



Emerging geographies of mobility: The role of regional towns in Greece's 'counterurbanisation story'



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 October 2015

Received in revised form

3 July 2017

Accepted 18 July 2017

Available online 27 July 2017

Keywords:

Mobilities

Counterurbanisation

Greece

Choice experiment

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the 'mobility turn', research in rural studies has engaged with new explorations of mobilities, beyond the now well-explored counterurbanisation and rural gentrification processes, including local and temporary mobility in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. This paper explores past and potential future mobility patterns in two regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece in the context of the ongoing financial crisis. Using a choice experiment, we assess the importance of settlement types, family networks, previous residency in the area, cultural opportunities and change in employment type in informing future mobility decisions. The analysis finds evidence of diverse mobilities, and distinguishes between two predominant mobility groups, i.e. counterurbanisers and local movers. We further look at relocation preferences for the two groups and find similar preferences for regional towns. In this context, we provide evidence for the potential emergence of an alternative, i.e. not rooted in pastoralism, version of the Anglo-American 'rural idyll'.

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1. Introduction

This study explores recent and intended mobility patterns in a period of ongoing financial crisis, through a quantitative household survey implemented in two regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece. The paper contributes to the rural mobilities literature (e.g. Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Bell and Osti, 2010), first, by exploring diverse and 'messy' practices of residential mobility, inclusive of, but not restricted to counterurbanisation (see also: Milbourne, 2007; Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Stockdale, 2016). Furthermore, we offer another lens in rural mobility research: that of financial crisis, an emerging research focus (Remoundou et al., 2016; Gkartzios, 2013; Kasimis and Papadopoulos, 2013). Mobility in rural areas tends to be associated with gentrification processes and a ubiquitous 'counterurbanisation story' is frequently discussed, in which rural localities constitute spaces of residential and recreational consumption for urban middle class residents (Halfacree, 2008). In contrast to this counterurbanisation literature, we look at wider non-metropolitan mobility, beyond the middle class construction of the 'rural idyll' that counterurbanisation is

usually associated with and, unfortunately, sometimes reduced to (Halfacree, 2008).

Emerging rural mobilities are discussed in the Greek context. Studies have looked at international migrant workers moving to rural areas (Kasimis et al., 2003, 2010), new, mostly younger and better educated, entrants in the agricultural sector (Kasimis and Papadopoulos, 2013; Kasimis and Zografakis, 2013) and, to less extent, the 'reversed mobility' (Kasimis and Papadopoulos, 2013) of people leaving cities for the countryside (Anthopoulou et al., 2017), or other regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece (Gkartzios, 2013). Remoundou et al. (2016) for example report stated preferences amongst urban residents in Athens for counterurban relocations in the context of the economic crisis, pointing towards a 'potential counterurbanisation' trend. This paper seeks evidence for such claims and explores the temporary nature of counterurban relocation, by investigating the conditions that would bring these residents back to the city, i.e. the hypothesis of a 'counter counterurbanisation'.

Inherent in this exploration about mobilities in non-metropolitan Greece, is the question of the indigenous construction of rurality (socially, culturally, linguistically) and its international relevance. Admittedly, conceptualisations of 'the rural' vary across cultural and linguistic contexts (see some examples in Woods, 2011), encompassing a wide range of very different

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settlement patterns and industrialisation histories globally. While the rural is extremely varied, the monolingual academic discourse (i.e. in English), inevitably, reduces such complex debates in universal, somewhat ubiquitous characterisations (such points are already made in social science research, notably by Phillipson, 1992 and de Swaan, 2001). Urban-rural dualities don't necessarily translate in equivalent terms in non-Anglophone contexts, particularly in countries that did not experience intense industrialisation processes. This is particularly important in the Greek context because urban/rural separations are not strongly evidenced. In fact, many Greek social scientists (see *Sociologia Ruralis*, 1997; Damianakos et al., 1997; Zacopoulou et al., 2008) have long discussed hybrid social and spatial identities – encapsulated for example in Karavidas' terms 'petite bourgeois-peasant family' (μικροαστοχωρική οικογένεια) and 'urban-peasants' (αστοχωρικός) (Damianakos, 2002; Sivignon, 2008). In this context, Zacopoulou (2008) argues that, in Greece, the city never competed with the countryside, because urban and rural spaces were never truly separated. Consequently, exploring mobility in, across, and out of 'rural areas' becomes not only 'messy' because of the diversity of mobilities observed or ignored by researchers (Stockdale, 2016), but also because of what is legitimised as 'rural' (and consequently as counterurbanisation too) in the academic discourse, which is heavily shaped by Anglo-American research (Lowe, 2012).

One of the main difficulties of the term 'rural' used in Greek is that it restricts meanings only to agricultural uses, spatialities and identities. The conceptual problematics of the word 'rural' are discussed by Kizos (2012) in relation to the translation of Michael Wood's 'Rural Geography' (2005) in Greek.¹ For this reason, we avoid referring specifically to rural areas, but instead to regional towns in non-metropolitan Greece. We prefer to refer to non-metropolitan Greece as an extremely heterogeneous space which is encompassing more settlements (not only relevant to agriculture) and inclusive of regional towns as suggested by Gousios (1999), corresponding to Greece's hybrid spatial identities.

Finally, the paper contributes to the application of quantitative methodologies in mobility research (see Smith, 2007) and in particular the use of a choice experiment. Choice experiments present respondents with a series of choice tasks and ask them to choose their preferred option. The stated choices can then be analysed to examine the importance respondents attach to the different characteristics that form the alternatives in the choice tasks. Although there are increasingly studies applying a choice experiment to examine residential preferences, migration and commuting patterns (e.g. Bullock et al., 2011; So et al., 2001; Zanni et al., 2008), socioeconomic and cultural aspects of the destination have not been given much attention in informing such choices. Our approach allows for socioeconomic considerations to be accounted for, and for trade-offs between such considerations and mobility motivations to be revealed.

2. Mobility research: rural dimensions

Academic accounts regarding the 'mobilities turn' or the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Urry, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2006) have offered an exciting frame to critically engage with diverse representations, practices and experiences produced by

mobilities. The mobilities literature has interlinked with rural studies, particularly as regards the role of migration in rural restructuring processes (see, for example *Sociologia Ruralis*, 2010; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). Thus, it has influenced the academic discourse, in understanding migration as an open-ended event, sometimes even temporary, and its importance irrespective of distance in relation to urban centres (Halfacree and Rivera, 2011; Milbourne, 2007).

In this paper, we focus on recent and potential future mobilities. We are interested in evidencing different expressions of mobility, inclusive of counterurbanisation, lateral migration and local mobility as well as the factors that play a role in informing future residential choices. Of all diverse practices of mobility, the one that has dominated rural studies has been counterurbanisation (Champion, 1989; Boyle et al., 1998). Lateral (i.e. rural-to-rural) and local movements (i.e. within the same settlement patterns), although reported, are particularly neglected in the literature (Milbourne, 2007; Stockdale, 2016). The counterurbanisation literature has explored both cases of aggregate rural turnarounds (experienced for example in the 1970s in the US) and cases of rural population growth (attributed to selective in-migration) irrespective of wider regional and national population dynamics (Champion and Brown, 2012; Mitchell, 2004). Research in the field has investigated the social actors involved, diverse representations of the rural associated with counterurbanisation, as well as the implications of such mobilities on rural communities and rural development trajectories (some examples: Bosworth and Atterton, 2012; Halfacree, 2012).

Representations of the rural have preoccupied researchers, particularly in more industrialised countries, and the construction of a romanticised rurality is often discussed in order to rationalise counterurbanisation and wider rural in-migration processes (see Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Such representations are important because, drawing on Cresswell (2006), they demonstrate that residential mobility is associated with particular meanings and expectations about 'the rural', which constitute counterurbanisation both ideological and political (Gkartziou and Scott, 2015). Idyllic representations of the rural, imagined or real, have attracted the middle classes who bring new and sometimes contested values about what the countryside is and for whom, and usually have the power to shape development policy narratives on their own terms (Murdoch et al., 2003; Satsangi et al., 2010).

Despite the abundance of literature on these subjects, in light of Milbourne and Kitchen's (2014) comments, the rural studies literature has overlooked other mobilities beyond counterurbanisation (for example: transient, non uni-directional movements, beyond urban and rural dichotomies; see also Milbourne, 2007; Halfacree, 2001; Stockdale, 2016). Counterurbanisation research has also been criticised for its Anglo-centric tendencies which may have created a 'counterurbanisation imperative', in the way this academic discourse is reproduced across non Anglophone countries. Several authors have questioned intellectual borrowings of counterurbanisation outside the UK and the US (Halfacree, 2008; Gkartziou, 2013; Grimsrud, 2011; Hoggart, 1997). The hegemony of Anglo-American research in rural studies (Lowe, 2012) may pose significant challenges, particularly in countries where the rural idyll (or pastoralism in the context of Murdoch's et al., 2003 'differentiated countryside') does not constitute such a dominant discourse in both policy prescription and popular culture, as it does in Anglo-American contexts (Bunce, 1994).

Pastoralism constitutes far from a hegemonic discourse in representing Greek rural realities. While the British Romantics were extolling rural-natural environments during a period of industrialisation (Satsangi et al., 2010), Balkan rural areas were generally characterised by economic and technological backwardness (see

¹ Two terms can be used for the word 'rural' in Greek: αγροτικός and γεωργικός, but both can be translated back as 'agricultural', leaving little imagination for other, beyond agriculture, interests and power struggles in non-metropolitan settings. The term υπαίθρος is also frequently used in Greek rural studies literature (closer to the English 'countryside' perhaps), although it is not a term that is commonly used in modern Greek, creating unnecessary distance between academic and lay discourses of the rural.

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