – in its archaic sense, those exiled and living outside of their own country – journalists, citizens, politicians, and other commentators locate colonialism outside the UK rather than within. The wide circulation in the popular imaginary of these Britons living abroad as traitors who care little for Britain – as ex-Britons – who for example do not pay taxes in Britain, helps to feed this narrative. It serves to construct an image of the nation as bounded to the geographical land mass of the current United Kingdom. In stating this, we want to be clear that for us the nation is an [imagined community](#), socially constructed and perpetuated through the (media) circulation of particular myths shared by the citizenry. Locating colonialism elsewhere, including in the present-day actions of ‘expatriates’, has the effect of bounding Britishness to this land mass and thus to a sovereign nation and actually denies the more ubiquitous legacies of colonialism in present-day Britain.

To return to our questions that inspired this post: why do these stereotypes frustrate us so much and why should anyone care about these misrepresentations? Our answer is simple: while we are concerned about the lives these stereotypes obscure, we are further concerned about how these operate alongside other stereotypes or misrepresentations of migrancy itself as aberrant and even threatening to stability, and how such stereotypes take their part in the construction of an evermore exclusive sense of Britishness. As we have seen, stereotypes can harm those they allege to describe – note the spike in racist harassment directed towards women wearing hijabs and burqas following Boris Johnson’s column on this topic.

There is, then, a lot more at stake in these stereotypes than the misrecognition of real lives. Stereotypes are powerful precisely because they are caught up in complex systems of meaning; in this case they reinforce particular articulations of nationalism. Our call here is to recognise that these are stereotypes, to question who is using them and with what intention, and to emphasise how they are caught up in myths about who makes the nation and the values that it purportedly stands for.

References

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This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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