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Charlotta Hedberg  
Renato Miguel do Carmo  
*Editors*

# Translocal Ruralism

Mobility and Connectivity  
in European Rural Spaces



Springer

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Charlotta Hedberg · Renato Miguel do Carmo  
Editors

# Translocal Ruralism

Mobility and Connectivity in European  
Rural Spaces

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*Editors*

Charlotta Hedberg  
Stockholm University  
Department of Human Geography  
Stockholm  
Sweden  
charlotta.hedberg@humangeo.su.se

Renato Miguel do Carmo  
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa  
(ISCTE-IUL)  
Centro de Investigação e Estudos  
de Sociologia (CIES-IUL)  
Lisboa  
Portugal  
renato.carmo@iscte.pt

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# Contributors

**Luis Camarero** Department of Theory, Methodology and Social Change, National University of Distance Learning (UNED), Madrid, Spain, lcamarero@poli.uned.es

**Andrew Copus** Nordregio – Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Stockholm, Sweden, andrew.copus@nordregio.se

**Vanda Aparecida da Silva** Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA-IUL), University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal, vandaaparecida.silva@gmail.com

**Philomena de Lima** Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland, UK, philomena.deLima@inverness.uhi.ac.uk

**Renato Miguel do Carmo** Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal, renato.carmo@iscte.pt

**Alexandre Dubois** Nordregio – Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Stockholm, Sweden, alexandre.dubois@nordregio.se

**Gunnel Forsberg** Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden, gunnel.forsberg@humangeo.su.se

**Liliana Guran-Nica** Faculty of Geography, Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania, liliana\_guran@yahoo.co.uk

**Charlotta Hedberg** Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden, charlotta.hedberg@humangeo.su.se

**Moa Hedström** Nordregio – Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Stockholm, Sweden, moa.hedstrom@nordregio.se

**Louise Meijering** Faculty of Spatial Sciences, Population Research Centre, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands, l.b.meijering@rug.nl

**Ali Najib** Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden, ali.najib@kultgeog.uu.se

**Jesús Oliva** Department of Sociology, Public University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, jos@unavarra.es

**Apostolos G. Papadopoulos** Department of Geography, Harokopio University of Athens, Athens, Greece, apospapa@hua.gr

**Henrike Rau** School of Political Science and Sociology, NUI, Galway, Galway, Ireland, henrike.rau@nuigalway.ie

**Rosario Sampedro** Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Valladolid, Segovia, Spain, sampedro@soc.uva.es

**Sofia Santos** Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal, sofia.santos@iscte.pt

**Michael Sofer** Department of Geography and Environment, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, soferm1@biu.ac.il

**Susanne Stenbacka** Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden, susanne.stenbacka@kultgeog.uu.se

# Chapter 1

## Translocal Ruralism: Mobility and Connectivity in European Rural Spaces

Charlotta Hedberg and Renato Miguel do Carmo

### 1.1 Introduction: Towards a Translocal Rural Space

If you imagine a rural space, you might think of the wide fields of an agricultural landscape, or the vast, forested parts of a sparsely populated region. Perhaps you think about small villages or townscapes, or an isolated house in a remote region. Rural spaces are often associated with an agricultural economy, outmigration and an ageing, decreasing population. This imaginary rural area is isolated from national and global processes, and is dependent on the proximate urban area.

If we examine rural space only a little closer, however, the setting is different. The residents of the small village seldom work in agriculture, but rather in the service sector. In the isolated house reside highly educated counter-urbanisers, who perform their work in the city through an internet connection. International migrants are lured to work in the agricultural sector as seasonal labour and migration authorities settle refugees in rural areas. Both internal and international migrants contribute not only to a younger population structure but also to a qualitative transformation of rural spaces. These are places that are changing through their connections to regional, national and global processes (Bell & Osti, 2010; Woods, 2007). Rather than being passive receivers of national and regional transfers, they are involved and connected on their own accounts.

Processes of globalisation, economic restructuring and continuing urbanisation have introduced new forms of spatial mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006). In fact, the attention that has been devoted to globalisation processes has placed the issue of mobilities at the core of social sciences research, through the extended focus on flows of capital, ideas and people (Canzler, Kaufmann, & Kesselring, 2008). These phenomena, however, are not exclusive to densely populated areas. The progressive loss of the importance of farming, which has been replaced by other sectors (mainly the tertiary sector), and a resulting diffusion of more or less urbanised

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C. Hedberg (✉)

Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden  
e-mail: charlotta.hedberg@humangeo.su.se

ways of life, is one important explanation for the proliferation of moves in (and to) rural areas (Carmo, 2010; Masuda & Garvin, 2008). As a result of the diversifying mobility flows, the social composition of rural areas is becoming increasingly heterogeneous (Camarero, 1993; Kayser, 1990, 1996; Smith, 2007; Milbourne, 2007).

It is in this scenario, which is based on a relational space, that we find in rural areas not only contradictory processes of depopulation and ageing, processes of modernisation or reinvention of tradition and of marginalisation, but also a time for functional reconfigurations (some new, some not so new), the dynamics of which are in part underpinned by an information economy (Murdoch, 2000). For instance, new dynamics emerge and are reflected by an intensification and diversification of circulation between rural and urban areas, but also between distinct rural spaces situated in different regional, national or international geographies. Phenomena like back-and-forth migration, the return to home villages by migrants who left them during the rural exodus or the dynamics of outmigration are some of the situations that are becoming more generalised in European countries. The population movements are gradually losing their traditional shape and new spatial routes are being created. For example, territories are no longer defined by the existence of a rural-urban divide, where the former tended to be characterised by its fixity and social and spatial stagnation, and the latter by intense and diversified paths of mobility (Bell & Osti, 2010). On the contrary, at a time of globalisation, spaces are dealing with constant reconfiguration, one of its main expressions being the intensification of movement that simultaneously affects both rural and urban places. The acceleration of movement is a characteristic of our time, and has introduced a new complexity within rural areas in the sense that new functions are emerging, business activities are diversifying and new social groupings are appearing (Woods, 2007). This process relies on close interdependence between rural and urban areas, resulting in the metamorphosis rather than the disappearance of rural areas.

The main purpose of this book is to unveil a set of dynamics that tends to go against the general insistence on labelling rural areas as stagnant or declining and suffering from similar regressive problems. In order to achieve this purpose, it is essential to see them as places that are 'changing' and 'interconnected' rather than 'stagnating' or 'isolated'. By changing, we mean that there have been many social transformations in rural areas occurring over relatively recent periods. Many of these transformations are the result of intense, ongoing exchanges between different people, settings and geographies. Accordingly, rural-urban but also rural-rural inter-relations on international and national scales contribute greatly to change. Incoming and outgoing migratory flows are perhaps the most visible phenomena, which occur on both very local levels and between widely global areas. Other examples include the activities of rural firms in national and global arenas, the spread of different forms of transportation and dislocation, and the growing information society that enables rural spaces to be connected to the world and that improves new ways of interconnection.

## 1.2 Translocal Ruralism: Mobilities on Various Scale Levels

Considering the processes described above, we have to look at rural spaces from a different perspective. It makes no sense to define them simply as marginalised territories of the globalised world. On the contrary, they are often deeply involved in the process of globalisation through their participation in networks and mobilities between localities on the global scale (Woods, 2007). In this way, they become crucial actors on the national level also. A rural place, like a village, is not completely immune to the flows and networks that circulate all over the world. Rural areas are relational and interconnected spaces, which are constructed by their interrelations with other spaces (Massey, 2005). As such, they should not be defined by their fixity and immobility aspects. Instead, relational spaces are 'open spaces' that are constantly changing through their interrelatedness. From this, it follows that we have to consider other mechanisms that produce and are being produced by these spaces (Lefebvre, 1974). One of them is certainly the dynamics of spatial mobility that are constantly interfering in peoples' everyday lives, not as an external feature but as a process that is locally embedded.

In this argument lies the idea that mobility cannot be defined by antagonism to the notion of fixity (Cresswell, 2006), as if it represented merely the other side. People are moving between different spaces but, once they have moved, they do not cease to engage with the texture and the materiality of the space they have left. They do not move as though they were mere flows; rather, they are translocal actors that connect places through their mobility (Brickell & Datta, 2011). Accordingly, they do not cease to be attached to the real places they move from, but they add the place of arrival to the place of departure (along with other, previous places where they lived). The influx of people to one place, the connections that are established through the migrants when they continue living in a place, and the connections to the remaining population at the place of departure mean that the 'fixity' in a place is part of mobility. Thus, fixity cannot be understood as the other side of stagnation and isolation, because fixity is itself related to mobility.

In line with this, we think that the notion of 'translocal' rather than 'fixity' better catches the idea of mobility and the production of relational space (Brickell & Datta, 2011; Hannerz, 1996; Appadurai, 1996). Central to this idea is the understanding of mobility as a way of connecting and transforming places. A translocal perspective of space brings the activities of mobile actors, such as migrants, to the fore, not only through the activities that occur as they move but also through the consequences that are produced in space through this activity (Smith, 2001). Consequently, a web of networks is established between places that is materialised through repeated communication, flows of knowledge and ideas, and political, cultural and economic activities (Faist, 2000; Hedberg, 2007; Featherstone, Phillips, & Waters, 2007).

A translocal perspective on rural space indicates that people not only move across the geographies of regional and international borders but that they also move beyond the geography of urban nodes and rural peripheries. Where the former have represented the spaces of attraction and the latter the spaces of repulsion, mobility flows and connections instead go in both directions. These processes are more complex