

# In what sense ruralization?

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## Abstract

This commentary offers an analysis of Gillen et al.'s (2022) 'Geographies of ruralization'. Through a reading of the authors' conceptualization of 'in-situ' and 'extended' ruralization, I raise two sets of questions. The first pertains to the relationship between ruralization – which the authors conceptualize primarily in terms of rural social reproduction – and transformations in agricultural production and agrarian political economy under contemporary capitalism. The second invites the authors to further elaborate on the historical specificity of the concept of ruralization, the politico-epistemological standpoint of their conceptualization, and the theoretical framework within which the concept is embedded.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, depeasantization, deruralization, extended urbanization, ruralization

'Peasant life is completely committed to survival. Perhaps this is the only characteristic fully shared by peasants everywhere'. So begins *Pig Earth* (1979), the first book in John Berger's *Into their Labors* trilogy. In their paper, 'Geographies of ruralization', Gillen et al. (2022) develop the concept of ruralization as a means of understanding the dynamism of rural survival, focusing principally on the livelihood strategies of smallholders in present-day Southeast Asia. Developed in dialogue with and as a counterpoint to recent theorizations of planetary urbanization and related research on extended urbanization, ruralization is offered as an empirically grounded alternative to the notion that 'the urbanization of everywhere' exists in a 'zero-sum relationship with a residual rural' (Gillen et al., 2022).

In the fields of critical geography and urban studies, the epistemological framework proposed by the theorists of planetary urbanization has helped catalyze a reorientation away from the persistent methodological cityism of research on

urban questions toward more expansive, dialectical-relational approaches to the study of capitalist urbanization and its evolving historical geographies. Gillen et al. argue that while these developments have 'profoundly unsettled' the parcelization of urban and rural – or to use a different lexicon, *city* and *non-city* – and has generated a 'productive vocabulary and toolkit for dissembling the entrenched urban–rural binary', work on planetary/extended urbanization has been primarily concerned to show 'how the urban exceeds its traditional territorial markers'.

The authors seek to unsettle the inherited analytical categories of 'urban' and 'rural'. This is done in two ways, both of which build on the authors' long-standing research in/on Southeast Asia and the rich

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yet underappreciated Southeast Asian tradition of human geographical scholarship on the political economy of urbanization and the relationship between urban and agrarian change. First, they show how the urban and the rural function as categories of practice, indexing socio-spatial differences reproduced through everyday practices of place-making. Second, they emphasize the mutual constitution of the urban and the rural in and through processes of ruralization.

Ruralization, then, is conceptualized as a form of rural spatial practice whose geographies extend well beyond putatively rural places and spaces of agricultural production into urban peripheries, towns, and cities. The emphasis on spatial practices derives from the authors' desire to develop the concept in relation to what they call 'a human-centered geography' – specifically, its 'bottom-up' dimensions. In contrast to scholarship that conceptualizes rural socio-spatial change primarily in terms of urbanization, Gillen et al. call for greater consideration of the relational dynamics through which rural places persist and are reproduced. They argue that despite escalating dispossession, dislocation, and displacement, the rural persists and is actively reproduced through the spatial imaginaries and practices of 'rural people'.

Their paper makes a timely contribution to geographical scholarship by recasting the rural as a locus of change and dynamism. It engages with and extends recent work that has sought, from a range of perspectives, to bring urban studies into closer dialogue with agrarian studies, development studies, and rural sociology often transcending the entrenched urban/rural academic division of labor (e.g. Arboleda, 2016; Ghosh, 2017; Ghosh and Meer, 2021; Gururani, 2020; Paprocki, 2020; see also Balakrishnan, 2019; Brenner and Ghosh, 2022; Cowan, 2018; Gidwani and Ramamurthy, 2018; Harriss-White, 2021; Jacobs, 2018).

In another sense, this paper arrives at a particularly opportune moment in the recent intellectual history of human geography. The publication in English of Henri Lefebvre's (2022) early work on agrarian questions and rural sociology promises to reinvigorate theoretical engagement with the rural in the Anglophone world – a socio-spatial category

that remains, as Gillen et al. rightly argue, relatively undertheorized in geographical scholarship. In this regard, it is significant that Lefebvre, the preeminent philosopher and theorist of *urban* space, found his way to urban questions through observations of transformations induced by extractive industrialization in the rural Pyrenees in the 1950s, noting that 'this irruption of the urban in a traditional rural reality was not simple local chance but...was linked to urbanization, to industrialization, to world-wide phenomena' (Lefebvre quoted in Elden and Morton, 2022: xvi).

There is much to agree with in the authors' contention that in urban geographical scholarship, the rural has largely been treated as historically inert, 'whereby 'rural' elements are assumed to be inherited from the past, and continue on borrowed time'. Change, on the other hand, 'is understood to be driven the urban "side"'. Indeed, the question of the proceeding, in an epistemic sense, from the rural versus the urban 'side' animates the conceptualization presented in their paper – a point I shall return to below. At the same time, the concept itself raises a number of productive questions.

While the authors briefly discuss the relationship between 'the rural' and 'the agrarian', the distinction between these two analytical categories is underspecified. This is particularly crucial as agrarian socio-economic relations drive much of the conceptualization of ruralization and each of its three constitutive dynamics – in-situ ruralization, extended ruralization, and rural returns. I shall focus on the first two. In-situ ruralization refers to continued survival of households in the countryside under conditions of escalating rural dispossession and depeasantization – what the historical sociologist Farshad Araghi has described as 'deruralization' (2009; see also Li, 2010). According to Gillen et al., households in the countryside survive even 'when their farms are not sufficient for them to subsist' by developing and intensifying translocal strategies for securing their means of subsistence, often through a combination of (sub)subsistence production, co-located householding, off-farm work, and remittances.

Closely related is the dynamic of extended ruralization, which refers to transformations in cities and peri-urban zones driven by 'changes in the

countryside and the social action of rural people' (Gillen et al., 2022). Building upon Terry McGee's classic theorizations of *desakota* and *kota-desai*, Gillen et al. argue that constitutively rural peoples and processes often drive socio-spatial transformations that are typically understood to be urbanization. Extended ruralization thus encompasses not only the spatial extension of 'rural dynamics' beyond the countryside but also the various rural imaginaries, strategies, and practices that 'drive action in the city of the present'. This is illustrated through the roles kampungs and *kampung* (rural-like) practices play in the mediation of rural in-migration in urban metropolitan regions by providing spaces of arrival and refuge and by articulating extended networks of kinship, mutual aid, and assistance. Kampung subsidize the urban economy by supporting the functioning, growth, and reproduction of the city 'on the cheap' even as they are pathologized by the state and seen to impede real estate development, capital accumulation, and the attainment of aesthetic ideals of cityness (Gillen et al., 2022; see also Bunnell, 2002; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018).

The discussion of in-situ and extended ruralization thus focuses on the challenges of social reproduction in a rapidly globalizing agrarian political economy. In Indonesia and Malaysia, this has been emblemized by the dramatic expansion of agribusiness-led mono-crop plantations since the 1980s (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016). Yet these processes, which have been of considerable interest to scholars of agrarian capitalism, do not figure in the authors' conceptualization and discussion of ruralization dynamics. Put another way, greater consideration of the state-mediated and capital-led restructuring of primary commodity production – including the expansion in export crop production – that has driven changes in smallholders' patterns of social reproduction will help sharpen the distinction between in-situ and extended ruralization. It will also bring into sharper relief the relationship between ruralization and the proliferation of 'banal operational landscapes' wherein smallholder growers and artisanal producers are incorporated into global commodity chains and circuits of capital (Ghosh and Meer, 2021: 1109). What might

a more integrated account of the *drivers* of smallholder expropriation, agrarian differentiation, and (semi)proletarianization imply for the conceptualization of in-situ and extended ruralization? This question invites greater consideration of the variegated spatial expressions of agrarian change and agro-industrial restructuring *within* regions of agricultural production, whether in terms of transformations in land use, property regimes, tenurial arrangements, land ownership patterns, or holding sizes. Attending to transformations in agricultural production is essential for a second, more fundamental reason. Just as the authors argue that the geographies of ruralization exceed the traditional sphere of the agrarian, so too do the geographies of agrarian capital and labor exceed rural places in the context of a global agrifood system increasingly shaped by finance capital and the supply chain strategies of transnational agribusiness corporations (Bernstein, 2004, 2006; Clapp, 2014).

Ruralization is presented as a corrective to the widely held notion that the countryside is a space of stasis acted upon from the 'outside'. Scholarship that proceeds from the urban 'side', the authors argue, replicates this view even when it attends to the transformation of non-city spaces. While this may be true, the impetus behind an expanded reconceptualization of urbanization, as in the neo-Lefebvrian work on planetary urbanization, is to theorize the restructuring of political-economic space under neoliberalizing capitalism in relation to historically specific drivers, directions, and geographies of socio-spatial and socio-ecological change. Thus planetary urbanization and the associated triadic framework of concentrated, extended, and differential urbanization emerges out of the recognition that in the long-1980s (1) geographies of urbanization are assuming 'new, increasingly large-scale morphologies that perforate, crosscut and ultimately explode the erstwhile urban/rural divide'; (2) state spatial strategies increasingly involve 'articulating vast grids of accumulation and spatial regulation' beyond urban metropolitan regions through large-scale investments in spatial infrastructures in order to channel flows of commodities, raw materials, energy, labor, and capital across transnational space; and (3) transformations in worldwide socio-spatial and regulatory arrangements are leading to the

emergence of new vectors and terrains of urban social struggle (Brenner, 2013: 87–88).

Against this backdrop, the concept of ruralization seeks to account for the ‘relative absence of rural places, people, and scholarship’ in work on planetary/extended urbanization (Gillen et al., 2022). Overcoming this absence, without resorting to unreflexively declensionist narratives, is an exceedingly urgent task in the present conjuncture of proliferating agrarian crises, escalating climate change-induced threats to croplands, and the worldwide expansion of large-scale agribusiness and agrochemical/energy-intensive modes of farming. Yet, in their discussion of ruralization, Gillen et al. do not provide a clear sense of the historical specificity of the concept, which, in turn, limits its utility as a ‘generalizable geographical concept’. Is ruralization to be understood as a set of processes relationally articulated to ongoing processes of extended urbanization observed from the standpoint of the rural? Is it to be understood as a transhistorical phenomenon, emerging out of practices adopted by peasants and smallholders in response to the curtailment of traditional patterns of social reproduction? If not, how have ‘ruralization dynamics’ transformed under different geopolitical-economic conjunctures, and at what levels of abstraction are they to be characterized and conceptualized? For ruralization to perform the conceptual work intended by its authors, descriptive characterizations must be complemented with forms of abstraction and generalization adequate to the analysis of the historically specific dimensions of the processes in question.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly return to the question of urban versus rural ‘sides’. The conceptualization presented by Gillen et al. hinges upon the notion that geographical scholarship proceeding from the rural side can provide distinctive insights into the ‘intermingling of rural and urban activities’. It is imperative to address the political and methodological implications of this proposition. Is the notion of a ‘rural side’ simply a question of ‘linguistic priority’ in geographical scholarship, or does it imply a more thoroughgoing politico-epistemological standpoint? In my reading, the authors hint at the latter, opening the door for the elaboration of a theoretical

framework within which the concept of ruralization might be embedded. Among other things, such a theorization can enable productive articulations to a wide range of interdisciplinary and activist scholarship on counter-hegemonic agrarian social movements for food sovereignty, climate justice, redistributive land reform, repeasantization, and agroecology (e.g. Cid Aguayo and Latta, 2015; Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2010).

‘The word survivor’, Berger writes, ‘has two meanings. It denotes somebody who has survived an ordeal. And it also denotes a person who has continued to live when others disappeared or perished’ (1979: xiv). By drawing attention to the socio-spatial dynamism of rural survival in the context of planetary urbanization, Gillen et al. have paved the way for deeper theoretical engagement with the geographies of actually existing rurality and imaginaries of peasant futures in the Global South and beyond.

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