

International Population Conference Abstract: Extended Abstract

Title: Reconceptualizing the “Rural Problematique”: “The Migrant” as the Demonstrative Case for Policy Inertia

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Topic: In order for population science to inform public policy, the policy challenge being addressed must be fully understood. In this paper, we examine how current conceptualizations of the “rural problem,” and the role of international migrants in mitigating this “problem,” have limited the ability of population science to inform public policy in developed economies. Drawing on the results from recently completed research projects on rural migration, and additional data and policy analysis, we examine the “rural problem” in the Canadian context. We conclude by considering the potential of this line of reasoning to inform both rural development policy and border policy for states such as Australia and East-Central Europe.

Across the developed world, rural decline is conceptualized as the natural result of urbanization. Rural places or “left behind” regions are understood as inherently problematic, because of their relatively small size, lower population density, and less diversity than their urban counterparts. The demographic challenges related to declining fertility rates and aging populations experienced across developed economies are accelerated in rural spaces which also contend with youth outmigration, declining populations and limited access to public services (UN 2022). However, both assets and deficits of life in a particular place exist across rural and urban spaces. Thus, we argue that the geographically constructed rural versus urban paradigm is illogical and limits our full understanding of the topic. For example, despite the challenges associated with rural life, evidence demonstrates that overall wellbeing is often higher outside of a country’s biggest cities. In developed economies, people in smaller and rural places are happier. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “rural happiness paradox” because it seems contradictory to contemporary constructions of the rural as problematic (Finnemann et al. 2024; Burger et al. 2020).

This paper speaks to this contradiction and specifically the role of international migration in current attempts to “solve” the rural problematique. International migration plays a key role in supporting population and economic growth in developed countries. Temporary migrants and immigrants, coming through various immigration streams and pathways, fill gaps in the labour markets of developed economies, support local economies, and contribute to society. Across Canada, Australia, and Europe engagement with the question of the “rural problem” and rural migration has grown. Major Canadian and European funding bodies, including Horizon Europe, have funded numerous projects that study the question of rurality, specifically how and why rural and smaller places are struggling, and how international migration could address these dynamics (see: Premium EU 2023 and Matilde 2021 as recent examples). However, despite the recognition that rural places are integral to life in urban spaces, as they produce the food, water,

and natural resources that we all rely on, governments continue to underfund rural places and invest in urban-centric policy design. Additionally, rural development policies and projects have largely failed to revitalize rural regions and smaller places.

In this context, we ask: Why is the “rural problematique” so enduring and difficult to address? Why have attempts at developing and revitalizing rural or “left behind” regions largely failed? What are we missing? Drawing on the findings of past migration projects conducted in rural Canada (see Haugen et al. 2024; 2023), and utilizing additional migration data and a policy analysis, we reconceptualize the rural problematique in Canada and then extend our analysis to the Australian and East-Central European contexts.

Theoretical Focus: While population science can help inform policy, how demographic changes and shifts are constructed within population science shapes the questions that we are trying to answer and the evidence that is put forward. In this paper, we question the very construction of the “rural problem” that is engaged with in population science and public policy making. We do this through the application of a historical neo-institutional lens to our policy analysis. The historical neo-institutional approach moves us out of the construction of the problem in geographically limiting terms that keep us embedded in the rural versus urban paradigm. This paper utilizes historical neo-institutional theory to examine rural policy design in Canada and beyond in other developed economies (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987).

Concerned with how institutions shape political behaviour, historical institutionalism examines patterns of interactions between institutions, primarily the state, and society in order to understand specific policy outcomes (Kato 1996, 559). Historical institutionalism conceptualize institutions as “the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy” which distribute power unevenly across social groups and influence the behaviour and actions of individuals (Hall and Taylor 1996, 938). Historical institutionalism demonstrates the persistence of institutions through path dependency, where contemporary responses are often shaped by past actions (Evans and Smith 2015; Hallstrom 2018), and stress the “unintended consequences and inefficiencies generated by existing institutions in contrast to images of institutions as more purposive and efficient” (Hall and Taylor 1996, 942). Moving beyond an understanding of institutions as formal structures, historical neo-institutionalism conceptualize institutions more broadly to include other informal and reciprocal actions. Historical neo-institutionalism thus “emphasizes the experience of an institutional world as an objective reality” (Hadler 2015, 186). We will demonstrate how adopting a historical neo-institutional approach exposes the underpinnings of rural policy design and how historical realities, institutional relationships, and path dependencies influence and shape the “rural problematique” today.

Research Methods & Data: This paper draws on the results from a number of recently completed, national research projects focused on rural migration in Canada. Completed in 2023 and 2024, these projects involved national surveys, focus groups, interviews, and a series of scenario-planning workshops that involved newcomers, settlement workers, policy-makers, volunteers, private refugee sponsors, and others with on-the-ground experience with processes

of rural migration (Haugen et al. 2023; 2024). For this paper, we utilize the extensive amount of data collected through these projects to inform our reconceptualization of the rural problematique.

Additionally, we also analyze and map a set of migration data collected by Canada's department of immigration (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada or IRCC). We examine and analyze the limitations of available migration data in Canada (from IRCC and Statistics Canada), map what is currently available in an attempt to understand population flows between rural and urban spaces, and consider alternative data collection methods that would help fill in the data gaps concerning this population.

Expected & Initial Findings: Based on our initial analysis, we contend that the durability of the "rural problematique" is not the natural result of urbanization, government oversight or neglect, or inadequate public policy, but is rather the legacy of the Canadian state that was founded on colonial ideals of "whiteness," individuality, capitalism and extraction. The ongoing challenges that rural places face and the varying reiterations of inadequate rural development policies are all rooted in the historical relationship between rural space and the Canadian state. The economic development policies of the Canadian-settler state were intentionally designed in the interests of urban centres where the dominant class, political power, and modernity were located. Since the creation of so-called Canada, resources and opportunities have been unevenly distributed across social groups and geographic areas. Over time, the impact of such uneven policies created the rural versus urban divide that we see today. Rural struggle, depopulation, and decline, are thus the result of the historical and ongoing reliance of the capitalist state on extractive industries, as the state's development agenda "explicitly assumes (and even relies on) rural exploitation" (Ashwood 2018, p719).

After combining this analysis with the results of our recently completed rural migration projects, we argue that rural migrants face the intersectional marginalization of rurality (resulting from the rural versus urban paradigm) and, often, of other inequalities like racism, in addition to the vulnerabilities that come with their varying residency status. Many of the greatest challenges for newcomers in smaller communities – as well as potential solutions to these challenges – are systemic policy issues that extend far beyond immigration policy. While newcomers may experience the implications of inadequate, and exclusionary, social policies exceptionally acutely, the obstacles they face are symptoms of a larger, more systemic problem of rural development policy in Canada.

This analysis challenges the construction of rural places as inherently defined by assets and liabilities, challenges and opportunities. In this paper, we will demonstrate how the contemporary challenges that people, including migrants, in rural and smaller places experience are the legacy of colonial government policies, and how understanding this can help population science speak to public policy. Additionally, we will also extend these initial findings and reconceptualization of the rural problematique to other contexts, particularly in Australia (as another settler-colonial state) and East-Central Europe. We expect to find that in Australia the constructions of the rural problematique will be similar to Canada's, as the development of its

settler-colonial political economy is comparable to the Canadian context. In the case of East-Central Europe, the migratory pathways are different (with more outmigration than immigration) but the core-periphery, urban-rural elements remain the same. A comparison of the two contexts allows us to analyze the paradox of economies and societies that need people (and the political core) even as they flourish/or don't as part of the periphery.

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