Rural Destinations:
Gentrified, or Satellites in the Global Economy?

Abstract

In this paper, I examine inequality in rural destination communities by accounting for in-migrants' origins in the global economy. Using a database of inter-county migration flows and a ranking of US cities' global economic integration, I explore how migration flows from major economic centers contributed to development in 50 rural satellite counties where the most globally connected urban migrants settled in the highest proportions between 1995 and 2000. By relating inequality across and within rural counties to a hierarchical network of migration flows, the paper describes how widening divisions at the local level relate to the society-wide prevalence of inequality. I argue that this emphasis on migration illuminates an important dimension of difference in modern rural places, offering insight for effectively targeting rural policy.

I. Introduction

Once defined by generally uniform remoteness, low population density, and natural resource dependence, rural places are growing more disparate. Communities develop new industrial dependencies in response to globalizing markets, and in the US they see uneven developments in transportation and communication. As a result, patterns of spatial inequality have emerged in which rural communities are as different from each other as they are from cities (Falk and Lobao 2003). Rural sociologists point to the role of in-migration when deciphering why such inequities persist (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2008), but pay insufficient attention to in-migrants' diverse origins. This paper considers the influence that in-migration from specific major cities had on economic development in rural destination counties in the1990's. It contextualizes destinations in the global economy, focuses on inequality embodied within and between rural counties, and offers insights for targeting rural policies and programs.

Despite awarding considerable focus to urban-rural migration, sociologists do not typically examine variability between rural destination communities, or how they relate to larger patterns of inequality. Lobao et al. (2008) contend that when studying inequality, typical social science approaches are inattentive to scale and segmented by boundaries separating disciplines and sub disciplines. As a result, we lose site of the fact that inequalities nest within each other at different spatial extents, and that migration helps to mold those nested patterns. For example, rural demographers recognize destination communities as unique examples of economic development, but overlook the variation in their development. They explain domestic migration as the result of broad demographic and economic trends, or simply matters of household choice, but rarely connect rural gentrification to social stratification more broadly. We discuss only passively, the connections between rural destinations, and the larger architecture of economic inequality that dominates contemporary stratification research.

This paper considers migrants' origins to be a meaningful dimension of difference across rural destinations due to the non-random sorting of households that constitutes American domestic migration. I theorize that newcomers embody material links between locations in the interconnected and hierarchical global economic system. Depending on their place of origin, urban-rural movers catalyze specific forms of development, which give rural destinations unique status in the global economy. I explore the empirical bases of these relationships through a demographic comparison of different county groupings meant to represent two forms of development. I identify 50 rural "satellite" counties that received the highest percentages of globally connected in-migration flows between 1995 and 2000, and assemble an average economic profile that I compare to that of the 50 most gentrified counties identified in paper two. This comparison illustrates that wealth inequality measured by home values expanded through different development processes, and at different spatial scales.

II. Background

Disparity across Destinations

Widespread migration to rural destinations now sets several communities throughout the US apart. Beginning in the 1970's, rural destinations proved to be an exception to the much more widespread trend of rural population decline. Frey (2004) observes from a national demographic analysis that these rural counties show few signs of being rural:

> *A sharp distinction that used to exist between metro and nonmetro areas, with respect to demographic attributes, has also become blurred as some nonmetro areas have become 'exurban' extensions to expanding metros and are taking on residential attributes that were previously associated with the suburbs.* (87)

Exhibiting demographic and economic growth, rural destinations import prosperity through migration, without necessarily being located in or near a metropolitan area.

With the emergence of modern rural destinations on the American demographic landscape, there has been widespread acknowledgment that the bases of our rural classification methodologies stand on shifting ground (Brown and Cromartie 2003; Lichter and Brown 2011). Frey (2004) argues that historical rural "synergies between function, form, and demographic attributes no longer hold", attributing this change to advancements in transportation and communications that have allowed greater economic integration, as well as a new status of cities in the migration hierarchy (Frey, 2004, 67-68). Consequently, traditional rural thresholds of remoteness and density are no longer in synch with historical economic profiles of rural places.

Despite compelling arguments that the relevance of the term "rural" is slowly fading into a more subjective realm (Halfacree 2011), poor communities in the United States rely on being labeled "rural" in order to qualify for financial support. These policies recognize highly variable material disparities persisting across the traditional urban-rural continuum, and despite masking tremendous diversity, they help anchor the term in the academic lexicon. In arguing for the continued relevance of rural social sciences, Lichter and Brown (2011) stress the importance of acknowledging urban-rural similarities and interdependencies instead of fixating upon differences.

This paper acknowledges that part of the reason "rural" places grow increasingly different from each other is their varying degrees of interdependency with the global economic system and the diverse positions in the economic hierarchy that result. Emphasizing the role of migration in creating different forms of rural development, I explore political economic drivers of inequality within and across rural destinations counties. I propose that a stronger focus on inequality reveals a dimension of diversity across rural destinations that has important implications for rural policy.

Place Hierarchy in the Global Economy

Demographers focusing on domestic migration have tended to ignore the links between origins and destinations. Household movements tell a story of two communities, but we typically observe just the destination, and therefore understand only one part of our country's process of sorting. Because cities occupy different statuses in a national hierarchy, we can learn more about place-making in rural destinations by considering migrants' urban origins. Just as rural places have relationships to cities, cities have different relationships to each other and to financial and economic networks. Where a city falls within these hierarchical networks dictates the resources accumulated there, the stratification of its labor force, and the resources its out-migrants can invest in developing their new communities. In other words, cities' disparate relationships to networks endow their out migrants with different potential to shape the rural communities where they relocate.

Examining urban-rural migration in the context of the world economy requires a wide lens. Scholars of international migration have borrowed from the World Systems perspective (Wallerstein 1974) in characterizing migration patterns as movements between core places, where capitalists accumulate and control wealth, and peripheral places, where capitalist institutions oversee natural resource extraction (Massey et al. 1993). Peripheral places are generally remote rural locations in less developed nations while core places are urban financial centers in more developed nations.

Scholars differentiate cities' status in the global economic system by assessing the transnational firms and institutions located within them. The richest theorization of core cities comes from in-depth study of the world's most integrated cities. Sassen (2001) uses the term "global city" to characterize London, New York, and Tokyo, describing how multiple financial service industries that cater to global producers now concentrate in them. Sassen and others have observed that their dense corporate concentration is a driver of disparate labor flows, and international migration theorists now explain many cross-border flows as the result of a highly stratified labor force being pushed and pulled to where skills are employed most efficiently (Massey et al. 1993; Massey and Taylor 2004). As hosts to global firms, cities are immigration crossroads, fostering international communities across the spectra of education, skill, income, and legal status (Sassen 1996).