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# Restructuring of rural Sweden – Employment transition and out-migration of three cohorts born 1945–1980



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## ABSTRACT

Rural restructuring has established itself in recent years as a popular area for research. However, the empirical findings are contested and criticism has been raised against its one-sided focus on agriculture and the British countryside. Drawing on Swedish longitudinal register data from three cohorts, we argue that there is empirical support for a restructuring process in rural areas. However, changes in agriculture are largely irrelevant considering the general picture – instead, it is the rise and fall of manufacturing and rural public sector employment, along with the recent growth of urban service sector employment, that comprise the contemporary economic restructuring of rural areas. We conclude that the contemporary restructuring in rural areas should be separated from a previous restructuring which went from agriculture to manufacturing.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural restructuring and its effects, such as post-productivism, gentrification and multi-functionality, have become popular themes in rural geography. Narratives are often centred on the decline and transformation of agricultural employment and other natural resource sectors into a post-productive countryside (Ilbery, 1998; OECD, 2006; Shucksmith, 1993) and on the gentrification of rural areas (Costello, 2007; Phillips, 2002). However, the importance of rural gentrification and post-productivism have been contested on empirical grounds (Amcoff, 2000; Evans et al., 2002; Hjort and Malmberg, 2006; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001a), which made Hoggart and Paniagua (2001b) question the use of the term rural restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, when looking at the long-term development in rural areas there is little doubt that great changes have occurred, among which the decline of agriculture and urbanization is central. Woods (2005) claims that there is solid evidence of large-scale rural

change if one broadens the perspective and increases the time frame of the analysis, and points to fundamental reconfigurations in a variety of spheres of life, including employment and migration. These are in turn driven by the larger processes of globalization, technological development and social modernization.

It is also evident that the Swedish countryside has experienced a negative population trend for decades. The pattern is similar to that in other countries in Europe, with many young people leaving the countryside for education and work in the growing metropolitan regions. The traditional natural resource-based sectors have been a small and shrinking sector of employment for many years, while most job growth has taken place in the service sectors in the urban economies (OECD, 2006). However, these long-term, fundamental changes have received little attention as study objects in the research on rural change. Rather, the general approach in research seems to be to assume these large, long-term changes and then focus the analysis on more marginal, recent phenomena.

In this study the large-scale, long-term changes, which are often assumed but seldom investigated in detail, are measured in order to estimate the type and magnitude of rural change. Here it is argued that sectorial change and rural-urban migration are central aspects of contemporary rural change. Furthermore, it is known that job markets around the world are segregated by gender, which motivates a division of investigations of rural restructuring by gender – this is an important aspect that is often neglected, in both

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<sup>1</sup> Hoggart and Paniagua (2001b) also questions the appliance of rural restructuring on wider theoretical grounds, but part of their criticism is related to the lack of empirical evidence in support of a post-productive transition in rural areas.

theoretical and empirical research on rural change (Anker, 1998).

In order to obtain a detailed picture on long-term changes in employment and migration, this paper uses a life-course perspective. An important contribution of the life-course theory, originally developed by Elder (1994, 1998) in his studies of cohorts growing up during the Great Depression, is the acknowledgement that the opportunities and constraints for individuals to shape their life trajectories are embedded in historical times and places. Furthermore, the life-course theory emphasizes that individuals' past biography is essential in order to understand their current life situation. In this paper, we argue that the study of the life trajectories of cohorts born in rural areas in different times reveals some important patterns of rural transformation. Studying the labour market entries from a life-course perspective offers an alternative view on the restructuring of the labour market and its geographical outcomes, compared to the more common description of changes in volumes of employees in different sectors and regions. The dominating trend becomes more prominent when one looks at labour market entries rather than the stock.

The study is based on Swedish census and register data stretching back to 1960, and the focus is on employment and rural-urban migration, which are central in the research on rural restructuring. It is important to keep in mind that these variables do not measure rural restructuring as such, but rather two central outcomes of the larger process of restructuring (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001b). By connecting the empirical results from this investigation to theories of larger processes of restructuring including globalization, technological development and social modernization (Woods, 2005), the aim is to contribute to the understanding of rural change in Sweden.

Previous studies of long-term changes of employment and migration in rural areas typically focus on specific aspects of rural change, for instance long-term agricultural change (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998), rural manufacturing (North, 1998), rural services (Woods, 2005) and rural-urban migration (Amcoff, 2000; Boyle and Halfacree, 1998). However, the long-term studies seldom analyse the changes together and have therefore not produced a comprehensible description of how rural areas have changed: employment in agriculture has declined while employment in services as well as rural-urban migration have increased – but how large are the changes, and how are they related to one another and to changes in urban areas?

By comparing how three cohorts of young females and males from rural areas were absorbed into education and labour market sectors, as both stayers and movers, this paper aims to offer a detailed description and analysis of economic and demographic change in rural areas.

Specific research questions are:

- Into what sectors has the labour market absorbed rural young cohorts entering the labour market in 1965, 1980 and year 2000?
- How has the pattern of out-migration from rural areas in early adulthood changed over time between these cohorts?
- How did the changes in migration and employment for rural youths compare to the changes for urban youths?

Together, these questions aim to answer the larger question of how the rural economy changed between 1965 and 2010.

In the next section the theoretical framework of this article is presented. It discusses aspects of rural restructuring and how a life-course perspective can contribute to the understanding of societal change. This is followed by methodology section which describes how the present study was conducted. The methodology section also contains a discussion of some limitations with the study. In the

fourth section the results of the study are presented, and in the fifth section the results are analysed from the perspective of rural restructuring. In the sixth and last section conclusions are drawn based on the empirical analysis.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Rural restructuring

In order to account for the nature of recent rural change, scholars have been compelled to use a multidimensional theoretical framework in which rural change is seen as the interrelated consequences of larger technical, economic and social changes on a global scale; a perspective which has come to be known under the term “rural restructuring” (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001b; Ilbery, 1998; Marsden et al., 1990; Pettersson, 2002; Woods, 2005, 2010). The idea of rural restructuring is to view rural change as a multifaceted and interdependent phenomenon, not limited to only a few aspects of reality. In a sense, rural restructuring takes a holistic view on rural change whereby everything is seen as related to everything else, which blurs the boundaries between different dimensions (Pettersson, 2002). One advantage of the restructuring approach is thus its multidimensional outlook that, at least in theory, aims to find a complete explanation of rural change.

However, in practice the holistic ambitions of the restructuring approach have often been reduced to the specific empirical outcomes of post-productivism and rural gentrification – phenomena for which the empirical evidence is contested (Amcoff, 2000; Evans et al., 2002; Hjort and Malmberg, 2006; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001a). It is partly based on this lack of empirical evidence that Hoggart and Paniagua (2001b) argue that rural restructuring as a theoretical approach has been used too flippantly, resulting in a devalued concept. Since the empirical evidence for certain outcomes of rural restructuring is contested we argue for the necessity of going back and analyse the large-scale and long-term empirical trends without presupposing any specific local outcome.

Following Woods (2005) and Hoggart and Paniagua (2001b), it is suggested here that restructuring, and its rural sub-category, should be viewed as an overarching process which generates local outcomes. Defined as such, rural restructuring is the combination of the larger forces of globalization, technological development and social modernization, and their local socioeconomic outcomes for rural areas, such as urbanization and agricultural decline.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive review of the larger processes of technological development, globalization and social modernization, a few central aspects deserve mentioning. Technological development has primarily affected rural areas by reducing employment in the primary sectors through mechanization and increased productivity. On the other hand, the manufacturing sector, which was made possible through mechanization, is a large-scale phenomenon in rural areas and some studies indicate that there has been an urban-rural shift in manufacturing (Keeble et al., 1983; North, 1998). However, much contemporary technological development in manufacturing rationalizes production and thereby reduces employment. The spread of automobile use has also increased mobility, enabling people to commute to urban areas from the rural vicinity, spurring counter-urbanization and making it possible for people to stay in rural areas in urban regions.

Globalization is understood here as the increased connectedness of localities around the world (Ekholm-Friedman and Friedman, 2008; Woods, 2005). This means that there is no global area or any global effects as such – people always produce and live their lives locally even if they are mobile. One local effect of

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