



‘Leaving Athens’: Narratives of counterurbanisation in times of crisis



Menelaos Gkartzios*

Centre for Rural Economy, School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Newcastle University, Agriculture Building, NE1 7RU Newcastle upon Tyne, England, UK

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Counterurbanisation
Economic crisis
Family
Greece

The purpose of this paper is to explore counterurbanisation in times of crisis. While much of the Anglophone literature highlights the consumption of the rural through counterurbanisation as part of a complex mosaic consisting of pro-rural lifestyle choices, class aspirations and ageing processes, the current economic recession that western countries are experiencing might reveal new ways of conceptualising counterurbanisation. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with counter-urban migrants in Greece. The interviews highlight a ‘crisis counterurbanisation’ triggered largely by unemployment at origin, rather than pro-rural motivations and idyllic constructions of rurality. More importantly, the migrants’ stories highlight the importance of the extended family in counter-urban movements, in terms of the location of destination and the multiple support offered. This supportive family structure is pronounced in Greece, especially in times of crisis, but can be expected to be comparable to other southern European contexts where the role of family replaces responsibilities of the welfare state.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Counterurbanisation, since its conceptual origins in the 1970s (Berry, 1976), has captured the imagination of rural social scientists, reflecting on trends (dominant or not) in most capitalist economies. Research on counterurbanisation is abundant, soon to enter its fourth decade. Despite of the output of this research activity, many researchers have highlighted that counterurbanisation theory has drawn heavily on English or Anglophone contexts (Brown, 2010), although in recent years various counterurbanisation stories have emerged from other European counties too (for example: Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Bijker and Haartsen, 2011; Grimsrud, 2011; Herslund, 2012). This paper aims first to widen the lens of counterurbanisation research (Halfacree, 2008), by focussing on Greece, a country that has received little attention in academic debates on internal counterurbanisation trends, beyond the research that has explored the migration of international migrants in rural areas (Papadopoulos, 2012; Kasimis et al., 2003). Secondly, the paper aims to revisit the importance of economic and employment forces in conceptualising counterurbanisation. In this context, the paper explores the hypothesis of a ‘crisis counterurbanisation’ that is not triggered simply by lifestyle choices and idyllic constructions of rurality as normally reported in the

literature (see for example: Benson and O’Reilly, 2009); instead, it also results from the current economic recession, spiralling unemployment levels and inner city dereliction. More importantly, this counterurbanisation story highlights the importance of the institution of family, in supporting these relocations through multiple means, such as housing provision, economic and psychological support.

The paper firstly briefly reviews the literature on counterurbanisation and highlights an Anglophone bias in the way that counterurbanisation theory has been developed and reproduced. Secondly, the paper focuses on Greece, aiming at exploring the counterurbanisation story within the country’s socio-spatial profile and, more importantly, in relation to the current economic crisis. The methodology and methodological issues are then discussed before the analysis of the qualitative interviews with counter-urban migrants is presented. Finally, the conclusions illustrate the key characteristics of a ‘crisis counterurbanisation’ (for example the importance of the extended family in the migration decision).

2. Counterurbanisation: movements, typologies, stories

2.1. A review of the literature

This section aims to discuss a shift in the counterurbanisation literature from a focus on *typologies* to *stories*, and, secondly, to highlight an Anglophone bias in the way that counterurbanisation theory has been produced. The research output that has been

* Tel.: +44 1912226615.

E-mail address: menelaos.gkartzios@ncl.ac.uk.

generated around counterurbanisation is indeed impressive. Mitchell (2004) in her authoritative review of this extensive literature observes that counterurbanisation has been interpreted either as a migration *movement* or a *process* of settlement system change, resulting in a deconcentrated settlement *pattern*. Each of these interpretations draws on different methodological approaches and scales of enquiry. For example, early research focused on what might be termed here as *statistical counterurbanisation*, a preoccupation to describe counterurbanisation shifts, or a rural turnaround, drawing on quantitative analysis of national population data (for example: Champion, 1992; Cochrane and Vining, 1988; Fielding, 1989). However, research has increasingly explored *case counterurbanisation* as well, focussing on specific local case studies irrespective of wider urban–rural population dynamics (i.e. Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Rivera, 2007). Case counterurbanisation research has highlighted the spatially selective character of counterurbanisation (Boyle et al., 1998) and the uneven local and regional geographies of rural in-migration (Woods, 2005). Work here has embraced qualitative methodologies, particularly after the ‘cultural turn’ in rural studies. Nevertheless, researchers have also highlighted the need for more quantitative approaches to examine counterurbanisation in its national, regional and local contexts (see also Smith, 2007; Milbourne, 2007). Researchers have reported also on *potential counterurbanisation* trends (people’s desire to move to rural areas), even where the migration has not been realised (for example: Nedomysl and Amcoff, 2011).

In explaining the motives behind counterurbanisation, several hypotheses have been suggested, recognising that while residential movements are the results of decisions made ‘freely’ by the individual migrants concerned, they also reflect a response to wider changes in economy and society (Champion, 1998). Early research centred around a dualism between economic (or job-led) and quality of life (or people-led) considerations of the migrants involved (for example: Grafton and Bolton, 1987; Moseley, 1984). More recently, Mitchell (2004) adopted a similar approach by suggesting a typology which distinguishes, *inter alia*, between economic and quality of life motives associated with the migration decision. For example, Mitchell proposed:

- the term *ex-urbanisation* to describe the movement of middle class commuters to accessible peri-urban rural areas, motivated by environmental amenities associated with rural living;
- the term *displaced-urbanisation* to describe relocations motivated by the need for employment, lower costs of living and/or affordable housing and taking place in any geographic location that provides for these needs; and
- the term *anti-urbanisation* to describe the movement of urban residents whose driving force is to live and work in a rural setting. These residents are motivated by anti-urban motives (i.e. urban crime, the rat race) and pro-rural perceptions about rural life.

Similar classifications have been suggested (for example: Halliday and Coombes, 1995). However, Halfacree (2001) has argued that such typologies run the risk of narrowing down the reality and diversity of counterurbanisation. Irrespective of whether such classifications are accepted or contested, there is a general consensus that counterurbanisation is far from a homogeneous movement and/or process (Champion, 1998; Mitchell, 2004). In essence, what appears to be a problem of defining and classifying might constitute an impossibility to conceptualise and internationalise in a *lingua franca* the diversity of global socio-spatial structures and systems which are linked with the experience of counterurbanisation. Halfacree (2008) suggested that while

research on counterurbanisation is still important, it should be carried out with the challenge of avoiding attempts to define what counterurbanisation is. This diversity of counterurbanisation has been promoted through constructing counterurbanisation as a *story*, a narrative of very different experiences and representations (Champion, 1998; Halfacree, 2008). Almost four decades of research on counterurbanisation stories have demonstrated, at least, the following interrelated elements of *differentiation*:

- First, *locality*. In an increasingly blurred and difficult to define rural territory, research has considered the distance of the relocation, highlighting cases of counterurbanisation from accessible rural peri-urban areas to more remote rural locations (i.e. Harper, 1991; Ford, 1999). Halfacree (1994) and Stockdale et al. (2000) examine both long distance and short distance counter-urban moves. Given that concepts such as ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ are heavily contested (Woods, 2005) and that these are also socially and culturally constructed (for social representations of ‘rural’ see Halfacree, 1993; for ‘urban’ as a social construct, see a discussion in Boudreau, 2010) research on counterurbanisation has focused on extremely diverse rural, market town and open countryside residential environments.
- Second, *motivation*. As mentioned already, counter-urban motivations usually reflect dualistic distinctions between economic/employment rationality and quality of life/lifestyle considerations, associated with the migration decision. Counterurbanisation in some cases tends to be associated with a very positive perception of rural living, emphasising the environmental, anti-urban and communitarian features of rural areas, and the existence of a ‘rural idyll’ has been used to rationalise the migration decision (Halfacree, 1994; Walmsley et al., 1998; van Dam et al., 2002). Beyond such (pull-led) motivations, research has also demonstrated the importance of other economic conditions (push-led) in counterurbanisation. Hugo and Bell (1998) for example discuss a welfare-led migration, where counter-urbanites take the opportunity of lower living costs in rural areas, while receiving public benefits. Fitchen (1994) too discusses migration to rural areas triggered not by employment opportunities, but by housing costs and low incomes.
- Third key element of differentiation is *social groups*. A significant body of research has focused on the diversity of people associated with counterurbanisation. For example, this includes the out-migration of an urban middle class (Urry, 1995), particularly in European and North American contexts (Woods, 2005). Work has also explored the counterurbanisation of case study groups, such as marginal settlers (Halfacree, 2001), lesbian households (Smith and Holt, 2005), artists (Mitchell et al., 2004), pre-retirement groups (Stockdale, 2006) and international return migrants (Ni Laoire, 2007). In this context, counterurbanisation has offered an exciting frame of change for studying wider social phenomena, such as the gentrification of rural space (Stockdale, 2010), the creative class thesis (Herslund, 2012) and the relationship between migration and neo-endogenous rural development (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012).

2.2. Anglophone imperialism?

The conceptualisation of counterurbanisation in the 1970s was useful, at least initially, because it helped to draw attention to a phenomenon which had heretofore been the subject of limited research. Counterurbanisation became the subject of considerable research interest not only in the USA and UK but also soon in other

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545903>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6545903>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)