

The Interaction between Urban and Rural Areas

Subjects: [Geography](#) | [Geography, Physical](#)

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The relationships and interactions between rural and urban spaces have long been of interest to territorial sciences. However, approaches to these issues have evolved in line with the changing characteristics of the two types of territories, reflecting new relationships and structures.

urban sprawl

rural–urban integration

countryside urbanisation

deagrarianisation

land use

1. Introduction

Any study of rural–urban relations and interactions requires the fundamental assumption that some spaces can be classified as “urban” and others as “rural”. Although this is indeed true, urban and rural areas do not constitute two separate territories that can be considered in isolation. On the contrary, they are strongly interrelated in many ways, and their connections must be investigated, theoretically and empirically, in terms of identity, causality and effects.

Terms such as *rural vs. urban* and *the country vs. the city* are commonly used to identify the main types of geographical spaces, both in academic circles and colloquially. Defining them, in both cases, usually involves a simplifying conceptual approach to address interdependent and complementary realities, focusing on the main features of their interconnections; hence, the numerous and continuing attempts to derive an almost impossible conceptual delimitation that, until recently, and especially in the case of rural spaces, usually lacks completeness and accuracy ^{[1][2]}.

2. Interaction between Rural and Urban Spaces: Updating the Theoretical Framework

The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to spatial realities that have often been interpreted as opposed, or even antagonistic and divergent ^{[3][4]}, from a dichotomous binary perspective based on alterity to the urban environment. This approach not only represents a simplification in various aspects but also expresses a non-existent homogeneity of rural and urban spaces, as if there were only one model of each category.

The spatial reality is much more complex than the above notion. Moreover, this complexity is increasing, and a complete understanding of the question would require multiple interdisciplinary analyses. This is particularly so today, when hybrid spatial environments [\[5\]](#) and numerous multifunctional rural landscapes are taking shape [\[6\]](#). Although the most intense interactions are taking place in rural spaces that have become integrated into functional urban and peri-urban areas, rural spaces that are more distant or less well connected with urban ones are also experiencing the impact of cities, albeit indirectly; for example, as falling levels of population caused by rural–urban migration [\[7\]](#).

As regards the first aspect, many rural areas are now witnessing the birth of a distinct spatial reality. The term “new rurality” [\[8\]](#)[\[9\]](#)[\[10\]](#)[\[11\]](#) refers to the reconstructed forms of organisation and the functional transformations being observed in spaces that previously had a rural identity and that are now evolving towards a different category of rural space [\[12\]](#)[\[13\]](#). Although the meanings assigned to this term by different theorists do not always coincide—in particular, there are significant conceptual differences between European [\[14\]](#) and Latin American authors [\[15\]](#)[\[16\]](#)[\[17\]](#)[\[18\]](#)[\[19\]](#)[\[20\]](#)[\[21\]](#)—it is generally accepted that the essential features of this “new rurality” consist of an increased mobility of people and goods, the diversification of economic activities and a modification of land use [\[22\]](#)[\[23\]](#).

A major socioeconomic transformation that has taken place in many areas is that of “deagrarianisation” [\[24\]](#)[\[25\]](#)[\[26\]](#)[\[27\]](#)[\[28\]](#)[\[29\]](#)[\[30\]](#)[\[31\]](#), or a reduction in the importance of agrarian activities, in terms of employed population and income and the correspondingly greater weight of non-agrarian forms of occupation. Deagrarianisation leads to a progressive loss of traditional ways of life, such that agrarian activity ceases to constitute the economic base and the main hallmark of rurality. It is a process that responds to the new productive and territorial logics of the globalised economy and has been associated with deruralisation [\[32\]](#) from a perspective based on the premise that the rural environment can be fully identified with agricultural activity. As concerns Spain, deagrarianisation [\[33\]](#)[\[34\]](#)[\[35\]](#) has been cited among the structural causes of the rural exodus, with particular reference to the modernisation of agrarian activity [\[36\]](#). For this reason, it is often viewed as an effect that is generalised and not exclusive to urbanised rural areas.

Another significant change, as a general rule complementary to the above, is the shift in patterns of employment and economic activity towards the services sector, together with the acquisition of a subsidiary residential function with the construction of second homes for the urban population [\[37\]](#)[\[38\]](#)[\[39\]](#).

The historical interaction between rural and urban spaces has evolved incessantly, profoundly transforming relations between the countryside and the city [\[40\]](#) and blurring the boundaries between urban and rural environments. Nevertheless, significant differences remain, and few authors question the existence of a rural–urban divide. Moreover, scholars have observed the gradual consolidation of fissures between different types of rural spaces [\[41\]](#)[\[42\]](#)[\[43\]](#), although they may be concealed by the regular occupational mobility of a large part of the rural population [\[44\]](#)[\[45\]](#).

It is almost universally acknowledged that the main driver of these changes is “rural urbanisation”. This process has many consequences, including the physical modification of the territory and changes in its socioeconomic

structures [46][47][48]. This urbanisation is functional, morphological, landscape-based and cultural, and it takes place not only in areas bordering or readily accessible to large cities but also in more remote territories and those bordering medium-sized and even small cities [49][50][51], which thus configure micropolitan areas [52].

The fact that urbanisation processes are the main factor triggering the territorial mutations that have occurred in many contemporary societies [53][54][55] explains the primacy of the urban-centric standpoint that has been adopted in most studies of rural areas, both past and present [56][57]. Thus, it is very widely accepted that the revitalisation of rural spaces takes place via logics according to which they are modified physically and socially. These logics, moreover, impact the strategies used to obtain the economies of urban agglomeration, such as spatial externalities, from which some rural areas also benefit [58][59][60][61][62][63]. In contrast, other spaces, generally those in peripheral and marginal locations, may suffer adverse effects from backwash, a process associated with the centre–periphery paradigm [64][65][66][67][68][69][70][71][72][73][74].

The urban-centric notion is also related to numerous concepts and words that have been coined to define the changing relations between rural and urban environments: “suburbanisation” [75][76], “peri-urbanisation” [77][78], “rurbanisation” [79][80][81], “exurbanisation” [82], “rural urbanity” [83], “rural gentrification” [84][85][86], “urban countryside”, “infiltration of the city into the countryside” [87], etc. In addition, some of these terms are closely related to a process that has been termed “counter-urbanisation” [88][89][90][91]. The proliferation of recent studies addressing these concepts highlights their conceptual interest and underlines the presence of a renewed dialogue between rural and urban geographies.

Another relevant consideration is the territorial concept of a sprawltown [92][93][94], also identified as “*città diffusa, campagna urbanizzata*” [95][96][97][98][99][100][101][102][103], characterized by the absence of vertical territorial hierarchies from the centre to the periphery, which are replaced by horizontal connections among population centres and by the dispersion of functions [104][105].

It is now widely accepted that the former elements of differentiation between urban and rural contexts have ceased to be operational and that alternative approaches to spatial realities are required. One such approach involves the functional integration of the two types of geographical space, whose signs of identity, such as agricultural activities, are weakening but have not entirely disappeared [106]. One outcome of these changes is the creation of multifunctional spaces and hybrid landscapes [107][108][109], ambiguous spaces in which urban and rural characteristics fade or even disappear as clearly legible spatial units within the landscape [110][111][112].

Recent studies of these questions have adopted a more fully integrated perspective of geographic space, going beyond the dichotomous standpoint, which many believe reflects an anachronistic static perspective [113][114][115][116][117][118][119][120][121][122][123][124][125].

Geographical space has long been viewed and analysed as a continuum, containing a gradual transition from urban to rural and vice versa, without remarkable territorial discontinuities [126]. However, this interpretation has been challenged by some authors [127] and updated and reformulated by others [128][129][130]. Nevertheless, for most

experts, the concept of a spatial continuum is accepted as a gradient of levels of urbanity/rurality ^[131] or as cyclical phases of urbanisation ^[132].

Some authors even deny the usefulness of traditional terminology for different types of spaces (suburban, peri-urban and rururban), claiming that what has been configured is a new model of the disassociated city that is post-industrial or even post-urban ^{[133][134][135][136][137][138]}, which should be viewed as a joined-up mosaic of urban elements within a territorial matrix ^[139] as the result of “metastatic metropolitanisation” ^{[140][141][142]}.

The question of how rural and areas are interrelated has attracted growing interest since the end of the twentieth century ^[143], and increasing numbers of studies have been undertaken in this regard, influencing socioeconomic and land-use planning policies for rural areas and leading to the adoption of new paradigmatic and methodological approaches. This new standpoint might be seen as a “rejuvenation” of rural geographic studies, based on a scientific and epistemological renewal achieved through dialogue and debate among rural and urban researchers seeking to enhance the understanding of developments in this area ^[144]. Although the contemporary approach to rural geography maintains some classical criteria, it also reveals new perspectives and takes increasing interest in the diverse practices and representations of the rural environment and its inhabitants ^{[145][146][147]}.

This evolving research focus first became apparent in the United States and Europe ^{[148][149][150][151][152][153][154][155][156][157][158][159][160][161][162][163][164]} and then later in Latin America ^{[165][166][167][168][169][170][171][172]}, and it is currently becoming accepted in Asia, especially in China ^{[173][174][175][176]}. In the latter country, following the accelerated urbanisation of the countryside under the model of state capitalism applied in China since the late 1970s ^[177], dramatic changes have taken place in land use, with a large-scale conversion from agrarian to urban practices. This development has attracted the attention of numerous researchers from different areas of knowledge, including geography, economics and the environmental sciences ^{[178][179][180][181][182][183]}.

Numerous recent studies have analysed and interpreted the functional territories ^[184] resulting from rural–urban integration or hybridisation ^{[185][186][187][188]} in the area termed the “rural-urban fringe”, viewed as a space with its own unique characteristics ^{[189][190]}. This entity has also been described as the “urban-rural interface” and as being composed of urbanised rural areas, intermediate territories, in-between territories (TiBs), the territories of a new modernity ^{[191][192]} or “hybrid geographies”.

Most studies of these questions have focused on the territorial transformations arising from economic and technical changes (deagrarianisation and tertiarisation, in particular) in the distribution of services and production centres, in physical and virtual accessibility and, especially, in mobility ^[193].

On the other hand, some recent analyses of rurality and urbanity ^{[194][195]} continue to address quantifiable data such as population size ^{[196][197][198][199][200]}, population density and/or distances between settlements of different categories ^{[201][202]}. However, these indicators are relatively ineffective as a means of describing rurality ^{[203][204][205]}, even the multivariate ones incorporating not only population density but also factors such as demographic

dynamics, mobility patterns, migrations and distances to major service centres [206][207][208][209][210]. Very few analyses have also used geographic information techniques for territorial measurement [211][212].

It has been observed that the effects of the urbanisation of rural spaces should be considered according to the specific conditions of both the rural and the urban spaces in which the process takes place [213]. The rationale for this is that the dynamics of urbanisation do not occur in the same way or with the same intensity in all territories. In recent times, both the variety and the complexity of rural spaces have intensified; some are evolving dynamically, while others are characterised by stagnation and decline.

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