



Re-thinking commercial counterurbanisation: Evidence from rural Nova Scotia, Canada



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A B S T R A C T

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In 2010, Bosworth coined the phrase ‘commercial counterurbanisation’ to describe the development of rural economies stimulated by inward migration. Although pointing to an increasingly important relationship, we argue here that this concept, in its present configuration, does not directly align with the ‘demographic counterurbanisation’ discourse that has permeated rural scholarship since the 1970s. We present and justify this contention, propose an alternative way to explore this relationship, and then apply this approach to a Canadian rural village (St. Peter’s, Nova Scotia). We discover from our survey and narrative analysis that ‘commercial counterurbanites’ are active in the community; their business ventures enhance the village’s dual identity and employment base; and their contributions are made possible by various passive and purposeful social, economic and civic connections. We conclude that the commercial counterurbanite cohort, rather than commercial counterurbanisation, is potentially fostering neo-endogenous development in rural Canada. This relationship warrants further investigation by scholars interested in understanding the drivers of rural economic change.

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1. Introduction

Rural communities are changing – both demographically and economically – as part of an ongoing process of restructuring that began more than five decades ago (Marsden, 1998). Bosworth (2010, p.977) conceptualizes the connection between these two trends as ‘commercial counterurbanisation’: the ‘growth of rural economies stimulated by inward migration’. In coining this term he has drawn attention to a crucial relationship that is unfolding in rural locales, and one that warrants closer scrutiny amongst the academic community.

Despite its timely introduction, we believe that this concept does not directly conform to current academic discourse of the counterurbanisation phenomenon. Our intent in this paper is to justify this contention, to propose an alternative way to explore this relationship, and to apply this approach to assess the contribution of ‘commercial counterurbanites’ to rural development in a small and somewhat isolated Canadian community (St. Peter’s, Nova Scotia). In doing so, this study contributes to the evolving literature that seeks to understand the relationship between demographic change and restructuring rural spaces.

2. The justification

We begin this critique by first establishing the spirit of ‘demographic counterurbanisation’; an idiom we coin to distinguish the original type of counterurbanisation from Bosworth’s newer rendition. The concept of commercial counterurbanisation (Bosworth, 2010) is described, and its conformity with traditional discourse assessed. We then offer an alternative interpretation of this phenomenon, which we believe adheres more closely to its demographic counterurbanisation roots.

2.1. Demographic counterurbanisation

Counterurbanisation has been a popular research focus since the term was first introduced by Brian Berry (1976a,b) nearly four decades ago. To some scholars, it is a process of settlement system change; a negative relationship between settlement size and either net migration (e.g. Beauchemin, 2011), or population growth (e.g. Mookherjee and Geyer, 2010; Geyer et al., 2012; Rérat, 2012).¹ For others, it is a terminal (Halfacree and Rivera, 2011), or temporary (Torkington, 2012), movement; the selective migration (Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011) of an increasingly mobile population (Halfacree,

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¹ A special issue of Tijdscher. Econ. Soc. Ge. (2003, Vol. 94, No. 1) is devoted to the concept of ‘differential urbanization,’ a concept that captures this interpretation.

2012), down international (Ni Laoire, 2007; Eimermann et al., 2012; Halfacree, 2012) and domestic settlement hierarchies (e.g. Smith and Higley, 2012; Vannini and Taggart, 2013). Both demographic interpretations have garnered significant attention since the concept was introduced, although the counterurbanisation-as-movement discourse appears to be gaining favour.²

Despite at times being conceived as a chaotic conception (Simon, 2011), academic interest continues to grow. Indeed, Halfacree's (2008, p.483) claim that 'the study of counterurbanisation is certainly not exhausted', appears to have spurred considerable interest amongst international scholars, particularly in the counterurbanisation-as-movement school. While some document the instrumental (e.g. Escribano, 2007; Halfacree, 2012), experiential (e.g. Halfacree and Rivera, 2011; Burchardt, 2012; Vias, 2012; Vallance, 2013), and familial (Stockdale, 2006; Ni Laoire 2007; Bijker and Haartsen, 2012) motives of counterurbanite migrants, others present taxonomic constructs that capture the heterogeneity of the counterurbanite population (e.g. Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Mitchell, 2004; Halfacree, 2012), or the 'heterodox' nature of the counterurbanisation concept (Halfacree, 2012, p.665). Indeed, the introduction of an alternative counterurbanisation type provides additional support for the latter contention.

2.2. Commercial counterurbanisation

The concept of 'commercial counterurbanisation' is one that encapsulates the relationship between demographic change and economic growth. Bosworth defines it as 'growth of rural economies stimulated by inward migration' (Bosworth, 2010, p.977). As such, it has three fundamental components: 'a residential move; the establishment of or involvement in a rural business; and the development of a degree of local embeddedness'. More specifically, Bosworth (2010) suggests that the residential move is one that originates a distance of more than 30 miles from the settlement in question. The establishment of, or involvement in, a rural business, he explains, includes 'business creation by rural in-migrants, their employment in other rural firms, or their promotion of other businesses through local trade, knowledge exchange, and cooperative working' (Bosworth, 2010, p.977). Embeddedness, he and a colleague later confirm (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012, p.261), is 'the situation where economic and social actions are influenced by being and feeling part of a local community;' one that arises from both passively (informally) and purposively (formally) derived relations (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012). When these three conditions are present, Bosworth (2010) suggests, commercial counterurbanisation is underway.

Although Bosworth's conceptualization draws attention to the pivotal role played by rural newcomers, we have two reservations about the characteristics that he has used in its definition. First, Bosworth (2010) indicates that commercial counterurbanisation is growth, driven by *inward migration*. As we have articulated above, proponents of the counterurbanisation-as-movement school view counterurbanisation as migration down the settlement hierarchy. Bosworth does not specify the origins of in-migrants, thus leading one to conclude that those participating may potentially originate from a community of any size. Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that rural newcomers arrive at their destination via many different paths (Mitchell, 2004; McIntyre, 2009). Although some

may move from a larger centre, others may migrate up the settlement hierarchy from a very small place to one that is larger (as is occurring in rural Ireland: Gkartzios and Scott, 2012), thereby engaging in 'demographic urbanisation'. Still others may move laterally around the rural countryside, between places of a similar size; a pathway that is taken by Canadian (Mitchell, 2009), Irish (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009, 2012; 2013), Scottish (Stockdale, 2006) and Dutch migrants (van der Vaart, 2005; Bijker and Haartsen, 2012). Since all three migration streams are subsumed by Bosworth's (2010) in-migrant pool, his interpretation of commercial counterurbanisation does not strictly conform to the existing counterurbanisation-as-movement discourse; nor, in fact, does it confirm to the process interpretation either.

In the process reading, population growth taking place in smaller communities occurs at the expense of larger ones (hence its expression as a negative relationship). In Bosworth's (2010) interpretation, rural growth does not necessarily occur to the detriment of larger centres because the in-migrants creating growth may have moved from an equally small (or even smaller) municipality. Since a negative relationship is not necessarily present, commercial counterurbanisation, as defined by Bosworth (2010), does not reflect the counterurbanisation-as-process reading either. As such, it is not in keeping with traditional discourse.

Our second reservation is the inclusion of embeddedness. Bosworth (2010) suggests that residents must become, and feel part of, a local community if commercial counterurbanisation is underway. Given the diverse motivations that lure migrants to rural locales, we do not believe that all in-migrants who engage in business activity will have the same desire to immerse themselves in rural society. While embeddedness may be sought by the 'pro-ruralite' or 'anti-urbanite' (Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Mitchell, 2004; Halfacree and Rivera, 2011; Burchardt, 2012), it may be less important to the 'displaced urbanite' (Mitchell, 2004), whose actions are motivated purely by financial necessity, rather than a desire to engage fully in a rural lifestyle. Commercial counterurbanisation, as defined by Bosworth (2010), does not account for the heterogeneity of the commercially-oriented in-migrant pool. This, combined with our other concern, suggests that a rethinking of the concept is, perhaps, necessary.

2.3. Rethinking commercial counterurbanisation

Given our reservations, we propose an alternative interpretation of the commercial counterurbanisation concept, and an alternative approach for exploring the relationship between in-migration and growth in rural locales. The phrase commercial counterurbanisation, we believe, should be reserved to describe either a commercial process, or movement, in much the same way as it is handled by scholars of demographic counterurbanisation. As the former, it becomes a process of settlement system change where rates of commercial business creation are higher in smaller, than in larger, economies. Bosworth (2010) indeed acknowledges this trend and provides contextual evidence from England of its occurrence. He does not, however, recognize that this could be used as a surrogate to describe process-based commercial counterurbanisation, in keeping with the demographic counterurbanisation discourse.

As the latter, it is read as the migration of commercial business down the settlement hierarchy; a situation that would contribute to the negative relationship described by the process reading. Bosworth (2010, p.971), in fact, does recognize the movement-based interpretation, but dismisses it on the grounds that 'commercial counterurbanisation is not simply the migration of commercial activity from urban to rural locations' (though he has provided significant evidence of this movement in his article).

² Recent 21st century examples include studies by Champion (2012) in the United Kingdom; by Mitchell (2009) and Ngo and Brklacich (2014) in Canada; by Bayona-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso (2012) and Gkartzios (2013) in Europe; and by Mockrin et al. (2013) in the United States.

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