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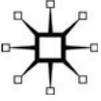
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▶ **Work, Family and
Commuting in
Europe: The Lives of
Euro-commuters**

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To Josie and Patsy

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Prologue

It was a rainy day in early-July 2012. I was staying at my parents' house in the Irish countryside. After lunch, my mother suggested we go visit her sister, who lives a couple of miles away in a neighbouring village. I had not visited my aunt in over a year.

Over tea, my mother and I listened as my aunt outlined a recent major development in her life. Her husband, we knew already, had lost his job as an engineer almost two years ago. He still got occasional contracts on a freelance capacity, but his earnings were massively down. My aunt continued to work part-time as a classroom teacher's assistant, while caring for her two sons, aged nine and 11, the rest of the time. The two boys were still in primary school. Financially, my aunt and her husband were struggling; the mortgage on the house they purchased in 2004 – a newly built bungalow on a low-density street with a half-acre lawn out front – had been renegotiated to interest-only payments for the time-being.

Her husband, my aunt explained, was seriously considering two job offers. The first one was in London, where they had previously lived for several years; he still had a lot of contacts there, and had been offered a full-time, well-paid position as an engineer in the city. The second job was in Germany, where the Irish company he previously worked for was currently involved in upgrading the country's road infrastructure. He would have to make up his mind – London or Germany – by the end of the month.

“So he's going to emigrate?” I asked.

“No, not quite”, my aunt answered. He would fly out from the local airport, Shannon, on Monday mornings, and return most weekends on Friday afternoons, to be with the family. It would be difficult, the week-day separations, my aunt added, and it would be costly, but somehow they would try to make the arrangement work. My aunt went silent for a moment. She stood up from the table and asked if we wanted more tea.

Seating herself again with the teapot in hand, my aunt continued, explaining how she and her husband had weighed up their situation over and over. They had a predicament. Emigrating as a family unit was not a possibility; uprooting the children from their school, their friends, their cousins would not be a good idea at this stage in their young lives. Equally, neither was staying in the Republic of Ireland full-time a viable prospect; the economy was simply too weak to earn a decent living here anymore. So, my aunt said, after much deliberation, neither able to stay together nor leave together as a family unit, they had decided that the best possible option would be to split the family and have her husband go over and back to either the UK or Germany for work, then return during weekends. In this way, after two years of constant money worries, they would finally earn enough to meet the family’s living expenses again – mortgage, car-, health- and house-insurance, holidays, clothes – while also being able to spend some time together on a regular basis.

I said, “So he will commute then?”

“Yes”, my aunt said, nodding her head. “He will commute. We will stay here, myself and the kids.”

My aunt’s story saddened me; I was concerned for her and her family’s happiness in the first instance. But, more generally, I was also intrigued, and wondered, are there other families in the Republic of Ireland in a predicament like my aunt’s? And if so, do they find a solution to this predicament by having one of the adult heads of household commute to near-by European destinations for work during weekdays while the rest of the family – spouses or partners, children – remain at home in the Republic of Ireland?

I knew from following the Irish media that emigration from the Republic of Ireland has been high since the recession began in 2008. New figures would emerge annually from the Central Statistics Office; and each year, emigration of the under-25s would have soared in the previous 12 months, as unemployment rates among this group were especially high.

However, listening to my aunt suggested to me two, related issues – issues that reflected my academic training in the field of both migration studies and family studies. First, different patterns of migration might be emerging in the post-crisis period, patterns that might be relatively novel and distinct from dominant representations of emigration as a one-way journey, undertaken mostly by single, young people. Second, the traditional “nuclear” family as the fundamental structuring unit of society was being challenged in recent decades, as people, for various reasons, increasingly choose to live in non-nuclear, more fragmentary family arrangements. Commuting between the Republic of Ireland and another European state on a routine basis (as my aunt’s husband was planning to do) represented one such novel migration pattern. Meanwhile, spread and stretched between the Republic of Ireland and another EU state, commuter households represented one such alternative to the traditional nuclear family, all living together under the one roof.

The conversation in my aunt’s kitchen in July 2012 sparked in me a curiosity about unorthodox forms of family migration within the European Union following the 2008 economic downturn. Specifically, this curiosity led me to examine the lives of people who commute cross-border between European states in the post-crisis period. As soon as I had left my aunt’s house, I wanted to find out: Who are these people commuting across the EU? Why do they undertake this peculiar mobility and not other, more conventional forms of migration (such as emigration)? Are their motives primarily economic, or are there other, non-monitory motives propelling this unorthodox to-and-fro movement? And, as it involves splitting the household between two locations, how does this unusual mobility impact on day-to-day family life?

In what follows, I outline the findings of these and other questions from my two-year study of what I term “Euro-commuters” – that is, people like my aunt’s husband who live in one European country but work in another, travelling over and back between the two on a routine basis.

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