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***Theme 3***

***COMMERCIAL COUNTERURBANISATION AND THE  
COMMODIFICATION OF THE RURAL***

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**Introduction**

The rural economy has shifted away from the dominant productivist paradigm towards an increasingly consumption-led array of businesses (Slee, 2005). Consequently, rural business owners are motivated by diverse influences and recognise diverse values associated with their rural setting. In this paper we explore the ways in which entrepreneurs that move into rural locations identify means of capitalising upon rural assets within their businesses. Recent debates on ‘commercial counterurbanisation’ (Bosworth 2010; Mitchell and Madden, 2014) have identified that entrepreneurs moving to rural areas are stimulating local economies but the nature of ensuing development demands deeper investigation. Therefore, this research explores the connections that these businesses and their owners perform within rural communities and with the rural environment in which they are situated. Deeper understanding of the ways in which businesses are influenced by their rural setting and capitalise on a range of rural assets can offer valuable insights for rural development.

**Commercial Counterurbanisation**

In an increasingly mobile world where rural and urban economies are seen to be increasingly inter-dependent (Lichter and Brown, 2011), entrepreneurial rural in-migrants provide a

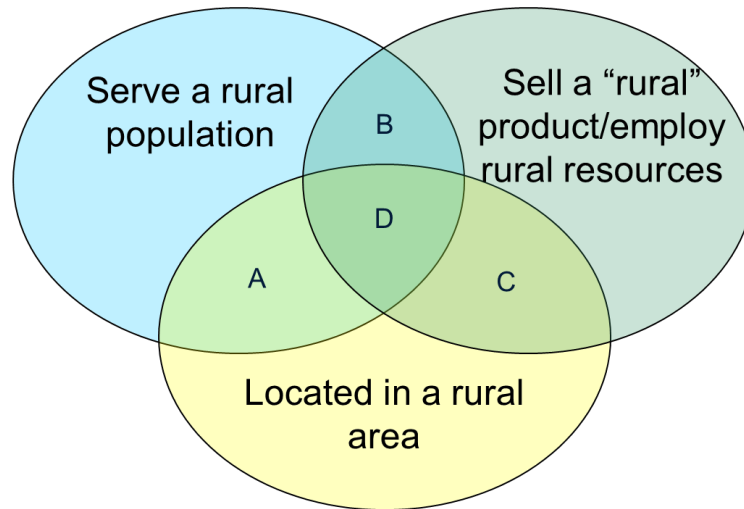
valuable lens through which to examine the commodification of rurality. Previously ‘Commercial Counterurbanisation’ was defined as ‘the growth of rural economies stimulated by inward migration’ (Bosworth, 2010: 977), which could include business creation by rural in-migrants, their employment in other rural firms or their promotion of other businesses through local trade, knowledge exchange and co-operative working.

Subsequently, Mitchell and Madden (2014) proposed that Commercial Counterurbanisation can be used to describe the movement of commercial activity from larger to smaller places. They found that commercial counterurbanites in Nova Scotia, developed ‘strong social, moderate civic, and weak economic ties within the village’ (Mitchell and Madden, 2014: 147) indicating that their contribution to wider dimensions of rural development are significant. For this stimulus to be maximised, we argue that the businesses created must interact as a part of the rural economy and not be isolated urban satellites.

### **Conceptualising Rural Businesses**

The rural economy has seen particular growth in the ‘cultural’ or ‘creative’ sector (Bell and Jayne, 2010) and the ‘knowledge economy’ (Ward, Atterton, Kim, Lowe, Phillipson and Thompson, 2005). Combined with declining influence of agriculture, especially in terms of employment, the composition of rural economies now increasingly mirrors more urban areas in the UK (Commission for Rural Communities, 2008). Meanwhile, the Danish government is mainly focusing on potential for increasing exports within food production and promoting coastal tourism to support rural development (Danish Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs, 2014). Therefore, we seek to develop an earlier conceptual framework (Figure 1) to better distinguish business features that continue to provide a rural character. The ‘rural product’ dimension (Bosworth, 2012) is extended from the earlier framework to include the employment of rural resources and following the previous logic, at least two of these criteria should be satisfied for a business to be considered ‘rural’ in character. In other words, location alone is not a sufficient indicator of a ‘rural’ business but either the products or services and/or the customers should also be part of the co-creation of the rurality performed through new business activities.

**Figure 1.** Characterising a Rural Business (Developed from Bosworth, 2012)



If a business that trades solely with urban customers and employs no rural resources is considered to be a displaced component of an urban economy, this raises important questions about the meaning of 'rural resources'. In an economy with highly mobile flows of information, goods and services, skilled labour and capital, it is increasingly difficult to categorise resources as either 'urban' or 'rural'. However, if we can identify less mobile attributes held within local communities, they offer greater potential for more endogenous forms of development. Such 'immobile resources' can include social capital, cultural capital and environmental capital (Terluin, 2003), as well as broader landscape values (Finke, 2014), and rural businesses are able to draw upon these resources through integration within their local areas.

Drawing value from rural assets links to notions of 'consuming' (Slee, 2005) or 'commodifying' (Woods, 2005; Perkins, 2006) the countryside. Woods (2011) sets out a number of ways in which the rural can be consumed, extending from physical interactions with landscapes through to cultural experiences which might take place outside of rural areas altogether. Along with conceptualisations of 'countryside capital' (Garrod, Youell and Wornell, 2006), these theories imply that the consumers are paying for the rurality that they are consuming – perhaps a premium for an identifiably rural product or a fee for entering into a rural place or activity. Perkins (2006) notes that counterurbanisation introduces new consumption demands into rural areas but this focus on the consumer overlooks the ways in

which commercial counterurbanisers can also capture the value of rural assets within their business activities.

## **Methodology**

Interviews were conducted during visits to a sample of three rural business owners in Lincolnshire (UK) and three in Funen (Denmark) where at least one of the owners/business partners had moved into their new rural location prior to starting their businesses. The Lincolnshire businesses were a cider maker, an arts and crafts gallery, which also had a training room and accommodation, and a recording studio based in a former chapel. The owner of the studio has since developed a new property providing large-group accommodation aimed at the corporate and private party markets adjacent to the chapel. In Denmark, we draw from interviews with a brewery re-inventing an old family tradition, a film production company drawing on local rural cultural and community assets and a micro folk high school that offers courses and lectures related to landscapes as profound inspirational attributes.

Based on the typology in Figure 1, each of the businesses were located in rural areas so this enabled the analysis to focus on the rural characteristics of their markets, their products and the resources employed in the business, each of which formed the basis of a semi-structured interview guide. Further questions explored the motivations for moving to the rural area and for starting a business as well as the ways in which the operation of the business was influenced by its rural context. With each interviewee having moved into their locality prior to starting the business, this enabled the analysis to consider how this external perspective influenced the assessment of both opportunities and barriers associated with a rural business location.

## **Findings**

Table 1 provides examples of the diverse ways in which rural assets are related to business innovation, personal lifestyle preferences and capitalised upon. As the table indicates intangible values such as landscape views, inspiration from walking in the woods or fields, moral aspects e.g. waste fruit or woods as resources and the appreciation of a non-busy environment the business activities are connected to the local context in a more complex way than only commodifying the "rural". Furthermore historically significant buildings are

maintained and given new meaning through new entrepreneurial functions and are thus contributing to the pride in their local community.

**Table 1:** Recognising and capitalising on rural assets

<b>Recognising the Value of Rural Assets</b>	<b>Capitalising on Rural Assets in the Business</b>
Acoustics of the building	Marketing a unique venue for music studio
“best view in Lincolnshire”	Design accommodation to take in the best features of the view
Good pub down the road	Building relations with the rural community to ensure support for ongoing activities and development plans – social capital development
Not as congested and busy as London	Give flexibility to bands to use the space more freely than in urban studios
Unused apples in a local orchard	Make cider and apple juice through a community-based cooperative
Available land for expansion	Develop new fruit varieties and introduce beehives in a new orchard
A nice house to bring up the family and preferences towards rural landscapes	Local branding of produce, including rural family heritage
Waste wood as a resource	Bringing local crafts into the gallery
Seeing a woodland property as a facility for embodied cognition in nature	Selling climbing experience in treetops, self-development courses
Convenient infrastructural location close to motorway	Wine production as an exotic crop connecting clients and locals to the place
The countryside as an inspiration and cultural resource for photography, film and art production	Decentralisation of “urban right to culture production” into a rural setting, drawing on local labour, supply chains and rural landscapes and locations for film production
A rented forest cottage within a manor landscape provides the setting for philosophy and art courses	Developing learning opportunities and insights through access to private landscapes

## **Discussion**

Commercial counterurbanites are commodifying aspects of rurality – but not just to sell them to an urban population desiring leisure pursuits (as with earlier tourism literature in this field) but also to enhance other business activities. They are also creating local opportunities – employment, trade for other local businesses, sharing expertise and networks, (attempting to) raise aspirations, attracting external investment. These factors ‘enhance’ rural development

beyond the measurable impact of the new business itself and demonstrate the potential that commercial counterurbanisation can offer to rural economies. In addition new rural businesses are merging into the local rural life, acting as agents of change within the rural area and re-shaping our understanding of rurality, whilst simultaneously capitalising on the perceived continuity of rural life.

Through the examples presented above, we see that businesses are drawing on rural resources in a multitude of ways. We might contrast those that consume the countryside from afar, creating no apparent impact, with those businesses that fundamentally interact with the land or the local context as part of the production activity or creational process. Drawing on landscape aesthetics, quietness, inspirational values and notions of ‘authenticity’, the rural resource can assume a public good role, where its consumption is neither rivalrous nor excludable. However, if the rural amenity is antithetical to other forms of development in the locality, the impact of commercial counterurbanisers could be more divisive because the protection of the public good may conflict with other, more productivist, development in the countryside.

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