



Episode 3

The countryside
is for the birds



MONSTER
under
the BED



Podcast: Monster Under the Bed

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Transcript: Episode 3

Intro

Allar: Don't be scared. This is the podcast that always leaves the light on.

(Music)

Allar (over the music): This is Monster Under the Bed. The podcast that takes some of the fears and myths in our society and busts them wide open. I'm Allar Tankler.

End of intro

Allar: We've been talking a lot about monsters and all kinds of nightmarish things on this podcast, so today we'll talk about dreams. Specifically, the dream about country living – you know, in the middle of the forest, away from the noise and the bustle...

Christine: ... but obviously with electricity, good internet connection, a regular trash pick-up service and a paved road to get to it, right?

Allar: Well, obviously. That is Christine, by the way, who works here at the European Investment Bank.

Christine: Hi everyone. The flipside of the dream is the monster under the bed in this episode: the nightmare of urban life. Smog, roads jammed with traffic, high prices and noise.

Allar: So our hypothesis is that this dream of the country, and the nightmare of the city are as irrational as the monster under the bed. So, Christine, let's explore the rationality of this dream of life in a rural area.

(Music)

Allar: My name is Allar Tankler and I work at the European Investment Bank, the EU bank. We have all kinds of experts who can help me explore different fears and beliefs which are costing us as a society. In each episode of the podcast, we fight one imaginary monster under the bed and hopefully win the battle for a more rational way of doing things.

Christine: So that you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Monster Under the Bed on Apple podcasts or Acast or wherever you get your podcasts.

Allar: And let me know if you can think of a monster we should expose on future episodes. Get in touch with me on Twitter @AllarTankler or you can just tag @eib.

(Music)

Allar: First, to gather representative, kind of scientific data about what people actually think about rural and city living, Christine you went out to ask completely random people in Luxembourg. What did you hear?

Christine: Well, Luxembourg is slightly unusual, because here you have a lot of people who live in rural areas but commute into the city for work. That's because the city is extremely expensive. So maybe our sample isn't completely representative. But even when we asked people where they prefer to live if they could live anywhere – they overwhelmingly preferred the countryside.

Man: I lived for some time in Austria, in the city of Salzburg, and it's very beautiful, but all my life is together in the countryside, so my heart beats for the countryside, yes.

Man 2: If I were to choose, then countryside would be my choice, yeah. So, if you live in a sort of countryside area kind of thing, you're your own house, not much noise around, you can pretty much scream and shout, do whatever you want. To have that sort of freedom that everyone sort of wants, but sometimes you can't have it when you live in a city, or something like that.

Allar: Scream and shout, wow! I wonder what would happen if all the world's population would be spread out equally across the countryside, screaming and shouting as they please.

Christine: Most people I spoke to said the peace and quiet is the main thing they like about rural life. Like this woman who lives in Belgium.

Woman: Cause it's pretty calm, and it's surrounded by woods, and animals, and you can just relax as much as you want to.

Christine: You didn't like living in the city as much?

Woman: No.

Christine: Why is that?

Woman: Cause it's way too noisy. People aren't smiling or welcoming or anything like that...

Christine: Would you say that urbanisation, so people moving and living more in the city – would you say that's a problem?

Woman: Umm, I don't know, I think it kind of depends on what you like the most. I like quiet areas and nature, so living in a village in the middle of nowhere is probably what's best for me, but I have a few friends who probably wouldn't live in a village because they need to have everything around as quickly as possible.

Allar: Now what she said brings us to an interesting issue. She says it should be a matter of personal choice – if you like living in the countryside, live in the countryside; if you like living in the city, live in the city.

Christine: But the thing is that people need all kinds of infrastructure and public services to live where they live, be it in more rural areas, or in the city. Things like electricity, 4G mobile networks, healthcare services...and roads. Listen to this guy.

Christine: Do you enjoy living in a village?

Man 3: Yes, I love it. I love it.

Christine: Why do you love it?

Man 3: It's not far from the city, but quiet area. It's 10 minutes from the city, 10-15 minutes, but it's very quiet. I prefer like this.

Christine: So you see, he loves living in the village, because he can quickly get to the city when he needs to.

Allar: Meaning that you have to have a good road there.

Christine: And that costs money, despite the fact that the road might only be used by the small number of people living in that rural area.

Allar: So people prefer to live in the countryside... but does it make economic sense from a public spending point of view? I talked about this with **Brendan McDonagh**. He works at the European Investment Advisory Hub, a partnership between the European Investment Bank and the European Commission. He's from Ireland, where he was working for a government agency that dealt with investments in mobile networks. It was really expensive in the most rural areas.

Brendan: I think if everybody wants to live on their own, and on their individual little piece of land and isolated from the others, then the cost of services to everyone grows. And equally, the ability of them to access the services is restricted, and I think there's a direct relationship there. And especially as we're all living longer, we're going to hopefully live longer lives and need those services much longer in our lives, and if they're ready and accessible to us, I think we can have a longer and a healthier and a happier life.

Allar: Brendan grew up on a farm himself and enjoyed living in a rural area in Ireland for a long time, but he has since started to see it differently.

Brendan: I suppose when I was young and I was living in Ireland we lived in a pretty rural community and very much I felt we were in the middle of nature, whereas now I look at it a little bit different and I see the benefits of living besides nature rather than living in nature. By that I mean you don't disturb nature as much. When we came to Luxembourg we noticed that the communities lived together, and then you see large open expanse. In many other countries, particularly in Ireland as an example, you see lots of ribbon developments: individual houses, half a kilometre, another house. My mother is a classic example of that where we grew up. So right now my mother is moving to a nursing home, but when I look at it, she's more than half a kilometre from her neighbours on either side. If she was right next door to them, I think her ability to stay in that rural environment could have been longer. But because she chose to stay in the nature, rather than beside it as part of a community, I think that, in a way, has meant she has to move a little bit earlier than might have otherwise been the case. And it's made me conscious of my own thoughts about the future. And I would have always had

the impression of: I want a house in the countryside, and I want my neighbours a little bit away from me, but close by. Today I'm very much of the view I want a house with my neighbours right beside me.

Allar: So it's not only the question of how close the public services are, it's also a question of social isolation?

Brendan: Very much so. For my mother I see people had to come and physically take the effort to meet her and visit her. Whereas if you were right beside them, passing by your front door, they interact with you a lot more. You can also interact with the services a lot more, be it a hospital... I look at myself and my wife as we grow older together and say: if one of us is in a hospital, do I want to be a large number of kilometres [away] and needing taxis? Is it nice to be able to use my zimmer frame to possibly stroll the ten minutes down to the hospital? To me that's a better environment to look into the future.

Christine: Hospitals and fast internet are fairly modern things. If we all like the countryside so much, why did we come together in cities in the first place?

Allar: Historically, the origin of cities was a completely rational trend. It started because of people's very rational need to trade with each other. Like if you had lots of eggs, but you needed salt, for example. I spoke to our senior urban development specialist **Grzegorz Gajda**, and this is what he told me:

Greg: Yeah I guess that in the beginning we need to imagine ourselves a road crossing, basically a place where two people would meet and they started to be engaging in trade. You can imagine a big, open field where people would start trading cattle, or wood, or salt – all those things that were very important in the early economy. And then around a field where people would meet and do some trade, you know a restaurant would be open, storage, you know, somebody would build a hotel – and that is the origin of the cities, basically. Typically, a cross-road or maybe a place where people can safely cross a river, so any place but people need to stop for something, for some reason.

Allar: But there's a second historical reason as well. Cities allowed people to do things more efficiently, together. Things like protecting themselves.

Greg: The other thing is that in a period of wars, cities would be a place where people can defend themselves collectively. So you can imagine yourself a nice fence you know, made of wood or stone with anybody who needs to be protected would hide, and they together would fight the enemy, or some beasts coming from the forests or something.

Allar: This the safety feature of cities I think illustrates the benefit of economies of scale that living in city brings, so instead of everyone having to build their own fortress around where they live, people came together and just built one wall to keep them safe. And I think that the same principle is true in various areas of urban life: that working together is simply more efficient to do things versus if we're dispersed all over the country. Is that generally true?

Greg: This is very true, so in the initial part, definitely, this collective defence works better because everybody could just put a little bit of his work into creating this collective defence and everybody else would benefit from that. And then it basically manifested itself during the industrial revolution, where people, acting together, pulling their resources together, pulling their capital together could create the origins of the industrial revolution – which also happened in cities. And it was at the same time a blessing and the curse for the cities as we can all remember from mass culture: the emergence of slums, and the emergence of all our dystopian movies about cities is very much rooted in the industrial culture.

Christine: So maybe this is where this fear of urbanization is from? This image of dark, unhealthy slums in the industrial era.

Allar: Industrialization meant that the economies of cities grew faster, attracting more people and making the cities bigger.

Christine: And more noisy and crowded.

Allar: At the same time fewer people were needed on the farms, in the countryside, because machines were doing a lot of the work.

Greg: So in the beginning, before the industrial revolution, the cities were mostly a place of trade. So in the city would be a central square, a market

square, where people would come from the villages to trade their produce, and to purchase industrial goods – very often manufactured by artisans in the city. And for many years, actually for many centuries that's how cities would work and that was quite sustainable and it enabled cities to also be a center of movements in culture, science and so on. Industrial revolution brought much more speed to the cities' development, because industrial revolution enabled economic growth at a pace that had never been seen before, which also attracted a lot of people to migrate to cities from the countryside.

This is an interesting story because industrial revolution also meant that much less people were needed in the countryside. With one machine, the job done previously by 10 people could just be done by one person, and 9 people were completely useless. And they all would migrate to cities in search for a better life. Since this happened so quickly the cities became places full of pollution, full of social issues, people started living in the unhealthy conditions without running water. Very often the air was polluted, so people, the visionaries of that age, had a completely different vision of living together by separating the areas designed for industrial growth, areas for residential settlement, and areas for trade or for office function. And they thought that with the development of efficient transport systems, of which the best example is the freeway, or the Autobahn. They thought they could actually link all those areas together, but separate them, so that the negative consequences of industrial production such as waste water or air pollution could be made separate from, say, a nice green environment for residential life. And that is basically exemplified in a typical design of an American city in the Mid-West where you have the city centre surrounded by tens of kilometres of identical single-family houses located in the suburbs. That was the vision, the utopian vision that you could actually build a city like this. But what people soon found out was that if you build a city this way, you will always get traffic jams, and you would always get problems with transportation. Because the bigger cities you build to make room for more roads, the bigger distances you create which in turn require people to travel more. And there is no way you can build enough roads to transport all the people that need to travel in the city, this is basically a dead-end and all the world cities have soon found [this] out. And there are movements all over the world, but very visible in Asia, where cities demolish motorways and instead build parks in that area to make better living conditions for the people and to bring everybody closer.

Now in order to make it well-functioning, what has happen to a city is that it has to be compact. So people have to live together and you shouldn't leave too many open spaces between main areas of the city. It means that there should be a lot of green spaces, but they should be strategically located and planned in a way that they are accessible. If you create too much of open space it ceases to be a nice space, it could become a dangerous place actually. So you have to be careful and you have to plan the city in a compact way.

Allar: Grzegorz is also a big advocate of something called mixed planning. What cities used to do is put polluting industries over here and a nice living area far away over there, then they'd connect them with long roads. Mixed planning creates areas with a mix of recreational facilities, homes and businesses.

Christine: Because otherwise some areas are empty during office hours and others are empty after office hours?

Allar: That's not an efficient use of space. It can also increase crime.

Christine: It also increases the chance that you'll be able to live closer to your job and your kids' school, meaning you'll have to do less driving.

Allar: But Grzegorz had another interesting point about why cities should try to mix things up.

Greg: When you talk about mixing functions it's also important to say that naturally people tend to move to places that somehow representative of their lifestyle. Very often if this is not controlled, it would lead to segregation – so certain groups of certain people would live in certain areas of the city, and other people will live in other areas of the city. When those groups are economically successful then nothing's wrong. But imagine a big industrial plant closes down and all employees living close together suddenly become unemployed. This would create very difficult conditions in this area, if all the employees of that plant were living together. So today cities try to mix people as much as possible and create neighbourhoods with different social classes living together. Because this would mean there would always be someone successful in a neighbourhood who can help others, who can create

opportunities for others and this is just more safe and more efficient for everybody.

Allar: There's a political angle too. Cities are the cradle of democracy.

Greg: We have to think how cities functioned as political organisms, because that is something which is very important to understand about of cities: it was actually the cradle of democracy. Of course we all know about Athens and how Athens worked, that in Athens we could have a direct democracy and all the citizens of Athens would meet in the Agora square and decide about all the issues of the city. But also in Europe where the system created in the villages, in the countryside was a feudal system, the system in the cities was actually a democratic system. And in those cities people could take decisions together and those decisions would impact everybody equally. So people started to understand that they cannot live in separation, that each person's decision would impact the neighbour, and they have to find out how to make decisions so that the impact on everybody is balanced. So from this approach cities became places of balanced development, where everybody has to benefit from the growth and everybody has to participate equally in the costs of the urban development.

So the cities are the pillar of the economic growth. The growth in the world is happening in the cities. The global economy is moving from agriculture is moving away from industrial, is moving towards the service-based economy, and this happens in the cities. So cities - do you want it or not – will be the dominant part of our economy. Soon more than half of the global population will live in the cities, so we may not like them but they will be always the most important part of our growth.

Christine: That all sounds great. But people think urbanization is a monster. Listen.

Man 4: I think it's going to be a problem – not for us but for our children and our children's children. You have to find a good way, but maybe it's too late to find a good way.

Allar: But did you figure out what specifically is bad about urbanization?

Christine: Well one lady, Marina, had a very clear answer.

Marina: Because more and more people go to the cities.

Christine: And why would you say that's a problem? Why would you think that's something...

Marina: It will be lost very soon, all the small villages, there will be no... they will not survive, if everyone goes to the city.

Allar: Ah, but it turns out that it might not be such a bad thing, if people leave the villages – not so bad for the environment, that is.

Christine: An interesting project that the European Investment Bank worked with recently is called Rewilding Europe. It is returning huge chunks of European rural areas to their original wild state.

Allar: These areas might have previously been populated by people, but now they'll be turned over to wild animals and plants.

Christine: **Stefanie Lindenberg** worked on this project at the European Investment Bank.

Stefanie: So Rewilding Europe is an initiative, an NGO, that aims to make Europe a wilder place, basically. And what does that mean – it means making the nature more wilder, give wildlife more space, and natural processes more space again in Europe.

Allar: How can nature be more wild?

Stefanie: Often now the landscapes that we live in are very much modified by human beings. And here we are talking about bringing these landscapes really back to nature, and giving them back to nature. Especially landscapes where people have moved out to cities. And making sure that the natural processes and the ecosystems in these areas can establish themselves again.

Allar: And they actually introduce new species, or they introduce species back in to these areas, is that right?

Stefanie: That's right, exactly. So they see what were the original species living there – of course, it is always the question of the baseline you take – but so

they are bringing back very iconic species like brown bears, European bisons, eagles, vultures... And you can see those in those areas. It's quite impressive. And also of course smaller, not that iconic species, which may be a bit less interesting to us but are very important to the ecosystem, nevertheless.

Allar: But how do they finance Rewilding Europe?

Christine: The project creates ways for people to interact with the wild nature. For example by going on safaris, or birdwatching, starwatching camps or photoshooting. That brings in money.

Allar: It also brings us back to the idea that Brendan started us off with: let's live by nature, not in it.

Christine: So living in the cities is great for the environment. When you think about it, it does make sense. And when I asked people on the streets—even people who wanted to live in the countryside—they told me they also knew city life was more sustainable.

Man 5: I think the city life is better for the environment. Sorry. Because you have not the distance with the car and so... to go in the shopping center. And all the different little things – because in the countryside, when you go to a colleague, to friends, you must take the car, or the bus, so I think it's not so good for the environment.

Christine: And here is Lori, who prefers living in the countryside herself.

Lori: In big cities – in Luxembourg, it's OK – but in big cities like Brussels or Paris, the pollution is everywhere, and in the countryside the air is more clean. I can say this.

Christine: She was saying how nice and quiet it is, how it's nice to be close to the forests. A real friend of nature! And when I asked her what's better for the environment, she knew the answer immediately.

Lori: Ah then it's better in the city. Because otherwise it means you have to take the car, or... of course.

Allar: It sounds like people would prefer if everyone else lived in the city, and they alone could live a little way off, with preferably nobody else commuting into town in the morning.

Christine: That sounds about right. The question arises whether governments should be subsidising this way of life so much. I mean, we have to make sure that people in rural areas have decent access to public services, for sure. But should we encourage more people to move there?

Allar: It's an interesting question. The great thing is that cities, which are already pretty nice, are getting even better. Grzegorz says that we don't even necessarily have to trade comfort for sustainability.

Greg: With all the technological advancement that we have today, with internet of things, with smart cities, with all those modern products like electric scooters, self-driving cars and things like this – I am sure that we can create a new life, a new way of life in cities which is more comfortable than the old way of life, and still be sustainable. And I think this is our greatest challenge – to redevelop cities so that they are more comfortable and more sustainable at the same time.

Christine: I like that. Let's end on this optimistic note.

Allar: Thanks, Christine. Let's do that. And I'm optimistic that people will subscribe to this podcast and get in touch with me on Twitter. I'm at @allartankler to tell me how much you enjoy your peace and quiet in the countryside, surrounded by the song of the birds, the wind in the trees and, of course, the sound of my voice on our latest podcast. This was Monster Under the Bed.



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