

## Counterurbanisation in post-covid-19 times. Signifier of resurgent interest in rural space across the global North?

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Counterurbanisation  
 COVID-19 pandemic  
 Rural resurgence  
 Global north rural  
 Urban-rural relations

### ABSTRACT

This review paper draws upon a wide range of diverse international sources to give a still relatively early assessment of the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated a resurgence of counterurbanisation across much of the global North. Whilst it finds and argues that a 'resurgence' was apparent, it may not have been as strong or lasting as was suggested by media reports in particular. Indeed, numerous challenges to any such a resurgence are noted, drawn especially from recent reflections on the pandemic period. Nonetheless, **any** counterurban revival is seen as being significant more widely as it fits with a wider resurgent interest in 'all things rural' that pre-dated COVID-19 but was stimulated further by it. In contrast to the widely celebrated rural, the paper also notes how city life was often seen as unsatisfactory during the pandemic, not least because its usual underpinning by diverse everyday mobilities was strongly compromised. This condition stimulated, in particular, a turn to rural often more for pragmatic than idealistic reasons, such as for health and to have more freedom and space. Overall, the whole COVID-19 experience sits within a range of political questions about access to space centrally involving the rural.

### 1. COVID-19's challenge to cities underpinned by mobilities

'As a sort of stowaway the virus travelled within people's bodies through the global infrastructure of the [urban] "mobile risk society"' (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021: 81).

When the COVID-19 pandemic took off in 2020 and 'upended life in Europe' (Chadwick 2020: np) and way beyond, the immediate geographical foci of media stories were mostly the major cities of each country. COVID-19 was seen, in short, as an 'urban problem' (Boterman 2020). A key reason for this, beyond any culturally embedded assumed 'metrocentric' discourse (Malatzky and Smith 2022), is that these sites expressed directly huge populations at risk and, one might add, were also likely to be the locations of the journalists covering the stories. There was thus nothing surprising that these cities retained strong media interest when lockdowns and similar strategies were adopted to check the virus's progress: a shot of a seemingly 'empty' London, New York, Paris or Tokyo was surely media 'gold dust' given the 'normal' busyness and people-fullness of such places. However, what also quickly developed, and would probably have been much less anticipated if we had known COVID-19 was coming, was how these same cities soon experienced notable lifestyle-orientated criticism, whilst previously 'silent' rural areas assumed a very desirous experiential position widely across

the media and for very many people.

There are at least two other key reasons why cities attracted so much attention, both already implied. First, initially at least, COVID-19 cases **were** very much concentrated there (Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 2021; Batty et al. 2022). This is explained by their sheer numbers of people – overall, in specific buildings and homes, gathered in areas such as shopping centres, passing through – and more specifically by noting the role of population density 'as the progenitor of transmission' (McFarlane 2023: 1553) for the city overall and within many urban homes. Thus, for example, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo portrayed his city as 'a victim of its own density' (McFarlane 2023: 1553). Cities also saw noted expressions of 'transgressive behaviour' (Boterman 2020) that could exacerbate the pandemic's spread, such as failure to stick to social distancing rules. Second, and drawing on the last point, media attention also turned to how the cities were quickly impacted through emergency policy aimed at reducing pandemic transmission by, in particular, substantially reducing population gatherings and flows.

COVID-19 thus led to the 'imposing [of] relative stillness on a mobile world' (Cresswell 2021: 52) and, most notably expressed through lockdown periods, the shutting down of much normal, largely taken-for-granted mobile urban life: from commuting to and from work, visiting friends and relatives, browsing shops, to going for a night out in

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103378>

Received 13 February 2024; Received in revised form 22 July 2024; Accepted 12 August 2024

Available online 22 August 2024

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restaurants, cinemas, bars and clubs and accessing urban amenities generally (Ahrend et al. 2022; Whitaker 2021). Fig. 1 portrays five kinds of intervention that came in across Europe in March 2020 that decimated mobile urban life (also Deutsche Welle, 2020; Kay and Wood 2022). A low urban mobility point in global North countries, measured via Google data (Lozzi et al. 2020), came in April 2020, when public transportation, traffic and walking were down 76%, 65% and 67%, respectively, on pre-COVID-19 levels, and even more so in city centres (Batty et al. 2022). What limited movements that were made at this time largely expressed short-term immediate needs, such as buying groceries or taking limited exercise. Moves were explicitly instrumental and anyone staying 'on the streets' for longer than necessary was immediately suggestive of something illegitimate. As already noted, numerous photographs – photographers had an excuse to be outside – were taken of cities 'looking completely deserted' (Liubchenkova 2020: np), as this cited article demonstrates via pictures from across the globe in 2020.

Numerous researchers have since reflected on this (temporary) death of the mobile city at the pandemic's height. For example, whilst noting how cities have been associated with mobilities for well over a century (reflected in Simmel's classic work, for example; Cairns and Clemente 2023), Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring (2021) draw out, after Urry (2004, 2007), the taken-for-granted centrality of private cars, 'automobility' and acceleration for city life today (also Kesselring and Freudendal-Pedersen 2021). They note how cities are 'built as urban environments for cars ... [with] automobility ... written into the urban fabric' (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021: 83). Suppression of this hegemony during lockdowns saw:

'noise levels ... drastically reduced, and bird songs ... become part of the new normal. Acceleration came to a halt and ... a liveable city ... flourished ... Suddenly, all the things that cities also are other than speed and acceleration were brought to the surface, not least through smell, noise ... and the embodiment of the urban became different' (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021: 85, 87).

Consequently, some commentators soon recognised positives in the physically immobile and small spatial scale city living of COVID-19 lockdowns, expressed well in the celebration of London's nature in McCarthy et al. (2020), for example. This was reinforced when, through looking with relatively unpeopled (*sic.*) clarity at the still and even seemingly 'dead' lockdown cities, a critique emerged of how their spatial positioning, structure and normal operations had encouraged the spread of COVID-19, especially via mobility, from the scale of elevators and subways (Whitaker 2021) to automobility flows, whether by residents or those just passing through. There emerged, in short, a noted sense of mobility as 'pathology' (Cresswell 2021: 54).

Whilst an immobile city could thus be celebrated, general suppression of urban mobility was soon seen to have less welcome consequences. Thus, Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring (2021: 83) also observed that positive ideas of 'cosmopolitanism and world society [are] grounded in mobilities', whilst Cresswell (2021) wrote of a danger of a turn to 'sedentary' (Sheller and Urry 2006) rejection of 'the various kinds of joy and opportunity that arise from the ways we move' (Cresswell 2021: 61). It should also be noted that only some types of mobility were suppressed. 'Virtual mobilities' grew substantially, with all the implications this had for a much more physically emplaced way of everyday living: the real and metaphorical teenager locked away in their bedroom. Overall, the everyday and ubiquitous dynamism that is such a normal and widely celebrated feature of urban life was largely stopped in an 'immobility turn' (Cairns and Clemente 2023). Or, as Pileva and Markov (2021: 558) understatedly put it, 'factors, generally attractive to the urban environment ... in the situation of repeated closing and opening ... significantly diminish [ed] their meaning'. Out of this disruption, a new city COVID-19 metanarrative quickly replaced exciting, dynamic and sophisticated living not with being at peace with urban nature but with public feelings of stress, anxiety and general mental ill health challenges (Malatzky et al. 2020; Batty et al. 2022).

Geographical alternatives to such city living were therefore sought by many of those who were able.

A first alternative geographical focus to the city was largely forced by the lockdown policies deployed. With people made to 'stay at home' for much of the day, the 'home zone' (Wolday and Böcker 2023: 1281) attracted more everyday attention than usual (Ahrend et al. 2022). Besides issues of overcrowding (McFarlane 2023), the experience for many poorer households especially – highlighting the importance of taking a social class perspective when analysing the uneven impact of the pandemic<sup>1</sup> – exactly how a home-centred lifestyle could and should play out attracted much attention. For example, how should a house be organised to best suit those experiencing the 'mobile immobility' of being forced to stay home but also having to be highly active online (Kesselring and Freudendal-Pedersen 2021), as many of us academics were? However, if the home zone was seen as fundamentally unsuitable, attention could turn to creating one elsewhere, with more and better space and greater comfort (Duque-Calvache et al. 2021): 'moving house'. This perhaps required a flight to the suburbs (Batty et al. 2022), or even to the more distant countryside, the latter further encouraged by rurality's resurgent appeal, introduced next.

## 2. A Benign and active rural for COVID-19 times

### 2.1. Space for living

Away from the seemingly insalubrious cities, and underpinned by commonplace dualistic ways of thinking (Boterman 2020), the countryside, as the city's opposite (Williams 1973), was soon picked up for praise in pandemic news reports (Kay and Wood 2022) and social media (Kay 2020). Here it was valorised less as just a stereotyped space of relatively uneventful rusticity and more as one of safety and purity, control, simplicity and innocence, even freedom and active inspiration (Kay 2020; Malatzky et al. 2020; Pileva and Markov 2021). Not simply reducible to being seen as just a 'safe haven' (Maclaren and Philip 2021) – although, initially at least, it was relatively virus-free (Pileva and Markov 2021) – the countryside's low population/COVID-19 density, open spaces allowing self-expression that could be accessed relatively legitimately, and all-round clean air became clearly marked as a potential source for feelings of rejuvenation, connection and inspiration in such troubled times. Its appeal epitomised an anti-(urban)-mobility 'turn to the local ... [with] invigorated **localism**' (Cresswell 2021: 59). In short, 'rural amenity', albeit 'an often hazily conceptualised and defined concept' (Argent and Plummer 2024: 9) and a 'collective re-enchantment by verdure' (Kay 2020: 1039) seemingly provided a space for 'retreat, respite and replenishment' (Kay and Wood 2022: 281).

A powerful current which epitomised this highly mediated pro-rural attraction has been labelled 'cottagecore' (Kashi 2020; Reggev 2020); similarly, 'cottage country' in Ontario, Canada (Weedon et al. 2022: 736). First emerging on the Tumblr computer application in 2014, cottagecore had earned its name and #cottagecore hashtag by 2018

<sup>1</sup> Such a perspective extends in many directions but not least to noting how the rate of COVID-19 illness and death was highly associated with socio-economic factors (Sorci et al. 2020; Canatay et al. 2021), which 'explained' higher pandemic rates in BAME communities, for example (Do and Frank 2020). This can be explained by diverse factors that facilitated COVID-19 spread and/or impact: from poorer people living in more crowded conditions – at home, in neighbourhoods – to being in 'essential worker' (Do and Frank 2020) jobs where distancing was not possible, such as healthcare, transport and personal services, to being generally less healthy and so more susceptible to the virus. A further key factor was how much 'power distance' a country had, defined as its established hierarchy (Canatay et al. 2021), that led to especially high fatalities in supposedly rich countries (Sorci et al. 2020). Such variation was, interestingly, somewhat suppressed by lockdown to a degree equalising experiential conditions (Canatay et al. 2021).

Case based self-isolation mandated	Sz		Ge	It	Be Sw	De UK		No	Au Fr	Sp		
Social distancing encouraged				It Sp		Ge De Be			Au Fr No Sw Sz UK			
Public events banned				It Au		Be Fr Sp De Sz No Sw					Ge	UK
School closure ordered		It				De No Sp Au Be Fr Ge Sz				Sw		UK
Lockdown ordered				It			Sp	Au Fr	Be De	Sz	Ge	No UK
Date in March	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24

Key: Au Austria; Be Belgium; De Denmark; Fr France; Ge Germany; It Italy; No Norway; Sp Spain; Sw Sweden; Sz Switzerland; UK United Kingdom

Fig. 1. Five key COVID-19 Interventions across Europe in March 2020 key: Au Austria; Be Belgium; de Denmark; Fr France; Ge Germany; it Italy; No Norway; Sp Spain; Sw Sweden; Sz Switzerland; UK United Kingdom.

(Source: redrawn from O’Hare and van Elsland 2020: np)

(Johnston 2022) but really took off when COVID-19 hit. Largely an internet phenomenon, its ‘glossy narratives’ (Weedon et al. 2022: 736) depicted an escapist ‘bucolic dreamland ... with a heavy dose of nostalgia’ (Kashi 2020: np) of country cottages and pre-industrial crafts and lifestyles. This even extended to a *Cottagecore Coloring Book* with ‘pages of cottages, wildflowers, and the pastoral lifestyle’ (Ulysses Press, 2021: cover) to colour in!

Reinforcing such rural appeal further were emerging stories within an enthusiastic media of just how resilient, socially cohesive and resistant to disruption some rural communities could be (Maclaren and Philip 2021; Glass et al. 2023). This especially came through in inspiring stories of voluntary sector (Markey et al. 2021) efforts to assert ‘community’, albeit - as Glass et al. (2023) stress - that this varied notably between rural places.

What came through particularly strongly in this overall highly positively imagined and articulated inspirational rural was its association with the possibility of attaining ‘refuge in nature’ (Doughty et al. 2023: 661), boosted further when expressed as a literally out-of-touch (and largely illegitimate) desire during COVID-19 urban confinement. Celebration of nature was one aspect of the immobile city noted positively by some, as noted above, but this celebration was much fuller for the countryside. As with the rural generally, however, it was a highly selective and mediated association - forgetting, for example, that the virus itself may be seen to some extent to be an expression of ‘nature’ – and once again hardly new. Nonetheless, COVID-19 provoked ‘a new visibility ... and perhaps a re-enchantment by ... the natural world’ (Kay 2020: 1038; see McCarthy et al. 2020). Typically, this was again often set up dualistically, as rural-nature versus urban-artifice.

In response to all of these representational expressions that established a nature-rich ‘mediated countryside [as] idealized escape’ (Kay and Wood, 2022: 278; also Schorn et al. 2024 on ‘discourse coalitions’), it is quite unsurprising that efforts to experience rural ‘coronavirus holidays’ (Kay 2020: 1039) were soon sought by many. A desire arose in many urban residents to at least get an inspiring dose of what natural history journalist Patrick Barkham (2020) evocatively termed ‘green Prozac’. For some, however, a periodic short fix was not enough, neither was deep at-home internet immersion in cottagecore (Johnston 2022). Instead, many sought more comprehensively to reduce urban lockdown stresses through deeper direct engagement with the countryside - accessing green space, experiencing better air quality, feeling generally safer (Ahrend et al. 2022) – through more permanent (*sic.*) counterurban residential relocation.

## 2.2. Counterurban resurgence

‘In the countries of the West, the pandemic has given further encouragement to those city workers who wish to leave their house in the city and live in less congested, more environmentally attractive and ... more pandemic-friendly locations’ (Batty et al. 2022: 455).

Clearest in countries with relatively high numbers of second homes, such as Spain (Duque-Calvache et al. 2021; González-Leonardo et al. 2022a, 2022b), Sweden (Åberg and Tondelli 2021; Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022) or Japan (Fielding and Ishikawa 2022), relocation to these houses in tourist areas was a fairly immediate striking population relocation feature of the pandemic (Gallent and Hamiduddin 2021; Gallent et al. 2023). Whilst the destination could be (sub)urban, it was soon noted that a rural location for the majority was no spatial coincidence but an essential part of their appeal. However, and not least from the wider ‘rediscovery of outside green spaces’ (Gallent et al. 2023: 7), it was soon noted that all the rural properties being occupied by former urban residents were not second homes. Many families’ relocation could thus be less easily reduced to an almost spontaneous ‘panic mobility’ (Cohen 2020). Instead, they signalled a more developed if still quite sudden resurgence in counterurbanisation (Colomb and Gallent 2022; McManus 2022).

Counterurban resurgence was soon noted for many countries across the global North. At the time mostly reported anecdotally and often quite passionately via the media (Colomb and Gallent 2022; for example, Marsh 2020) – reflecting the rural’s aforementioned broader media celebration - only now are more comprehensive and carefully noted and argued academic studies emerging of what occurred. A set of case studies from six global North countries, edited by Francisco Rowe and colleagues (Rowe et al., 2023b), provides an excellent measured account of what took place. All six countries – Spain, Germany, Sweden, Japan, Australia, Great Britain – showed ‘an impressive degree of consistency between their stories’ (Rowe et al., 2023b: 4). All had a notable decline in internal migration overall during COVID-19, a vital qualifier to backdrop any other trends noted and a further indication of the pandemic’s suppression of mobilities. This was especially reductive of movement to cities, and especially noted for some sub-groups, such as young adults in Germany (Stawarz et al. 2022). At the same time, however, the internal migration that remained generally became relatively more pro-rural (Halfacree and Rivera 2012) for most countries, even if this could emphasise the suburbs as destination more than ‘true’

countryside, as for Stockholm, Sweden (Vogiazides and Kawelerowicz 2022) and Australia's cities (Perales and Bernard 2022; Argent and Plummer 2024; also Borsellino et al. 2022). In short, whilst talk of any mass 'urban exodus' was clearly inappropriate and too much of a media spin (Colomb and Gallent 2022; Rowe et al., 2023a), a noted boost to the residential appeal of rurality in COVID-19 times did nonetheless come through.

This cautious suggestion of COVID-19's relative boost to counterurbanisation is taken further analytically in case studies, where recognition of the geographical selectivity as to which rural areas were most popular is made (Rowe et al., 2023b). Thus, in Sweden, in contrast to an emphasis on migration to the suburbs for Stockholm (Vogiazides and Kawelerowicz 2022), Åberg and Tondelli (2021) asserted a population renaissance for the island of Gotland, albeit once again especially to second homes, that they felt could even be indicative of an emerging new and wider pro-rural Gröna Vågen (Green Wave), last seen in the 1970s. More broadly, Membretti et al. (2022b: 19) noted an 'unprecedented momentum for remoteness and remote places' across much of Europe being boosted significantly by the pandemic.

Numerous other studies have also shown evidence for at least some pandemic resurgent counterurbanisation, even if it was far from universal or uniform, as an OECD overview emphasised (Ahrend et al. 2022). These include further evidence from Germany of a desire for a greener residential environment (Dolls and Mehles 2021), urban residents moving somewhere more rural in France (Sagnard 2021; Millet et al. 2022), relocation from the Randstad's four biggest cities in the Netherlands (Klopper and Kooiman 2021), COVID-19-enhanced internal migration to rural Bulgaria (Pileva and Markov 2021), and movement out of Oslo in Norway (Tønnessen 2021). Whilst the US did not seem to have any mass urban loss, some upsurge was again noted by both media and research (compare Hughes 2020; Whitaker 2021; Ngo 2022), with population loss especially from metropolitan areas with higher COVID-19 death rates and by those in 'telework-capable occupations' (Whitaker, 2021: np). On the same continent, Markey et al. (2021) and Weeden et al. (2022) noted migration of formerly urban residents into rural Canada.

For many of these countries, of course, counterurbanisation was not a new development but was simply boosted by the pandemic (Ramachandran 2021; Schorn et al. 2024). However, it should also be noted that prior to COVID-19 many rural areas across the global North were in population decline, with a 'culture of hopelessness' even noted for much of the rural USA (Ngo 2022; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018), for example. Some of these 'left behind places' now began a degree of population resurgence, such as parts of remoter rural Europe (Membretti et al. 2022a). For Japan, rural population growth expressed a notable challenge to over 70 years of population loss for 'the emptier parts' (Fielding and Ishikawa 2022: 8), whilst Borsellino et al. (2022) cautiously noted potential for some repopulation of parts of otherwise declining rural Australia. In Estonia, Tammaru et al. (2023) observed the potential of a growth in what had been very modest counterurbanisation – and even then often associated with periods of economic bust – during the pandemic, notably by higher-income families with children, for countering the country's rural aging and loss of educated people.

### 2.3. Challenges to resurgent counterurbanisation

It was noted earlier how the 'rural' many sought to access through COVID-19 times – whether or not involving migration – was highly mediated in an overwhelmingly positive manner, epitomised by cottagecore. Emphasis was overwhelmingly on the rewarding aspects to be found in rural space that were supposedly then absent or weakly expressed in the city. Recognition of this selective rural representation and its articulation through 'discourse coalitions' (Schorn et al. 2024) Rowe et al., 2023b, for example, immediately suggests a potential limitation for any resurgent counterurbanisation: namely, experience of what living in the countryside today is truly like 'all round' on the

ground: more-than-representational rurality (Halfacree and Rivera 2012). Challenges that come with such actual rural living in 2023 can be observed in several ways.

First, whilst urban services declined markedly during the COVID-19 lockdown, this was mostly a temporary loss. However, after moving to the countryside, many newcomers would have become quickly aware of just how ingrained low service provision is for most rural areas today, with the consequent need often to travel long distances – using private transport, as public transport is typically also very poor – for shops, entertainments, schools and so on (Ramachandran 2021). As Markey et al. (2021: iii) put it more broadly, the pandemic soon 'exposed and exacerbated existing facilities and structural problems associated with the state of rural infrastructure and services'.

Second, as with services, so too are rural jobs often very limited in number and type. A frequent issue here that has received notable critical comment, is the notoriously poor quality of broadband internet in many rural places. Although long recognised (for example, Chen and Wellman 2004), it was soon widely highlighted as a critical limitation across the global North on the potential for rural work during (and following) the pandemic (for example, de Luca et al. 2020; Ruiz-Martínez and Esparcia 2020; Åberg and Tondelli 2021; Maclaren and Philip 2021; Markey et al. 2021; Ngo 2022). A core consequence of this is that many rural areas remain highly unsuitable to host many of today's spatially relatively free jobs and the celebrated 'digital nomads' (Cook 2023) who were seemingly otherwise further boosted by the strongly pandemic-catalysed development and normalisation of Zoom, Teams and so on (Batty et al. 2022). Moreover, whilst workers were typically encouraged to work remotely online (if they could) during the pandemic, there soon developed renewed efforts by many employers to get them 'back to the office', at least for some days each week (for example, Tapper 2023). This clearly makes residence in a relatively remote rural location a less practical option and raises the spectre of long commutes. On top of this, it should be recognised not only that many jobs cannot be done (well) remotely (Pileva and Markov 2021; Gallent et al. 2023), even for some days of the week, but also that notable online work stress and fatigue can develop (Colomb and Gallent 2022; González-Leonardo et al. 2022a).

A third barrier to resurgent counterurban living is less immediately practical and more broadly cultural and relates directly to how rural living in 2023 – 'lives of the rural' (Halfacree 2006) – is imagined to play out. Soon realising that 'village life' is not always in the ever-sunny world of cottagecore, newcomers to the countryside will also soon have their sight, smell, sounds and touch all sensing and experiencing at least some aspects of how that space is being used today – 'rural locality' (Halfacree 2006) – which may be far from how it was 'sold' during the pandemic – 'representations of the rural' (Halfacree 2006). For example, especially often intensive landscapes of 'productivist' agriculture (Halfacree 2006) can clash notably with what newcomers may expect and hope for. A powerful suggestive example of how this could develop comes from Caffyn's (2021) research on tensions over the intensive and sense-heavy poultry production landscapes of Herefordshire and Shropshire in England, where issues over 'smell, traffic [including noise], visual impacts, pollution' (p.10) stand out sharply. This study having been done pre-pandemic, one can only imagine how (post-) COVID-19 rural newcomers may feel about experiencing the same kind of intensive agriculture that many may also associate with the emergence and spread of that very virus.<sup>2</sup> More generally, simply not being able to make the cultural transition to 'rural living' will constrain the extent of counterurban settlement, as has long been acknowledged (for example, Cloke et al. 1998).

Whilst only really a presence in the background thus far, the attitudes and feelings of already-existing rural residents may often present a fourth barrier to post-COVID-19 rural settlement. Here it should be

<sup>2</sup> For a broader related discussion of possible links between intensive agriculture and pandemics more widely, see LyMBERY (2020).

noted again the relative poverty and perceived marginality felt by many rural people, such as in the USA (Ngo 2022; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). To a degree reflecting this, resentment of ‘urban people’ coming into rural places during COVID-19 was certainly noted by the media, not least stemming from a fear that these ‘strangers’ would bring illness with them and also be a burden on already stretched local resources and services (for example, Goodwin-Hawkins 2020; Guardian 2020). Such antipathy can develop further into promoting ‘rural revanchism’ (Halfacree 2023), understood as the attempted reassertion of a relatively narrowly defined ‘traditional’ rural against pushes for the diversification of such a space that ‘newcomers’ at least symbolise, notwithstanding their class and other selectivity. We await research to explore if this has occurred.

Besides the experiences of ex-urban ‘internal’ migrants, the fate of immigrants – international migrants – in many rural locations during the pandemic also suggests limitations on post-COVID-19 counter-urbanisation. Whilst such migrants are now increasingly recognised now as being essential for the everyday functioning of many rural economies and societies (de Luca et al. 2020; Collins 2021; Gruber et al. 2022) – somewhat ironically a recognition often largely as a consequence of how they were (mis)treated during the pandemic - their experiences during COVID-19 suggests an often less welcoming rural space. This overlaps with a rise in rural racism during the pandemic with, in particular, BAME people perceived as ‘out of place’ in the countryside (for example, Taylor 2020; Helps et al. 2021). Certainly, in general, it was wise for rural newcomers quickly to engage directly with established residents or risk a reactionary xenophobic response – further rural revanchism - in this time of heightened and scrutinised people-in/out of-place awareness. This could go beyond just the (number) ‘plate shaming’ of cars from outside the local area, as reported for Atlantic Canada (Battis and Jones 2020), for example.

It is clear from all of these points so far that it is important to reiterate the **selectivity** of people who could successfully engage with and experience successful counterurbanisation over the pandemic, even if some trends were towards less selectivity, such as involving more younger adult migrants (Pileva and Markov 2021; Colomb and Gallent 2022; Kay and Wood 2022). Once again, as with the impact of COVID-19 on the population, class was a core variable, with those in the higher social classes being more able overall both to relocate and to relocate successfully. This has been widely noted and typically explained in terms both of the higher classes having more resources all round and of often working in more spatially flexible occupations (compare Åberg and Tondelli 2021; Pileva and Markov 2021; Colomb and Gallent 2022; Membretti et al. 2022b; Tamaru et al. 2023). Also once again, of course, this is not a novel finding for counterurbanisation but provides a clear contextual issue to reflect on explicitly within any evaluation of the practice’s resurgence.

Reiterating these qualifications to the potential for a longer-term revitalised counterurbanisation, some studies are now even beginning to suggest ‘a back to the city trend’ (Hamiduddin and Gallent 2024: 347) or a re-urbanisation. For example, based on Welsh research, Hamiduddin and Gallent (2024: 346) recognise at the very least ‘some ebbing of the tide’, as practical limitations to actually living in rural Wales today (Colomb and Gallent 2022) become expressed by return migration. In summary, four key factors influencing erstwhile counterurbanisers to return to the city are:

‘forced or voluntary return of old working patterns; ... rebalancing of utility and exchange considerations in housing consumption choices; ... shortcomings in the “expat” lifestyles ... encountered in the countryside; and ... transformation of early hostility towards [them] into new policy and planning restrictions’ (Hamiduddin and Gallent 2024: 348).

How more geographically ubiquitous any such re-urbanisation trend has become remains to be demonstrated but an interesting reflection was made early on by Tønnessen (2021) in her suggestion that many

out-migrants from Oslo, Norway, may not return as they had relatively weak ties to the city, not least through being born elsewhere and working as spatially flexible teleworkers.

#### 2.4. For greener mobile cities

It is clear that where ‘the city’ is situated within any evaluation of the relative practical appeal of the rural to post-COVID-19 urban (or rural) residents also represents a potential check on resurgent counter-urbanisation (or re-urbanisation). Specifically, attention can be given to if and how the post-COVID-19 city (Batty et al. 2022) is quickly learning lessons from its pandemic experience to make itself a more robust and positive residential experience: ‘cities ... perceived as attractive living and working environment [s]’ (Wolday and Böcker 2023: 1281). How, in short, from the ‘forced experiment’ (Acuto 2020: 318) and through as open a debate as possible (Nathan and Overman 2020), can the urban ‘offer’ be improved for all of those living there? Certainly, many questions and issues have been raised about the everyday lived sustainability of the ‘compact city’, where ‘places of work, rest and play are contiguously arranged in medium to high-density public-transit orientated settlements’ (Lennon 2021: S212). Some sense of the range and content of these is given in Fig. 2’s overview. How these are responded to through policy, design and so on will have considerable implications for the relative residential attractiveness of an urban as compared to a rural home.

There are at least two connected core issue within these debates about urban futures with clear implications for counterurbanisation. The first is that of the desired place and relative ranking of the different mobilities inherent within everyday urban society. Whilst a dominant policy across the global North in response to the transcendent global sustainability challenge had become prior to COVID-19 a push for ‘compact and walkable mixed-use urban neighbourhoods’ (Batty et al. 2022: 451) – thereby, implicitly at least, promoting walking mobilities over automobility - the pandemic exposed how its experience for residents could all too easily shift from emplaced community to sedentary entrapment (Cresswell 2021). This was especially the case for the less well off, as those with more resources, as well as generally having more private space, were also far more able to avoid entrapment through various rural engagements, including counterurbanisation, as noted earlier. For sustainable **and resilient** cities (Kesselring and Freudendal-Pedersen 2021), whilst normalised over-dependency on everyday (auto)mobilities must be challenged, consequent more localised living spaces – revitalised place-based communities – must be both ‘human-scale’ **and** ‘liveable’ (Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021: 93). How successfully this is achieved will be a key factor impacting on future counterurbanisation, not just in pandemic times but more widely, as those with the means to make a difference in where they live weigh up the relative merits of urban and rural living.

A second core issue merits drawing-out from this general desire for a human-scale and liveable city. This concerns people’s access to ‘green and blue’ spaces within them i.e. ‘urban nature’. Resurgent interest in ‘therapeutic landscapes’ as the pandemic developed, stimulated by a popular search for such spaces (exemplified by empirical research in the Netherlands, for example [Doughty et al. 2023]) – as already noted, especially focused on rural locations – soon foregrounded how ‘we need to inject nature throughout our cities’ (Gillis 2021: S237). In any emergent attempt at such a ‘structured reordering of access to nature’ (Foley and Cumbreña 2021: 281), its placement, accessibility and promotion in the city must be a central challenge and, of course, be fundamentally attentive to ‘the challenge of equity’ (Dobson 2021: 9). If this can be achieved then, arguably, pressure for full-scale counterurban residential relocations may decline.

#### 2.5. Conclusion: all to play for

In overview of their journal edition’s findings, Rowe et al. (2023b)

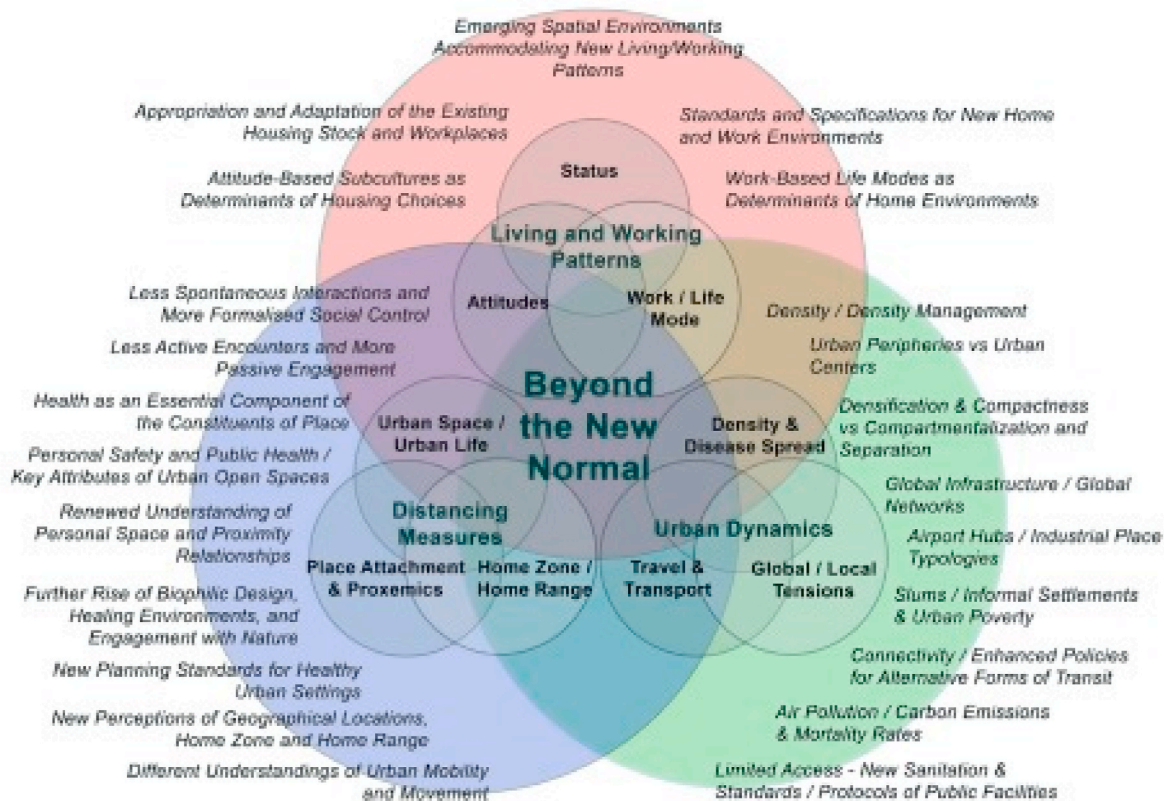


Fig. 2. Post-COVID-19 urban Re-design issues for consideration. (Source: Salama 2020)

were probably wise to ‘sit on the fence’ as regards the long-term scope and impact of the highly qualified counterurbanisation that occurred through the COVID-19 pandemic in many countries. Whilst they saw the pandemic overall as ‘just a temporary interruption of business as usual in internal migration behaviour’ (p.5), they also note how ‘even a short-lived period of disruption can have longer-term consequences ... [and] COVID-19 may have ... whetted people’s appetite for greener and more spacious environments’ (*ibid.*). In other words, even without any strong sense of ‘counterurban resurgence’ from today’s perspective and certainly not any more general urban-to-rural ‘exodus’ (Whitaker 2021), the pandemic-catalysed pro-rural focus may well have a range of lasting consequences. Not least with respect to counterurbanisation, it may well be less a case of ‘new geographies but rather [the] accelerat [ion] and amplify [ication of] existing trends’ (Schorn et al. 2024: 2).

For example, a core issue that emerged through the pandemic counterurban experience was the practicality of working in rural environments using the latest computer-focused technologies, albeit noting the class and occupational selectivity of those who can so work. There was certainly a big rise in and development of computer information communications technology during COVID-19, making much rural working more practically feasible (Rowe et al., 2023b). The global North saw an acceleration of ‘working-from-home practices enabled by the digital revolution’ (Ahrend et al. 2022: 6), with less stigma in so working and benefits noted for both employers and employees from such practices (Crisuolo et al. 2021). Whilst there has been some stepping-back since the lockdowns ended, questions ‘raised ... about the necessity of working in city offices and daily commuting’ (Stawarz et al. 2022: 9) will surely feed into wider debates about more hybrid forms of work (for example, Haag 2021), where ‘hybridity’ includes the locations where a job can take place.

More widely, however, pandemic counterurbanisation’s expression of renewed interest in ‘all things rural’ by a largely urban population not

only challenges any assumed hegemonic ‘metrocentric discourse ... in discussions about ... social, political, and economic systems’ (Malatzky and Smith 2022: 140, 134) but clearly raises numerous questions about the fate of rural places across the global North today (Kay 2020; Kay and Wood 2022). A number of these questions are given in Table 1, further indicating some of the numerous groups, interests and priorities involved in ongoing struggles for the ‘right to be rural’ (Weeden et al. 2022). Finally, though, if there is lasting resurgence in the popularity of the countryside and rural living widely across the global North, stimulated at least in part by to the experience of COVID-19, what will be the fate of the already established rural population? Here, things are also very uncertain: from their rural Wales research, Hamiduddin and Galent (2024) not only observed the re-urbanisation trend but also a still-enhanced demand for second and holiday homes that must surely impact on local housing supply and prices for the resident population.

In overall conclusion therefore, after being clearly shaken-up and invigorated via that ‘stowaway’ COVID-19 virus, the fate of rural space and place today across the global North – there was not space to discuss the global South – is highly alive culturally, socially and politically, with surely very much to play for. And from this, it thus seems certainly true that ‘Rural futures ... [will be] inherently difficult, entangled and “wicked”’ (Malatzky and Smith 2022: 141) ...

**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Keith Halfacree:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

**Declaration of competing interest**

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Table 1**  
Some questions Relevant to the fate of the rural global north in the shadow of COVID-19.

Can the practicalities of 'home-working', especially associated with computer-based technology, be developed quickly enough to diversify the rural workforce?
How much will urban voices' overview on and of the rural, with their often-critical perspectives on the status quo and suggestions for alternatives, be listened to and acted on?
Can the elusive 'rural community' become more fully realised through inspiration from the self-care and self-sufficiency expressed by 'buy local' schemes and other communitarian initiatives during COVID-19?
Will there be a further clampdown on rural second homes and a renewed urgent foregrounding of the rural housing unaffordability/inaccessibility issue more widely?
Where will the resurgent land rights and access debate – strong in the UK (Shrubsole 2019; Hayes 2020) -go with respect to opening the rural more fully to visitors and inspiring them to come?
Building on its near veneration throughout COVID-19, will there be a revival in pre-Christian rural celebrations of nature and the Earth?
Can those engaging with the rural get past the 'ideological mystification' that fails to recognise it as a space as capitalist as the city?
How well can rural places be (oversimply) summarised as havens for incomers but prisons for established residents? How can this divide be broken down?
How much can the potential for local rural space to become a core site for sustainable food production be realised as global food insecurity and its reliance on vulnerable international trade flows becomes more widely recognised?
Can the largely online appeal of cottagecore for simplicity and anti-modernity in everyday life be firmed up and connected to more emplaced and practiced rural experiences celebrating wellness, sustainability and social connectivity?
How fully will roles – actual and potential – played by immigrants and their offspring for the everyday reproduction of many rural places be recognised, celebrated and more positively realised?
Especially for remoter rural areas still losing population, can resurgent interest in 'sustainable nature-based recreation, landscape enjoyment and pilgrimage and hiking activities ... boost the development of a new form of slow, sustainable, and proximity tourism enhancing the value of local cultural and natural heritage and human capital' (de Luca et al. 2020: 129)?
Overall, can we get past the reactionary and exclusionary currents that are strong in rural revanchism and progress towards a 'Good Countryside' (Shucksmith 2018)?

(Source: drawing on Halfacree 2023 and many sources cited in the bibliography)

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all who supported him in producing this paper but most especially Cornelia Reiher who kicked it all off by inviting me to speak in Berlin and supporting the whole special edition.

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