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Ulceluse, Magdalena; Bock, Bettina; Haartsen, Tialda

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Immigration, spatial inequality and place attractiveness

1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding why individuals migrate and settle in particular places is one of the most important questions within the broader field of migration studies. This question has gained renewed policy relevance as countries increasingly compete for the 'best and the brightest' (Cerna & Czaika, 2016) and for the low-skilled immigrants who, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, fill essential jobs in an economy (Dutch News, 2020). Moreover, finding out what makes a place attractive is crucial for those places that are in need of new inhabitants, for example, because they experience population decline or labour shortages.

In this Special Issue, we intend to provide new insights and consolidate our knowledge of *what* makes places attractive for *whom*. Our work builds on and complements a rich body of literature investigating place attractiveness, but also attempts to put forward a novel argument. Specifically, the papers in this Special Issue bring to the fore the important role that spatial inequality plays in making places attractive for *specific* groups of immigrants. By spatial inequality, we understand the uneven distribution of resources, capacities, and capabilities between places (see Ulceluse et al., 2020). We take a broad understanding of the concept to include material and economic aspects such as employment opportunities, wage levels, the availability of services such as education, health and safety, housing, but also noneconomic aspects such as proximity to nature, culture or social cohesion. In our conceptualization, spatial inequality reflects the differences in the attractiveness of places, and in the opportunities, they provide for (established and new) residents to experience a high quality of life. Using the lens of spatial inequality, thus understood, allows us to appreciate that the relative comparative advantage of a place, in an economic or noneconomic way, opens up the possibility for it to appeal to specific groups, at different stages of their life. In other words, instead of categorising places as being attractive or not, it becomes possible to understand *what* strengthens or weakens the attractiveness of a place and for *whom*. This way, any type of region, whether rich or poor in an economic or noneconomic sense, can be(come) attractive for certain categories of immigrants.

This Special Issue results from the Horizon 2020¹ research project Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and

Territorial Inequalities in Europe (IMAJINE) and includes contributions from the project team members across various work packages. The core objective of IMAJINE is to formulate new integrative policy mechanisms to enable European, national and regional government agencies to more effectively address territorial inequalities within the European Union. The projects ask us to imagine a future for European regions in which the distribution of resources is consistent with principles of social and spatial justice. An important dimension of attaining this objective relies on our understanding of territorial inequalities and spatial (in)justice through the lens of migration, that is, on our conceptualization of migration as a barometer of the (un)attractiveness of places, regions and countries. The papers in this Special Issue reflect this conceptualization.

We structure this Editorial Introduction as follows. In the next section, we provide an overview of the existing studies and their findings concerning place attractiveness, and in doing so we document the evolution of our understanding of factors influencing the appeal of a place. Section 3 presents an overview of the papers included in this issue and their main insights, while Section 4 discusses these insights and their implications in the broader context of the existing knowledge of the relationship between migration, inequality and place attractiveness.

2 | WHAT MAKES A PLACE ATTRACTIVE FOR IMMIGRANTS?

Understanding what makes a place attractive for immigrants has been a core question in migration research. Early studies have perceived migration to be a logical consequence of wage differences between sending and receiving places, determined by geographical differences in labour supply and demand (Massey et al., 1993). Individuals were considered rational, income-maximizing agents who, based on a cost-benefit analysis, decided to migrate to a place where the cost of migrating should be overcome by the expected wage benefits (De Haas, 2011; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Hicks, 1963). Other studies have also pointed to the possibility of career advancement, the existence of low unemployment rates and the size and composition of the economy as factors playing a role in the decision of where to migrate and settle (Biagi et al., 2011; Ottaviano & Puga, 1998; Pissarides & McMaster, 1990). According to this strand of research, migrants are most attracted to places that are economically dynamic, present high wages, good career opportunities and low unemployment rates (Rodríguez-Pose & von Berlepsch, 2020).

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Another strand of the academic literature has emphasised the role that factors external to individuals, such as labour market dynamics, forces of globalisation, historical ties between origin and destination countries, networks or household risk mitigation strategies play in influencing the decision to migrate and where (Bodvarsson et al., 2015; Massey et al., 1993; Pedersen et al., 2008; Piore, 1979; Stark & Bloom, 1985; Wallerstein, 2011). However, while these exogenous factors may play a role in shaping migration decisions, their largely deterministic nature obscures the intrinsic agency that immigrants have in selecting a migration location, and their heterogeneous reasons for doing so.

Indeed, more recent research has challenged these primarily economic or deterministic perspectives of place attractiveness. We now know that places are also judged and selected based on noneconomic factors such as social welfare spending, the availability and quality of public services such as good education or healthcare, the quality of institutions, man-made and natural amenities such as culture, history, climate and natural environment, recreational areas and the general quality of life (Brettell, 2008; de Jong et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2007; Ferwerda & Gest, 2020; Findlay, 2011; Geis et al., 2013; Mayda, 2010; Migali, 2018; Partridge, 2010; Partridge & Rickman, 2008; Pszczółkowski, 2015; Sandu, 2017; Tuccio, 2019; Vertovec, 2007). In this sense, while many places might provide individuals with economic opportunities, the final choice of location might eventually depend on the availability and abundance of these amenities and other noneconomic factors (Nelson & Nelson, 2011; Wright & Ellis, 2016). Furthermore, research has emphasised that a place's attractiveness for migrants is substantially influenced by information, desires and expectations introduced into the origin country through (social) media, return migration and other external influences (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2009). This, together with the phenomenon of lifestyle migration, defined as the migration of relatively affluent individuals of all ages to places which are meaningful because they offer the potential of a better quality of life (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), suggests that places can become attractive for certain types of immigrants for highly idiosyncratic and personal reasons.

This special issue investigates precisely this relativity of place attractiveness over time and space, across the five distinct studies discussed below.

3 | OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The first paper in the Special Issue, by Plotnikova and Ulceluse (2021), sets the stage for our topic by investigating the relationship between country attractiveness and inequality across 41 countries in Europe. Their results indicate the existence of two migration regimes within Europe, a West–West regime motivated mainly by lifestyle and nonmaterial related factors, and an East–West regime primarily motivated by material and economic factors such as wage differentials and employment opportunities. These findings signal that

places, or in this case countries, can attract different groups of migrants, for different reasons. Spatial inequalities in the form of quality-of-life differences between origin and destination countries may influence destination choices for lifestyle immigrants, while spatial inequalities in the form of economic differences may influence the destination choices of economic migrants.

This point is further emphasised by Viñuela (2021) in her analysis of place attractiveness in Italy, France and Spain. Zooming in on the local level, she finds strong immigrant agglomerations in both blooming and withering localities, albeit with important country variations. In Spain, immigrant concentrations can be found in the usual suspects of economically thriving cities, but also in the less affluent towns located along coastal areas. The latter might be indicative of migrant employment in the tourism sector but might likewise reflect the attractiveness of the coast for individuals migrating for lifestyle (e.g., retirement, sun-seeking) reasons. In France, migrants seem to concentrate in economically declining localities, characterized by older-age populations and high unemployment rates, although the available data does not allow for further investigations that might explain their attractiveness. Finally, in Italy, immigrants seem to concentrate in the rich regions of the North, however, when zooming in at the local level within these regions, Viñuela (2021) finds large immigrant agglomerations in small, peripheric localities with a strong presence of agriculture, ageing population and high unemployment. She concludes that migrants are attracted to the rich regions of Northern Italy for higher wages and good employment opportunities, but might only be able to find or afford housing in smaller towns within these regions. Economically declining localities, thus, become attractive for migrants for their comparative advantage in affordable housing.

Housing affordability is an important reason why the respondents in Goodwin-Hawkins and Jones's (2021) study have migrated to Wales, a peripheral area generally considered unattractive in socioeconomic terms. Although migrating to the region might seem counterintuitive if one considers economic indicators such as employment rate, wages or GDP per capita, for a particular category of migrants, it provides ample opportunities for a middle-class lifestyle. The specificity of the category of migrants aspect needs to be doubly emphasised. As the authors note, the spatial inequality between Wales and other places within or outside the UK, and thus the relative unattractiveness of the region in economic terms, is what makes it possible for this category of immigrants to live a comfortable life here, generally above the means of the local population. Goodwin-Hawkins and Jones (2021) also remark how a place's attractiveness can evolve over time, and over the life course of individuals. For instance, some individuals had migrated to Wales because of housing affordability but had decided to stay longer term because of its culture or natural landscape. Other individuals had migrated for the nature and tranquil lifestyle it provides but now consider moving to more affluent areas, which they perceive to offer their children better opportunities for the future.

The importance of using a life course lens when analysing the dynamic between a place's attractiveness and migration decisions is

reiterated in Papadopoulos and Fratsea (2022) article focusing on Romanian immigrants in Greece. For many Romanian respondents, the place was initially attractive for its potential to provide higher wages, better employment opportunities and living conditions, to offer better life chances for social mobility for themselves and their children or, more generally, to search for better livelihoods than in Romania. In time, however, the economic or material attractiveness of the place had diminished, in this case under the influence of the economic crisis which negatively affected wages and employment opportunities. And yet, individuals had nevertheless remained in these places, because their motivations for migrating and settling have evolved over their life course. In time, the place had instead become valued for nonmaterial reasons such as natural amenities (the sea, the mountains), the tranquil rhythm of life or the social ties formed at the destination.

The spatial-temporal evolution of place attractiveness is a theme further developed in Ulceluse et al. (2021), who note a similar, but reverse, transition in three villages in the Netherlands. The villages are located in poorer municipalities,² which rely extensively on agriculture, horticulture and dairy farming as the backbone of their economies. While they offer few employment opportunities for the local residents who are reluctant to take up jobs in these migrant-dominated sectors, the villages had become attractive destinations for a specific type of migrant, that is, Eastern European seasonal workers. The Polish and Romanian seasonal workers in Ulceluse et al. (2021) cases had been lured to these places by the availability of jobs and the relatively higher salaries, compared to levels in origin countries. However, the implementation of the local migrant housing policies, which has been conducive to spatial and social segregation, to loss of privacy and to the reinforcement of social hierarchies and inequalities vis-à-vis the local population, had increasingly made the villages less appealing destinations for migrants, many of whom considered moving further to countries such as Denmark.

4 | PLACE ATTRACTIVENESS AND THE ROLE OF SPATIAL INEQUALITY

The articles in this Special Issue attempt to consolidate our understanding of what makes a place attractive for immigrants. They show that spatial inequalities play a vital role in making places attractive for particular groups of migrants. There are several specific insights that our studies provide, which help to significantly advance our knowledge of the topic.

Firstly, our research shows that places that are attractive to migrants do not necessarily need to be rich, economically booming areas that provide ample employment opportunities and high wages. Using the lens of spatial inequalities, this special issue shows that peripheral places, which are considered unattractive from a

socioeconomic point of view, can still constitute desirable destinations for certain groups of immigrants. For instance, their relative underdevelopment makes housing, and life more generally, affordable in small towns in Northern Italy (Viñuela, 2021) and Wales (Goodwin-Hawkins & Jones, 2021). Wales also becomes a desirable destination for those individuals who value natural amenities like nature, the sea and desire a slower rhythm of life and less congestion, confirming existing scholarship arguing that place attractiveness goes beyond classical economic factors such as employment and wages. In this sense, spatial inequality, broadly understood, contributes to differentiating places across distinct dimensions.

Economically underdeveloped or peripheral areas, however, seem to be attractive for certain categories of immigrants only, who can afford to forego economic benefits for a different quality of life. Housing in Wales, for instance, is affordable for professional, middle-class migrants but not for those low-skilled and with fewer means. Spatial inequality enables these migrants to lead middle-class life, making the place more affordable for them. Similarly, living on the beautiful but not bountiful coastal areas in Spain (Viñuela, 2021) can be afforded by retirees or lifestyle migrants, but not by economic migrants who need employment opportunities.

Secondly, the attractiveness of a place may vary objectively over time and subjectively over the life course. Objectively, places may change for a number of reasons, including investments in infrastructure (e.g., to increase accessibility, availability and quality of services such as healthcare, education), or as a result of the effect of climate change, economic crises, policy interventions, decreases in the availability and quality of employment, and so forth. For instance, in Greece (Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2022), the economic crisis which has severely affected the country has made specific places significantly less attractive from an economic point of view, as they experienced high unemployment and lower wages. Similarly, the local housing policies in the three villages in the Netherlands (Ulceluse et al., 2021) and their consequences have made them less attractive places to live for the Romanian and Polish seasonal workers in the case study. Here, it is important to consider that a place's attractiveness may also change relative to other places. It is, hence, also change elsewhere which can make a difference or the differential impact of major events. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered rural places quite suddenly more attractive compared to big cities, because of the perceived lower risk of contagion. Similarly, the way in which specific places (and countries) have managed and controlled the pandemic and its effects might make them less or more attractive for that category of migrants which value a sound approach to public health.

At the same time, subjectively, the perceived attractiveness of a place can change over the life course of individuals. For instance, long-term migrants who have initially come for employment opportunities in Greece (Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2022), opportunities which have been severely affected by the crisis, were one or two decades later staying because of place attachment, social ties and an appreciation for the Greek nature. They had come for economic reasons but were staying for noneconomic ones. Conversely, the

²Noordoostpolder ranks 129th and Steenbergen ranks 335 out of a total of 347 municipalities, according to the *Ranglijst economische prestaties totale bedrijvigheid 2021* by Bureau Louter (https://www.bureaulouter.nl/toploc2021_totaal.php).

Romanian and Polish seasonal workers who had been attracted by the job opportunities and salaries in the three villages in the Netherlands became in time disenchanted with the place because of the way their presence was perceived and managed by the municipality. In this case, they had come for economic reasons but were (thinking about) leaving for noneconomic ones. Similarly, in Wales, individuals who as young people had chosen the nature and affordability of Wales, were as older parents considering further migrating, to provide more and better economic opportunities for their offsprings. More generally, younger individuals might be more attracted to bigger cities, for higher education, a career, for meeting new people and enjoying the plenty of opportunities for culture and recreation, while families and retirees might prefer the safety, space and slow pace of rural areas or smaller places.

Lastly, although less discussed in the literature, this special issue highlights the important role of local government policymaking in affecting the attractiveness of a place. The local migrant housing policies in the three villages in the Netherlands (Ulceluse et al., 2021), which negatively affected migrant's housing conditions and their social interactions with the local residents, worsened their quality of life and made the villages significantly less attractive places to work and stay. More generally, local policymakers can make a difference directly to a place's attractiveness, by for instance investing in improving access to and quality of services, employment opportunities or amenities, and indirectly, by, for instance, implementing policies that make migrants feel (un)welcome.

Identifying the objective and subjective factors that make a place attractive is essential if we are to understand why migrants concentrate in certain places, and if we want to predict or influence where they might settle in the future. This, in turn, may support the potential of using migration as an instrument to reduce spatial inequalities.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Magdalena Ulceluse

Bettina Bock

Tialda Haartsen 

Faculty of Spatial Sciences, Department of Cultural Geography,
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Magdalena Ulceluse, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, Department of
Cultural Geography, University of Groningen, Landlevan 1, 9747
AD, Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: m.m.ulceluse@rug.nl

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ORCID

Tialda Haartsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3858-3419>

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