



Rural geography: globalizing the countryside

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I Introduction

Anyone who thinks the world's hippest, most jaw-dropping hotels can only be found in cities will be astounded by this photographic tour through the global countryside. As this colorful book reveals, the quaint 'old-country' inn of the past has given way to interiors and amenities that will astound even the most jaded traveler. In Granada, Ibiza, and Tenerife; in the Yucatan and on Saranac Lake; in the Loire Valley, the English countryside and the Seychelles – world-renowned architects have found ways to combine ultimate luxury with breathtaking vistas and authentic culture with exquisite appointments. A perfect introduction to luxury globetrotting – and a suitable substitution for those who can only dream about it – this pocket-sized collection of images is brimming with surprising details and delightful revelations about traveling beyond the city limits. (Canizares, 2006)

The publisher's blurb for the 2006 edition of *Country hotels* (Canizares, 2006), above, is of course formulaically hyperbolic. Yet the passage does in fact hint at some important revelations regarding the contemporary countryside (although not everyone will find them delightful). We see that the countryside is increasingly a global commodity, one produced to standardized and exacting

specifications at a growing number of locations. Some of its producers are visible: we learn that the same architects (and designers, builders, and other manufacturers) are plying their trades in a growing number of far-flung rural locations. The particular countryside on offer here is clearly a postproductivist one, with consumption-orientated uses for elites being the major commodities it produces. The importance of shared aspirational representations in fueling ongoing demand for and production of particular sorts of rural landscapes and experiences is acknowledged. Finally, it is clear that the rural is still imagined in paradoxical relationship to the urban: they are superficially opposed, inasmuch as the presence of the best money can buy in the countryside rather than the city is presented as surprising, but more fundamentally connected, inasmuch as the point is that consumers can go to rural retreats and have precisely the same interiors they would expect in the top hotels in global cities.

In this final review of work in rural geography, I explore some of the ways in which rural areas are being produced through increasingly globalized forms and relationships.

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Specifically, I focus on the growing phenomena of amenity migration to certain types of rural areas and the proliferation of American-style exurban and suburban development, both of which take place in and transform initially 'rural' areas, and both of which are occurring in ever larger numbers of locations around the globe, including many in the global south. As in my two previous reviews (McCarthy, 2005; 2006), I aim here to think about rural geographies in explicitly relational terms, recognizing that, by nearly any substantive definition of the 'rural' (see, for example, Halfacree, 1993; 2006a; Hibbard and Römer, 1999; Cloke, 2006), most rural areas are in developing countries, and that the relations that shape them are more important than snapshots of the fleeting landscapes they produce. I am not claiming that these trends are entirely new: elite retreats to popular and pleasant rural areas have been popular for millennia, while many scholars have long recognized that cities, suburbs, and rural areas are mutually constitutive and dynamic categories, rather than discrete ontological or geographic entities (see, for example, Williams, 1973; Murdoch and Lowe, 2003; Cloke, 2006; Munkejord, 2006). But the greater intensification and extensification of both of the trends above have been important themes in recent work in rural geography, prompting the development of new terms such as the 'new countryside' (Beesley *et al.*, 2003), the 'global countryside' (Hibbard and Römer, 1999; Woods, 2007), 'wilderness gentrification' (Darling, 2005), and the 'urbanization of the rural', along with the less recognized 'ruralization of the urban' (see Cloke, 2006). Efforts to theorize these particular trends are parts of a larger conversation about the effects of globalization on rural areas, a prominent theme in a recent major collection, the *Handbook of rural studies* (Cloke *et al.*, 2006) (see, for example, Halfacree, 2006b; Marsden, 2006; Cloke, 2006; Murdoch, 2006; Perkins, 2006; Lyson, 2006; see also Beesley *et al.*, 2003; Woods, 2005; 2007).¹ A major part of the burden of such work is to counteract the frequent,

implicit presumption that globalization is an overwhelmingly if not exclusively urban process (see Hibbard and Römer, 1999).

II Amenity migration and the urbanization of the rural

Silicon Valley executives telecommute from Argentinean haciendas, posh Londoners jet across the channel for week-end retreats at Slovakian country cottages, [and] North American celebrities take shelter on anti-podean sheep stations, while a stream of other migrants claim much more modest parcels of rural paradise. (Haggerty *et al.*, 2006)

Amenity migration – broadly, the purchasing of primary or second residences in rural areas valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-orientated use values – is not a new phenomenon. But a call for papers for the 2006 AAG meetings reflected a widely shared sense among many rural geographers that an 'amenity property boom' is under way, one that is affecting a far more extensive set of rural areas around the world than previous booms of this sort. What might be causing or enabling such an intensification of amenity migration is debated, but a survey of both case studies and more synthetic approaches to the issue suggests that increases in the mobility of elites, rapid growth in relative and absolute incomes for certain classes of urban professionals, loosening of restrictions on foreign ownership of property in many countries, ongoing reductions in the friction of distance through developments in transportation and communications technologies, and the increased circulation of representations of prized rural landscapes have all contributed to the formation of an increasingly globalized market for a relatively small number of specific rural landscapes meeting the requisite criteria (Buckley, 2003; Darling, 2005; Gosnell and Travis, 2005; Gogia, 2006; Moss, 2006; Murdoch, 2006; Perkins, 2006; Gosnell *et al.*, 2007).

Despite the global extent of the amenity property boom – no location, it seems, is

too remote for elites with private jets and permanent staffs in residence – it is of course highly localized in important ways. Only areas meeting the requisite aesthetic, legal, linguistic, and other preconditions qualify, leaving most rural areas unlikely to receive this form of investment. Buckley (2003) argues that proximity to protected natural areas and access to particular forms of outdoor recreation are currently particular high on the list of desired attributes. Inferences drawn from other cases and reviews (eg, Crump, 2003; Walker and Fortmann, 2003; Hurley and Walker, 2004; Gosnell and Travis, 2005; Perkins, 2006; Gosnell *et al.*, 2007) would seem to suggest that current or former ranching regions of Anglo settler colonies rank particularly high on the list of places sought by elite amenity buyers, both because their patterns of land tenure and land use over the previous century have kept relatively large, open tracts available for purchase in the present, and because of their privileged place in dominant geographical imaginaries. As the latter point suggests, understanding amenity migration demands investigation of the widely circulating imaginaries, meanings, and performances coded as ‘rural’ that generate demand for, and somewhat orchestrate the production and use of, particular commodifications of rural landscapes (Clope, 2006). Yet further reading suggests that rural amenity landscapes may not be so narrowly territorialized after all: other recent work in rural geography makes clear that amenity migration and much associated tourism is driven at least in part by temporarily deterritorialized and significantly globalized visions of the rural (see Clope, 2006). One implication of this that runs counter to intuitive understandings of the rural, but that has become an important theme in recent rural geography, is that at least some of the desired features of such rural amenity landscapes are increasingly being produced in ‘urban’ or peri-urban locations, further confounding the categories of rural, urban, and their various permutations.

The implications of amenity migration for rural areas are legion. The ecological effects are often little-researched, but likely to be profound, as new owners change patterns of land use, land cover, and water use, and actively or passively transform the mix of species present through starting or stopping hunting, fishing, planting, and more (see, for example, Perkins, 2006; Gosnell *et al.*, 2007). The effects on and within human communities are often described as the ‘urbanization of the rural’, with that phrase encompassing both material elements (eg, newer housing styles and changing mixes of retail and service providers) and less immediately visible transformations of social relations (eg, commitments to greater gender equality), as Munkejord (2006) demonstrates regarding northern Norway, for instance. Land prices tend to rise, of course, driving out some residents, particularly those who are not property owners themselves (Perkins, 2006). Darling (2005) argues that this aspect of the urbanization of the rural can be analyzed with greater theoretical precision via the application of Neil Smith’s theory of the rent gap, which she argues does operate in rural areas, but with important differences in what constitutes undercapitalized ground rent in particular sorts of landscapes leading to important differences in its geographical dynamics and expressions, particularly in and around formally protected ‘natural’ areas. In many cases, amenity migration and the ‘urbanization of the rural’ it produces can be understood as the first signs of exurban development, which leads us to the next topic in this review.

III Globalizing the suburbs

Rural areas around the world today are being rapidly transformed by processes broadly associated with ongoing urban and suburban growth and expansion. Exurban development, growth in the peri-urban fringe, suburban sprawl, the urbanization of the rural – all describe processes in which places typically undergo a shift from being perceived and

represented as 'rural' to being predominantly part of urban or metropolitan landscapes (Marsden, 2006; Murdoch, 2006; Perkins, 2006). The scale of these transformations is enormous: by some accounts, more than one million hectares per year are converted from agriculture and other 'rural' land uses to development in the categories above (see, for example, Tan *et al.*, 2005; Davis, 2006). While suburbanization writ large is significant and continues apace in most industrialized countries, and is probably most strongly associated with the United States at present, what is most striking is the degree to which it has become a truly global phenomenon: low-density settlements of large, single-family houses reachable only by automobiles on networks of new roads, occupied exclusively by middle- and upper-class residents, and often gated and governed by restrictive covenants, are becoming commonplace in China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, to name just a selection of examples from recent case studies, while similar patterns continue to spread in industrialized countries (Glazze and Alkhayyal, 2002; Leichenko and Solecki, 2005; Tan *et al.*, 2005; Solecki and Leichenko, 2006; Davis, 2006; Mycoo, 2006; Rofe, 2006; Bossuet, 2006; Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007; Jetzkowitz *et al.*, 2007).

Although there is no clear line between the fringes of exurban or peri-urban development and amenity migration, it seems useful to draw a conceptual distinction between amenity migration that, while very selective in its destinations, is relatively footloose, such as North American celebrities purchasing ranches in Montana or sheep stations in New Zealand and literally or figuratively helicoptering in and out, and development that is directly tied to proximate urban areas, with strong ties to their metropolitan labor markets and transportation systems (see Perkins, 2006: 250–51). The latter is the focus of this section, and, while it is driven at many levels by urban growth, it is of enormous

significance for rural geography because, very nearly by definition, transitions into exurban or suburban status are transitions out of rural status. As Jetzkowitz *et al.* summarize it, "Urban sprawl" is the term used to refer to the formation of settlements consisting of small to medium-sized urban locations collected around a city, *which transform rural settlements into urban landscapes*' (2007: 149, emphasis added). It is thus crucial for rural geography to remain attentive to the fact that while cities around the world continue to grow at astonishing rates, many are doing so in increasingly low-density patterns, with vast metropolitan areas that mix 'urban' and 'rural' elements in new combinations becoming quite common, due in no small part to the continued strength of anti-urban sentiment and visions of the rural idyll (Davis, 2006; Solecki and Leichenko, 2006; Cloke, 2006; Perkins, 2006).

In particular, patterns of residential development that closely mirror American exurban and suburban development are becoming more and more widespread. Those patterns and older suburbs certainly have obvious roots in the rural idyll: a detached home in a rural area with substantial green and open space affording direct communion with nature, but with easy access to the benefits of the city when desired always in the background. Many also have more specific elements rooted in postwar Fordism and Keynesianism, however: houses, automobiles, and major household appliances produced and sold as mass-market commodities to new middle classes to sustain accumulation; state investment in new road networks and other direct and indirect subsidies to builders and financiers of suburbs; dependence on unsustainable rates of fossil fuel use; and the inscription of class, racial, and other social inequalities into the landscape in far more spatially extensive patterns. Fordist models of mass production and consumption and Keynesian models of state financing and regulation were central to postwar suburbanization in the United States, but the suburbs have survived and

thrived despite the alleged passing of the frameworks that gave them their start (many observers, in fact, have now come to view the suburbs as complicit in the neoliberalization of society: see, for example, Walks, 2005: 502; Cowen, 2005; Mitchell, 2005). Suburban and exurban development in the same basic patterns, but with even larger spatial footprints – for houses, lot sizes, road networks, and commuting distances – continue apace today in the United States and other industrialized countries (see, for example, Jetzkowitz *et al.*, 2007). Daily commutes of up to three and four hours round-trip are becoming common in some metropolitan regions, meaning that the exurban or peri-urban zones of many metropolitan areas now encompass vast areas (see, for example, Crump, 2003; Walker and Fortmann, 2003; Hurley and Walker, 2004). While many of these lands may continue to ‘look’ rural, at least for a time, they are functionally suburbs.

Again, recent research shows that forms of suburban development visually indistinguishable from more recent American suburbs and exurbs have begun to appear throughout the world, including around many urban cores in the global south. Growth in population in general and urban populations in particular is clearly an insufficient explanation for this phenomenon: the very particular *form* of this metropolitan growth must still be explained. Some literature in this area simply takes preferences for certain suburban and exurban residential options as exogenous and seeks to model the behaviors that follow from such preferences (eg, Fernandez *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Robinson, 2006). This is inadequate and indeed analytically and politically problematic: both the production of particular landscapes and desires for them must be explained. One explanation for the similarities in new suburban forms around the world is a fairly straightforward one: it turns out that in many cases these new suburbs are being designed, built, and marketed by the same professionals who produce

suburbs in the United States, as a substantial number of architects, planners, landscapers, builders, and marketers have begun to establish themselves in new markets that they have good reason to believe will grow enormously (Leichenko and Solecki, 2005). A related factor is that the large house and lot sizes integral to this model almost require the development of previously open land, which is typically far cheaper than already urbanized land (and which often has greater potential for subsequent appreciation) (Mycoo, 2006; Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007). At the same time, demand for such landscapes is fueled by the widespread circulation of discourses and representations of the ‘good life’ in the country or exurban sprawl: as Davis reports, “‘Orange County’ is a gated estate of sprawling million-dollar California-style homes, designed by a Newport Beach architect and with Martha Stewart décor, on the northern outskirts of Beijing’ (2006: 115; see also Leichenko and Solecki, 2005). Again, the salience of recent work emphasizing the ways in which ‘rural’ imaginaries, desires, and performances become temporarily deterritorialized and globalized, including through the international mobility of professional-class migrants, thereby generating demand for and somewhat orchestrating the production and use of re-territorialized visions of elite countrysides or exurban living, is clear (Blum *et al.*, 2004; Cloke, 2006; Mycoo, 2006). The end result, of course, is that urban growth is fueled largely by anti-urban sentiments (Perkins, 2006). And, of course, state policies and expenditures with respect to land use, planning, transportation systems, and more play a critical role in structuring such production, demand, and choices.

One final explanation for the particular form of this exurban and suburban growth advanced by many researchers in this area is that it is the spatial expression and consequence of growing class polarization and the dysfunctions of many cities in the developing world (Leichenko and Solecki, 2005; Solecki

and Leichenko, 2006; Davis, 2006; Mycoo, 2006; Rofe, 2006; Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007). In an all too familiar pattern, middle and upper classes around the world are retreating into functionally or officially privatized enclaves with highly localized, high-quality infrastructure, services, and environmental and social amenities, leaving cities bereft of tax revenues and many social interactions (Coy and Pöhler, 2002; Glasze and Alkhayyal, 2002; Webster *et al.*, 2002; Mycoo, 2006; Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007). Such retreats are also driven by pervasive fears of crime and violence, largely created and fueled by growing socio-economic inequality. It thus comes as no surprise that many of the new suburban communities examined in this literature are physically gated and guarded, located in remote or inaccessible locations such as islands, or both (Mycoo, 2006; Rofe, 2006; Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007). While many have actual gates and guards, others rely on slightly less direct but still highly effective mechanisms of social control and exclusion, trusting that the power and privilege inscribed into luxury landscapes will ensure that non-residents do not enter or stay (for examples of such mechanisms at work in Australia and the USA, see Rofe, 2006, and Duncan and Duncan, 2004).

Remarkably, these enclaves are still often promoted and apparently perceived through the lens of the rural idyll, with both material and social conventions regarding the 'rural' coming into play. Álvarez-Rivadulla (2007) describes the gated communities she studied in Uruguay:

The three located the farthest from the city are the largest. They are situated in a geographically beautiful non-urbanized area with smooth rolling hills, and you have to take a detour from the highway to find them. By the time you get there, no sign of the city is left. Birdsong replaces traffic noise, the grey of the city gives way to diverse tones of green, spoilt only by scattered luxurious houses of various shapes and colors. (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007: 51)

Her respondents reproduced every element of conventional urban/rural dichotomies in explaining their residential preferences:

For them, the house is the place for reproduction and leisure. The City is unpredictable, insecure, asphyxiating, dirty, polluted, unhealthy, artificial, and ugly. It has too much traffic and its inhabitants are always defensive and running, and families do not have enough space or time to share. The new neighborhood is more predictable, safe, clean, healthy, natural, and beautiful, and traffic is not a problem. There, people are not defensive and families can enjoy all that beauty and space ... As one said, 'This is an ecological development ... We have swans, otters, alligators ... it's like being in the middle of the countryside, but we are only ten minutes from Carrasco.' (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007: 56, 57)

Developments in rural geography? Yes. Progress? No.

IV Environmental and social implications

Most scholars researching the trends above see them as overwhelmingly negative in both social and environmental terms. Ecologically, exurban development and amenity landscapes fragment habitat, increase impervious ground cover, and in general contribute to very high and inefficient levels of resource use. A particular concern is that they typically convert arable land to other uses in ways that would be exceedingly difficult to reverse, leading some to see them as undermining food security: for instance, Tan *et al.* (2005) note that about 74% of the land converted to new urban uses in China over the past decade was converted from arable land (see also Davis, 2006). At the same time, however, many researchers have noted that exurban migrants typically profess more 'environmental' values and priorities than do 'traditional' rural residents (eg, Walker and Fortmann, 2003), leading some to suggest that their mass movement into rural landscapes might actually translate into a new era of ecological restoration and

stewardship (Cadieux, 2005). Socially, it is clear that the developments reviewed here translate into very large-scale urbanizations of rural societies, with a host of attendant familiar conflicts (see, for example, Walker and Fortmann, 2003; Hurley and Walker, 2004; Perkins, 2006). The greatest concern, however, is that the many forms of rural retreats reviewed here are all likely to increase social segregation (Leichenko and Solecki, 2005; Davis, 2006) so that, collectively, they 'can be seen as an attempt to "escape" the social through an immersion in "country life"' (Murdoch, 2006: 178).

Note

1. Positing the globalization of the countryside as an emerging theme in rural geography demands several qualifications. First, there is a long tradition in left political thought, especially since the middle of the past century, of viewing the world's rural areas, particularly those in the global south, as the 'global countryside', imagined in relation to the global 'core' or 'city' of the urban, industrializing north. In particular, much third-world Marxism theorized the potential for anti-capitalist revolution to proceed along a Maoist spatial and social trajectory, from the global 'countryside' of the rural third world to the global 'metropolises' of the urban first world. This review will not delve into the profound differences between these past and present conceptualizations of something called the global countryside, except to note the irony in the near-complete reversal of their substantive content. Second, this review will say little about the ongoing liberalization of primary commodity sectors, which is quite probably the form of globalization directly affecting the most rural areas throughout the world, particularly those in the global south (see Buttel, 2006). I do not deal with it here largely because it is already well recognized and the subject of many large literatures – including strands dealing with the globalization of rural resistance to it (Woods, 2006; Sevilla Guzmán and Martínez-Alier, 2006) – whereas the other trends I focus on here are perhaps more recent and less widely treated as increasingly global phenomena. Similarly, this review will not address the globalization of environmental discourses and policies, particularly those pertaining to conservation, which tend to impact rural areas disproportionately, inasmuch as the attendant dynamics are already well covered in existing literature. Finally, it is a given at this point that 'globalization' is an always uneven and multistranded set of processes,

meaning that different rural areas are being affected and faring very differently through it and that economic, political, cultural, or other versions of globalization may appear most influential, depending upon which cases or aspects individual researchers examine or emphasize.

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