



Editorial. Counterurbanisation, again: Rural mobilities, representations, power and policies

People moving to live in the countryside within largely urban societies – however ‘countryside’ is defined or understood – has preoccupied many social scientists working across urban, regional and rural studies for almost 50 years (compare Berry, 1976; Champion, 1989; Boyle et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2015; Barcus & Halfacree, 2018; Dilley et al., 2022). Introduction of the term ‘counterurbanisation’ in the 1970s to discuss a seemingly ‘new’ urban exodus in the US (Berry, 1976) has now gone on to embrace debates about demographic turnarounds, rural restructuring, rurality’s place in culture and even wider development strategies that build upon networking possibilities for urban and rural places.

Research on counterurbanisation, in sum, has been truly vast and, although originally it expressed a western-centric and global north research question, is now also commonly discussed in global south and emerging economy contexts (e.g. Crankshaw & Borel-Saladin, 2019; Jain & Korzhenevych, 2019). Various typologies, definitional attempts and context-specific experiences have all been produced (e.g. Gkartzios, 2013; Halfacree, 2001; Mitchell, 2004) and it is impossible to reduce the richness of the phenomenon to any single universal ‘story’ (Champion, 1998). All of this breadth and inconclusiveness is due, *inter alia*, to the difficulties attached to reductive urban/rural dichotomous definitions and diverse global social constructions of the countryside across different cultures, languages, industrialization histories and planning systems (Gkartzios et al., 2020; Halfacree, 2008). Not all countrysides are the same, not all mobilities are the same, and not all of their interactions are the same. From gentrification of peri-urban rural places colonized by the middle classes attaching ‘rural consumption’ to individual wellbeing, to countercultural, radical and queer groups relocating and adopting ‘rural lifestyles’ to better enable self-expression, to policy-led initiatives aiming to repopulate marginal rural places, to issues of rural housing unaffordability and the growth of second or holiday homes in the countryside, the academic literature has demonstrated the very wide diversity of social groups, motivations and impacts associated and entangled with counterurbanisation (Gkartzios et al., 2022; Gkartzios et al., 2022).

Researchers have also become interested in rural relocations that do not fit well a dominant counterurbanisation paradigm associated with the (characteristically Anglo-centric) rural idyll (Halfacree, 2009) and have sought to explore short term relocations with mobility an open-ended lifecourse event not necessarily simply attached to urban-rural unidirectional relocation (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Stockdale, 2016) or even to a single destination point (Halfacree, 2012). Furthermore, and challenging the association between counterurbanisation and lifecourse ‘success’, several contemporary societal challenges - from the ‘European refugee crisis’, to climate change, food scares and financial crises - have all been shown to play out differently in

and across the countryside, where a decision to counterurbanise often becomes a very political act. And finally and most recently, debate and focus on counterurbanisation has been revived via the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both a resurgent pro-ruralism and new modes of working have seen many rural places experiencing the attention of a new wave of ex-urban residents interested in rural living, again also stimulating further the politics of rural place (e.g. Halfacree, 2023; McManus, 2022).

In spite of our topic’s overall long research pedigree, we believe there is now scholarly need to consider the global relevance and emerging experiences of counterurbanisation **once again** as it is such a ‘live’ phenomenon. This special issue of *Habitat International* does this. It explores contributions on contemporary and global perspectives of counterurbanisation from both global north and south contexts and from a wide variety of perspectives. The papers that follow are not seeking to pin down and define counterurbanisation (or even rurality) in absolute terms but explore differentiated and rural focused mobilities that fit the wider narrative of ‘moving to the countryside’, irrespective of how these mobilities are practiced, imagined or tackled via policy. We invite our readers, therefore, to delve into these numerous ‘counterurbanisation stories’ (Champion, 1998). They are powerfully illustrative of extremely differentiated and active countrysides shaped strongly through counterurbanisation’s diverse expressions.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2023.102906>

Received 2 August 2023; Accepted 15 August 2023

Available online 2 September 2023

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Menelaos Gkartzios*

Centre for Rural Economy, School of Natural & Environmental Sciences,
Newcastle University, UK
Department of City & Regional Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Izmir
Institute of Technology, Türkiye

Keith Halfacree

Department of Geography, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Swansea
University, Swansea, UK

* Corresponding author. School of Natural & Environmental Sciences,
Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, UK and Department of
City & Regional Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Izmir Institute of
Technology, Türkiye.

E-mail addresses: menelaos.gkartzios@ncl.ac.uk,
menelaosgkartzios@iyte.edu.tr (M. Gkartzios).