

Mobilities and Ruralities: An Introduction

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The rural is on the move, now as always. In rural studies, however, there has long been a bias towards imagining the rural as stable. The old *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* continuum saw the rural as the realm of long-standing ascriptive ties of family, community, place, and ethnicity, in contrast to the achieved statuses of urban life. Where there was mobility in rural life, it was to leave it behind for the competitive uncertainties of life among strangers in cities. Social mobility meant spatial mobility and little social mobility was recognised in the rural, with all its traditionalism. Adoption-diffusion theory – perhaps rural sociology's most widely diffused and adopted contribution, even if rural sociology is rarely recognised as its source – similarly rested on the image of a stable rural, resistant to innovation, except among those few, sought-after early adopters. Far more of the rural population were late adopters of change or even 'laggards'. Where change has been recognised in the rural it has generally been as part of a narrative of protection, defending the rural from the ravages of capital, gentrifiers, pollution and other emanations of the urban: the rural as victim. The rural has rarely been envisioned as a source of activeness on its own. The victim has also become a villain through its stabilities, confounding culture with idyllic myths of order and old virtues in much social constructionist work.

In light of this bias it may seem curious that the rural has long relied on extensive mobility in both economic and social life. But mobility is central to the enactment of the rural. Markets, employment, shopping, socialising, schooling, attending church, seeing a doctor, visiting parks: these all require traversing space, often great reaches of it, whether one lives in a rural place or is travelling to one. From this perspective it is reasonable to claim that the rural is at least as mobile as the urban, if not more so.

Rural scholars are starting to develop this appreciation of a mobile rural, as this special issue manifests, itself a product of the 2007 meetings of the European Society for Rural Sociology on the theme of 'Mobilities, Vulnerabilities and Sustainabilities: New Questions and Challenges for Rural Europe'. After the long season of urbanisation, in which we largely envisioned the rural as a reservoir that was draining away, our attention shifted to counter-urbanisation (Champion 1998), the return of urban people to the countryside. We did not see this as ruralisation, for the most part. Rather,

we still saw the rural as a passive stability, now receiving new pressure from urban life and being transformed by it. Subsequent work revealed that the notion of counter-urbanisation has limited application because the forms of return to the countryside were many and not massive. The rural was acting on the urban as much as the urban was acting on the rural, creating both manifestations and limitations that did not always conform to urban interests.

But the turn to research on counter-urbanisation has been decisive in alerting scholars to the importance of mobility more generally among migrants, visitors and long-term rural residents alike. Commuters, newcomers and holiday-makers have become central to the life of many rural regions today, although this often entails considerable conflict, as Blekesaune *et al.* (2010) and Oliva (2010) show in their contributions to this special issue. Jobs in town have also become central to the livelihood of many a long-time rural household, both farm and non-farm, as Danaher (2010) and Osti (2010) demonstrate in their articles. We are also coming to recognise that the rural–urban axis is not the only dimension of rural mobilities. International migration increasingly follows a rural–rural axis as people move from a rural region in the country of their birth to a rural region in another, following the demand for rural labour in a continually industrialising economy, as Kasimis *et al.* (2010) demonstrate in their contribution. There is also much rural–rural movement within countries, as Danaher (2010) and Osti (2010) also show. Rural people often find work, health care, shopping and social life the next county over, especially as the rural road-base improves. All of these phenomena are creating new situations in rural areas, a dynamism in need of the attention of rural scholars.

The emphasis on stabilities has not only been a characteristic of rural research, however. The scholarly tendency to objectify is part of an intellectual need to give something enough stability for us to recognise that it exists, and therefore study its implications. All scholars do it, at least to some extent. This need is fine as long as we do not allow it to petrify the world into the categorical rigidities of modernism. Even rocks are constantly moving and changing, as plate tectonics now teaches us.

But there is now a widespread effort to restore our appreciation of mobility in all scholarship. The work of John Urry (2000), Manuel Castells (2000 [1996]), and their many colleagues has been especially influential in developing an understanding of spatial mobility as a basic variable in contemporary social life. Of course, much remains that is relatively stable in social life, or we would not be able to recognise that anything in social life does, in fact, exist. Mobility is only recognisable, or even possible, because of simultaneous presence of stability. There has to be something to move, to move to and to move on. Moreover, stability requires mobility; the maintenance of stability requires mobilisation as much as the maintenance of mobility requires stabilisation, as Bell *et al.* (2010) argue later in this issue. The point of mobility research is not, or should not be, to trade an overemphasis on stability for an overemphasis on mobility. Rather, it is to bring together a balanced appreciation of both, and their mutual constitution, in social life. The rural can be an excellent test bed for developing this more balanced understanding, which may in turn give us a deeper appreciation of the role of the rural in everyone's lives, in both town and country.

Objectives of the special issue

With this thought in mind, our objective in this special issue is to clarify how spatial mobilities – and their interdependence with stabilities – at all levels (physical, symbolic and relational) affect rural areas, and how rural areas affect spatial mobilities. Several of the articles give special attention to how rural mobilities are changing over time. As we said, mobility is not new for the rural; it is a historical process that has extended over centuries at least. The historical roots of rural mobilities find testimony in the debate between followers of mobility transition hypothesis (Zelinsky 1971) and social historians who contest the basic idea that massive migration from countryside started with the industrial revolution (Lucassen and Lucassen 2009; Vries 1994). It is a debate that involves pictures of socioeconomic development as great as those traced by Karl Polanyi (1944) and Max Weber (1946). As fixed as the rural is often considered to be, it has always been moving and always itself shaping movement.

But rural mobilities raise a set of questions for rural scholars: how can we conceptualise these phenomena? Do we expect a consolidation of long-term effects (that is, stretching and disembedding) or a rupture, a point of radical change, in our time? Which major changes should we expect for rural areas or do they perhaps already exist? Which actors or social forces will lead these changes?

Central to conceptualising rural mobilities is conceptualising the rural itself. Here we must begin by contending that the concept of rural mobilities is not a contradiction in terms. The apparently endless growth of mobility is often said to have eliminated classical spatial divisions, among them that of rural and urban. That can be contested for at least three reasons that highlight the continuing role of the rural in social differences:

- the persistence of unequal access: the rise in price of fossil fuels (if not their incipient shortage) will increase inequalities and local solutions to issues of the transport of people, goods and ideas, demonstrating the inequalities of rural mobilities
- the persistence of place: the local dimension of the rural as communities, residences, cultural constructions and landscapes of production and consumption lead to distinctions that are still important factors in human wellbeing and development, bringing with them old and new stabilities of rural social difference
- the persistence of flux: mobilities and stabilities continue to combine in different ways rather than erasing each other, making the rural a constant source of surprise due to the interaction of both forms of rural social difference.

The rural is thus never the same everywhere and at every time. Continuing contestations over these three forms of rural social difference (mobilities, stabilities and their interaction) have a variety of important practical ramifications.

Rural mobilities

- Because of the lower density and the limited possibility of creating economies of scale in rural areas there are fewer public transport journeys. The rural reliance on private transport increases individual costs and, in a vicious cycle, increases the social isolation of rural people.

- The shortage of fossil fuel is increasing pressure on rural areas for biomass cultivation. This is already having a huge impact at the environmental level (through the reduction of soil fertility and the increased use of pesticides), at the symbolic level (to produce food is less anonymous than to produce fuel, which modifies the identity of farmers) and at the social level (as with any form of cultivation, production shapes social relations).
- Because it is more open and in some way more free, government locates in the rural many infrastructure projects devoted to mobility, such as highways, ring roads, and associated facilities. Such projects create different reactions in rural areas according to the local capacity to face political issues. Another form of inequality, then, concerns the different geographical distribution of political capabilities among citizens to contest mobilities.

Rural stabilities

- There are many examples of rural areas where local persistence and concentration are important factors of development. Some industrial districts are localised in rural areas. There are also rural districts with competitive advantages in agricultural production and landscape consumption.
- With regard to population mobility, rural stabilities can exercise an attraction on tourists, newcomers, artists, and so on, as well as provide spaces of return for rural locals. This raises issues of suburbanisation and rural gentrification, which in turn have implications for the energy use that supports such movements.
- The sense of the rural as having persistent stabilities (whether this is materially true or not) is important in shaping the symbolic use of the rural throughout contemporary culture and politics. Such symbolic stability shapes ideas of gender, class, race and ethnicity, nationality and more, as well as their spatial imaginations.

Interaction of rural mobilities and stabilities

We can combine mobility and stability to obtain four practical logics of the rural as life space:

- 1 A logic of reversibility: here a rural area is the main space of life and mobility is seen as spreading in rays out from this centre, leading to temporary spaces of instrumentality and impermanent social relations. Extreme commuting and return migration are examples.
- 2 A logic of recursiveness: here a rural area is a space of life among other ones, all of which are seen as stabilities and sources of mobilities. Rural space assumes a place in a network with other spaces that are connected through mobilities. Examples include pluri-residentiality and transmigration.
- 3 A logic of discursiveness: here a rural area is a temporary space with symbolic value and mobilities reach out into it from other centres. Examples include tourism and scientific exploration.
- 4 A logic of irreversibility: here a rural area becomes a lost space that cannot be returned to. Any new place becomes the main space of life, but its newness is

understood against the background of what has been left. Examples include modernisation, urbanisation and linear migration.

Mobilities, ruralities, and rural sociologies

The articles included in this special issue testify to the great variety of perspectives, methods and objects of research that can be collected under the umbrella of ruralities and mobilities. The use of plural terms – ruralities and mobilities – is a way to represent such variety. Nevertheless, some key points can be envisaged:

- There is a growing attention to permanent mobility lifestyles, emphasising that mobility is more than an economic matter but pertains to mobile traits that concern the whole life of an individual.
- The definition of rurality is still open to many different interpretations. Like other widely used categories like demographic trends, the rural is an important concept but it contains many meanings that are not always clear, and is notoriously hard to define. This is not a good reason for erasing it. The most important dimensions of social life are generally the hardest to define, precisely because they pertain to so much.
- A more mobile stability, as it were, should be the guiding principle of our criteria for the territorial delimitation of the rural. Recognising the fluidity of boundaries, both conceptually and materially, is not an argument for dispensing with them. Rather, it is a brief for drawing them and for immediately criticising them, lest we foolishly attempt to turn mobile stabilities into frozen fixities.
- Spatial mobilities should not be seen as, or be allowed to become, a new materialist bias. Mobilities and stabilities are crucial to the cultural representation of rural life – the rural ideology, we would say – for residents of city and country both.
- A more mobile conception of the rural greatly complicates our understanding of what the rural is and what it is to become. This complication is a good thing, potentially, because it highlights the industrial-productive bias of many rural policies today and suggests that other forms of rural social organisation are possible, for they already exist.
- The mobilities perspective throws new light on rural studies. But it is crucial that mobilities be seen as a dialogue with stabilities. While a case can be made for highlighting the mobile side of the dialogue at this moment in the development of rural studies and social research more generally, we look to a time when it is no longer rhetorically necessary to issue this reminder.

In conclusion, this special issue explores a neglected phenomenon in rural studies: mobilities. May it ever be a plural phenomenon, as new as it is old, as stable as it is mobile, as surprising as it is understood.

Note

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