

Geographies of ruralisation or ruralities? The death and life of a category

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–4

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206221102937

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg**Laurie Parsons**

Royal Holloway University of London, UK

Sabina Lawreniuk 

University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

The rural sphere has suffered from underrepresentation in recent years in part due to growing interest in the urban. A perhaps equally important aspect of the decline has been the troubling of the spatial boundaries that define the rural and urban among scholars of mobilities and translocality. Exploring the decline of the rural in relation to these literary works, this commentary interrogates current geographical thinking on spatial categories, positing the concept of ruralities as a means to reinvigorate rural space on its own terms.

Keywords

Mobilities, rural, ruralisation, ruralities, translocal

The death and life of categories

Geographic concepts have had a dramatic time of it in recent years, with many of the discipline's best loved and most central concepts following an increasingly familiar pattern of death, revival and phoenix (or zombie)-like transcendence. We have mourned the death of distance (Couclelis, 1996) and its resurgence (Tranos and Nijkamp, 2013), the death of class (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) and its reincarnation (Das, 2012), and even most famously the death of geography itself (Ohmae, 1990), followed by a swift reinvigoration (Morgan, 2004).

This is by no means a unique feature of geography, but a wider spirit of postmodern scholarship, in which death is treated lightly and relativistically; an end of a kind, rather than of being; the return

always in view. Yet, perhaps due to its situation firmly on the categorical pillars of space, place and scale (Campbell, 2018), this ever-present conceptual fatality has had a particular impact on the discipline of geography. As if shielding themselves from loss, scholars have begun increasingly to view all categories as transient and transgressable, as mere shifting guidelines in a mobile world. It is, at the base, against this that Gillen et al.'s (2022) article on "Geographies of Ruralization" sets out its stall: not only as a call to re-ruralise our thinking,

Corresponding author:

Sabina Lawreniuk, University of Nottingham, Sir Clive Grainger Building, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

Email: sabina.lawreniuk@nottingham.ac.uk

but as a call also to recognise the ongoing relevance of boundaries and meaning in space.

Mobility unfettered

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is nowhere more true than in the study of migration and mobility, which has undergone a profound shift in recent years from the unidirectional, atomistic models, drawn from economics, that characterised the early years of the field (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Lee, 1966; Lewis, 1954; Todaro, 1969), via the new economics of labour migration (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Taylor, 1999), which highlighted the wider role of households in shaping individual migration behaviour; and most recently the revival of systems frameworks (De Haas, 2010; Mabogunje, 1970), which highlighted the ongoing and dynamic nature of these processes.

None of these models explicitly questioned the undergirding presence of the rural-urban binary, but with each new frame, they chipped away at it nonetheless. The categorical questions raised with each innovation, though unanswered, hung around and multiplied to the point that migration studies had become more elephant than room. If a household economy is split between city and farm work, which site does it belong to? If a migration system spans and organises work in both rural and urban areas, is any participant in it truly a part of either? These puzzles became increasingly difficult either to answer or ignore.

At which point, began the end times. The two horse-men of the rural-urban dyad's purported apocalypse in recent years, translocality and the mobilities turn, though dressed in different garb, have harboured equally destructive ambitions towards the rural and the urban. In the more structural interpretation of the translocality literature (Brickell and Datta, 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2020), the binary had not been eliminated as such, but superseded by patterns of mutual interaction so deeply imbricated, so supercharged by mass transport and mobile communication, that the examination of one side alone was necessarily incomplete.

The highly influential mobilities turn (Adey, 2006; Cresswell, 2011; Sheller, 2017; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2016), on the other hand, took a quite

different approach, decoupling movement from Euclidean space and resettling it in the subjective-objective hybrid of spatial experience. In this incarnation, the rural and the urban exist only as a chimera unique to each individual: the product of journeys experienced and anticipated; of iPad conversations, of old photographs and new aspirations; of this moment and other moments.

No wonder, then, that Gillen et al. (2022) have advocated here for a re-examination. As they put it, by attempting to free ourselves entirely from our spatial straitjacket, 'we are necessarily at risk of perpetuating the rural-urban binary in conceptual if not spatial terms'. Whilst people may 'experience and effect relational entanglements of ongoing ruralization and urbanization', to focus on these entanglements alone necessitates 'some uncomfortable twists of language and logic because we do not yet have the means to escape the conceptual straight jacket of urban and rural studies and the territorial markers they generate' (Gillen et al., 2022). Without categories, the argument runs, we are left only with trends of others' making and this is not scholarly freedom.

Gillen et al.'s (2022) paper is, viewed thus, more than simply a call to re-establish spatial boundaries, but also a spotlight shone on the limitations of our existing tools. In doing so, the paper sets up its opposition to the more unruly and insouciant interconnectedness of the mobilities and translocality literary works, yet it also proposes a wider case to the discipline. That categories matter. Or as Gillen et al. (2022) put it, 'geographical thought centers on the assumption that humans create distinctive boundaries around spatial units within which they live, work, and draw meaning'.

Foregrounding ruralities

What, though, is to be done? The rural is a vital site, deserving greater attention than it has recently enjoyed. It is needed as a counterbalance to the weighty dominance of urban thinking in multiple areas of scholarship. Yet a return to a more static conception of spatial categories is to turn back the clock on migration, abandoning much of the value accumulated through the pathbreaking schisms that have

troubled the rural and the urban, illuminating their in-betweenness, connections, and contradictions. Rather than pursuing the rural anachronistically, therefore, the answer may lie in attention towards the plurality of rurality, not merely as a subaltern to the urban, but as multiple contested sites of origin, belonging and return.

This, perhaps, is what Gillen et al. (2022) intend when they state that ‘we understand ruralization as the processual, more-than-residual, and geographically-variegated socio-spatial dynamics of contemporary human engagements with rural land, livelihoods, and lifestyles’. Yet there is more to it than this. The rural must be ‘more-than-residual’, yes, but what then should it, at the base, *be*? Categorical questions once again underlie this. Part of the reason that urbanisation has been so foregrounded in recent years is its clear definition. The city has precisely delineated boundaries, it has a population counted (ostensibly) to the inhabitant. It lends itself, in other words, to the kind of objective categorical distinction that facilitates comparison and calculation. What can the rural offer in opposition to this? The truth is that if the rural is to be categorically defined on the same terms as the urban, then it can *only* be a subaltern space. It is that which is not the urban, it is everything else, the remainder.

The rural, though, need not accept these terms. It was, after all, here first So, rather than seeking to retrench the rural as a fixed oppositional category, we might instead present the rural using the categorical language of the mobilities literature – in other words, as a site of multiple, evolving meanings, a dynamic and evolving multi-scalar category in contrast to the staid objectivity of the urban. After all, ‘what makes an object a geographical object? Geographers and others have debated these questions for many decades’ (Smith and Mark, 2001: 592). In the wake of so many years of thinking, one point of clarity is that an object need not necessarily be objective. Categorical subjectivity need not mean categorical death. On the contrary, there may be more life in ruralities than the rural.

Empirical rather than theoretical realities confirm this. The rural is an ever-presence in the lives of many urban people. It may be where parents, grandparents, or children live. It may be a source of remitted money, or rice, or on the contrary, it may be a

sink of urban income, a burden on rural workers’ wages (Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2018). These, though, are not the only relevant connections. The rural exists also as an idea disembodied from experience: as a site of peace, or of boredom; aspiration, or stagnation. It is, in other words, far more alive in the minds and livelihoods of ordinary people than it has become in geographical analysis.

Indeed, the rural is a powerful cultural force that commands economic might in apparently logic-defying ways. In Cambodia, for example, the conjoined ideas of Maoist rural utopia and locally embedded resentment at the cultural distinction of the urban population famously underpinned the catastrophic rise of the Khmer Rouge (Short, 2006). Two ruralities in partnership developed huge – and hugely destructive – cultural power, but rural imaginations continue to exercise untold sway around the world. Simply consider the phenomenon of remittance houses in the Philippines (McKay, 2012): vast sums pumped into homes that may never be lived in; a distant dream of return rendered lovingly in brick and render. And this is by no means a situation unique to Southeast Asia. On a quite different plane of wealth and visibility, the recent inclusion of a plot of land in Scotland in the 2022 Oscars ‘Everybody Wins’ giftbags exemplifies this. Very few, if any, of those owning this land will ever see it, but this is not the point. The land itself has little to do with it. This is the rural sold and packaged as a glamorous, ephemeral idea, an aspiration without the need or desire for execution.

It is in this infinitely variegated, pan-cultural manifestation that the rural reveals its true power, not as ‘the other’, but as ‘the many’. These ruralities underpin so much of what occurs around the world precisely because they are boundless and because they often do not succumb to the economic rules. For millions of migrant workers, struggling farmers, even wealthy city dwellers, the urban is the reality you endure, whereas the rural is the dream you choose. Appreciating this means analysing the rural on its own, multiplicitous, categorical terms, and it is a fruitful approach. As the tendrils of communication and mobility trouble and extend the boundaries of the city, the rural may be dying, but ruralities endure, perhaps more powerful than ever.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the British Academy (Grant Number: COVJT210012) and ESRC-DFID (Grant number: ES/T016051/1).

ORCID iD

Sabina Lawreniuk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7165-9481>

References

- Adey P (2006) If mobility is everything then it is nothing: towards a relational politics of (im) mobilities. *Mobilities* 1(1): 75–94.
- Brickell K and Datta A (Eds) (2011) *Translocal Geographies*. London: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Campbell CJ (2018) Space, place and scale: human geography and spatial history in past and present. *Past and Present* 239(1): e23–e45.
- Couclelis H (1996) The death of distance. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 23(4): 387–389.
- Cresswell T (2011) Mobilities I: catching up. *Progress in Human Geography* 35(4): 550–558.
- Das RJ (2012) From labor geography to class geography: reasserting the Marxist theory of class. *Human Geography* 5(1): 19–35.
- De Haas H (2010) Migration and development: A theoretical perspective. *International Migration Review* 44(1): 227–264.
- Gillen J, Bunnell T and Rigg J (2022) Geographies of ruralization. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, this issue: 1–18.
- Greiner C and Sakdapolrak P (2013) Translocality: concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives. *Geography Compass* 7(5): 373–384.
- Harris JR and Todaro MP (1970) Migration, unemployment and development: A two-sector analysis. *The American Economic Review* 60(1): 126–142.
- Lawreniuk S and Parsons L (2018) For a few dollars more: towards a translocal mobilities of labour activism in Cambodia. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences* 92: 26–35.
- Lawreniuk S and Parsons L (2020) *Going Nowhere Fast: Mobile Inequality in the Age of Translocality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee ES (1966) A theory of migration. *Demography* 3(1): 47–57.
- Lewis WA (1954) *Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour*. Manchester: The Manchester School.
- Mabogunje AL (1970) Systems approach to a theory of rural-urban migration. *Geographical Analysis* 2(1): 1–18.
- McKay D (2012) *Global Filipinos: Migrants' Lives in the Virtual Village*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Morgan K (2004) The exaggerated death of geography: learning, proximity and territorial innovation systems. *Journal of Economic Geography* 4(1): 3–21.
- Ohmae K (1990) *The Borderless World*. New York: Harper.
- Pakulski J and Waters M (1996) *The Death of Class*. London: Sage.
- Sheller M (2017) From spatial turn to mobilities turn. *Current Sociology* 65(4): 623–639.
- Sheller M and Urry J (2006) The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A* 38(2): 207–226.
- Short P (2006) *Pol Pot: History of a Nightmare*. New York: Owl Books.
- Smith B and Mark DM (2001) Geographical categories: An ontological investigation. *International Journal of Geographical Information Science* 15(7): 591–612.
- Stark O and Bloom DE (1985) The new economics of labour migration. *Frontiers in Demographic Economics* 35: 173–178.
- Taylor EJ (1999) The new economics of labour migration and the role of remittances in the migration process. *International Migration* 37(1): 63–88.
- Todaro MP (1969) A model of labor migration and urban unemployment in less developed countries. *The American Economic Review* 59(1): 138–148.
- Tranos E and Nijkamp P (2013) The death of distance revisited: cyber-place, physical and relational proximities. *Journal of Regional Science* 53(5): 855–873.
- Urry J (2016) *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society*. London: Routledge.