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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,

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

7 But the turn to research on counter-urbanisation has been decisive in alerting
8 scholars to the importance of mobility more generally among migrants, visitors and
9 long-term rural residents alike. Commuters, newcomers and holiday-makers have
10 become central to the life of many rural regions today, although this often entails
11 considerable conflict, as Blekesaune *et al.* (2010) and Oliva (2010) show in their
12 contributions to this special issue. Jobs in town have also become central to the
13 livelihood of many a long-time rural household, both farm and non-farm, as Danaher
14 (2010) and Osti (2010) demonstrate in their articles. We are also coming to recognise
15 that the rural–urban axis is not the only dimension of rural mobilities. International
16 migration increasingly follows a rural–rural axis as people move from a rural region
17 in the country of their birth to a rural region in another, following the demand for
18 rural labour in a continually industrialising economy, as Kasimis *et al.* (2010) dem-
19 onstrate in their contribution. There is also much rural–rural movement within
20 countries, as Danaher (2010) and Osti (2010) also show. Rural people often find work,
21 health care, shopping and social life the next county over, especially as the rural
22 road-base improves. All of these phenomena are creating new situations in rural
23 areas, a dynamism in need of the attention of rural scholars.

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

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

1 **Objectives of the special issue**

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3 With this thought in mind, our objective in this special issue is to clarify how spatial
4 mobilities – and their interdependence with stabilities – at all levels (physical, sym-
5 bolic and relational) affect rural areas, and how rural areas affect spatial mobilities.
6 Several of the articles give special attention to how rural mobilities are changing over
7 time. As we said, mobility is not new for the rural; it is a historical process that has
8 extended over centuries at least. The historical roots of rural mobilities find testimony
9 in the debate between followers of mobility transition pattern (Zelinsky 1971) and
10 social historians who contest the basic idea that massive migration from countryside
11 started with the industrial revolution (Lucassen and Lucassen 2009; Vries 1994). It is
12 a debate that involves pictures of socioeconomic development as great as those traced
13 by Karl Polanyi (1944) and Max Weber (1946). As fixed as the rural is often considered 1
14 to be, it has always been moving and always itself shaping movement.

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

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

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27
- 28 • the persistence of unequal access: the rise in price of fossil fuels (if not their incipient
29 shortage) will increase inequalities and local solutions to issues of the transport of
30 people, goods and ideas, demonstrating the inequalities of rural mobilities
 - 31 • the persistence of place: the local dimension of the rural as communities, resi-
32 dences, cultural constructions and landscapes of production and consumption lead
33 to distinctions that are still important factors in human wellbeing and development,
34 bringing with them old and new stabilities of rural social difference
 - 35 • the persistence of flux: mobilities and stabilities continue to combine in different
36 ways rather than erasing each other, making the rural a constant source of sur-
37 prise due to the interaction of both forms of rural social difference.

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

41
42 *Rural mobilities*

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

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

13 *Rural stabilities*

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

26 *Interaction of rural mobilities and stabilities*

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

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

1 understood against the background of what has been left. Examples include mod-
2 urbanisation, urbanisation and linear migration.

3 4 **Mobilities, ruralities, and rural sociologies**

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

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

38
39 In conclusion, this special issue explores a neglected phenomenon in rural studies:
40 mobilities. May it ever be a plural phenomenon, as new as it is old, as stable as it is
41 mobile, as surprising as it is understood.
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