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Cultures of Migration: A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Rural-Urban Migration in Finland

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The question of what motivates people to move to the countryside, of what it is that they are looking for in rural spaces, has been of interest to researchers of rural topics for a long time. This question is prominent in the background of my dissertation in the area of European ethnology, which is entitled *Cultures of Migration: A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Rural-Urban Migration in Finland* (University of Helsinki, 2023).

The starting point for this dissertation was a puzzlement about some apparent inconsistencies in representations of everyday life in the remote countryside of Kainuu. Kainuu's more remote municipalities have been familiar to me throughout my life due to my family ties there and my regular visits, which started in the late 1980s. However, having been born and raised in Germany, my perspectives on Kainuu were those of a visitor. Naturally, though, my personal connection led me to take particular notice of its more idyllic aspects – the vast forest and swamplands, the quiet lakes, the reindeer, etc.

However, I also witnessed some of the gradual changes that Kainuu's countryside went through over the course of my annual summer visits during the last three decades. These contradicted somewhat my initial impressions of a seemingly blemish-free rural idyll. Specifically, I began to observe that one relative after another was selling their livestock and

ceasing to farm. Upon each return, another young family member appeared to have vanished in search of work or further education in far-away cities. In some of my relatives' remote hamlets, all the remaining inhabitants were pensioners, who would predict casually over coffee and cake that their villages might well be abandoned fully in ten or twenty years.

Interestingly, for these older people the out-migration of young people was a phenomenon that was almost too ordinary to be noteworthy. They expected that most local young people would leave and that many would never return. These everyday observations were accompanied by doom-mongering reportage in the Finnish media. This had a tendency to portray such remote municipalities as Kainuu as slowly dying peripheralities that had only slim prospects for their redemption.

Yet, despite recognizing some traces of this decline myself, I was struck, too, by the attitude of my relations in the region, who seemed to be very satisfied with life in Kainuu. They were quick to emphasize, when asked, that they could not envisage leaving their remote home region. Moreover, I did also know some young adults who had made the deliberate choice to stay and to create a life for themselves even though most of their peers were migrating. They, too, seemed to be content with their decision. Their living example challenged dismissive narratives that portrayed any young people who did not leave remote municipalities as marginalized *rural others*, who remained simply because they lacked agency to depart.

My dissertation that was prompted by these preliminary observations is an ethnographical exploration of the cultural context in which young adults from Kainuu make their migration decisions. It approaches the topic with the help of the concept cultures of migration that was first developed in the 1990s in the literature on international migration studies. It strives to shed light on the emergence of a perpetuation of local cultural contexts in which out-migration is not only encouraged but becomes a practice that is expected of young people – a context in which a young person's desire to stay is seen as unusual and requiring of justification. Consequently, the dissertation includes also an exploration of the justifications that are offered by young adults who have chosen to stay in Kainuu. In addition, their reasoning on this offers some valuable insights more generally into what it is that can make the countryside (and also more remote rural municipalities) an attractive living environment in today's world.

The research project was realized as a multi-sited ethnography and included twelve months of fieldwork in two villages in Kainuu plus ethnographic work with young adults in Helsinki who had left Kainuu for the capital. The project relied on a method-mix of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and a visual participatory elicitation method that asked the participating interlocutors to take photographs in everyday life situations that were relevant to the research theme.

In summary, the accumulated research indicates that a perceived higher quality of life on the part of young people is the main reason for their choosing to remain in Kainuu despite the strong out-migration of their peers. This seems surprising given the ubiquitous reporting of worsening access to public services and a lack of opportunities for employment and further education for young adults in remote municipalities. These are considerations that the interlocutors in Kainuu did acknowledge; however, the benefits of living in Kainuu outweighed them in their estimation. They perceived a higher quality of life in Kainuu that was based on two distinct sets of rationale: *nature-based reasons* and *community-based reasons*.

The first category of *nature-based reasons* concerned several aspects. First and foremost, the interlocutors in Kainuu highlighted the importance of having easy access to nature. It was a consensus among them that this is important for their personal wellbeing. The availability of space and the privacy of properties without immediate neighbors – which are also affordable – was another important factor that contributed to their perception of a higher quality of life. Furthermore, all interlocutors in Kainuu’s countryside reported that leisure activities that depend on a rural setting were very important to them. These include fishing and hunting, hiking, picking berries and mushrooms, growing their own produce, and simply spending time in nature. The ability to pursue these activities regularly was a key contributor to the perceived high quality of life available in Kainuu.

The second category of *community-based reasons* foregrounded young people’s sense of safety and of belonging that stemmed from the close-knit communities that exist in their home municipalities. The interlocutors reported that they enjoyed the small-scale of their communities and having their families nearby. They asserted that they could access support in their lives easily because they had strong social networks of friends and relatives. They explained that the people in their local communities looked

out for one another and they spoke of their sense of responsibility to ensure that local community life, and ways of living, would continue into the future. They tended to juxtapose their reflections on small-scale community life with negative descriptions of a perception of urban society that is characterized by anonymity, competition and insecurity. Generally, they tended to rely on a rural-urban dichotomy in their narratives, in which a valorized countryside was contrasted with an unattractive urban living environment.

A comparison of these reasons for staying in Kainuu's countryside with the reasoning of those young adults among the interlocutors who left Kainuu for Helsinki, sheds further light on the factors that can make the countryside a more desirable living environment, as well as on those factors that might make rural living less attractive.

The interlocutors in Helsinki were divided into three categories: *convinced stayers*, *conflicted stayers* and *potential returnees*. The *convinced stayers* are those who proclaimed that they have no desire to return to Kainuu and who see their future in Helsinki. Meanwhile, the *conflicted stayers* are not necessarily averse to the idea of returning at some point and do not feel entirely at home in Helsinki. However, they assume that a return to Kainuu will be impossible because of a lack of employment opportunities corresponding with their education and training. Lastly, *potential returnees* have plans to return to Kainuu as soon as the opportunity arises. It should be noted that there was only one *potential returnee* who had concrete plans to return among the eighteen interlocutors in Helsinki: the overwhelming majority did not expect ever to return to Kainuu on a permanent basis.

A closer investigation of the ways in which the interlocutors in Helsinki spoke about the perceived possibility (or more often the perceived impossibility) of return shows that they accepted the *nature-based reasons* for staying, which were identified by the non-migrants, and that they generally agreed with them. There was a clear consensus among all the interlocutors that having access to nature, space and the possibility to grow their own organic food or to be able to get it straight from nature contribute to a higher quality of life. In fact, the vastness and silence of Kainuu's wilderness was what the interlocutors, including those who had no desire to return, missed most. Many reported that they experience the noise, crowdedness and general materiality of the city as intermittently oppressive. Therefore, there was no disagreement among the interlocu-

tors that Kainuu is a very attractive living environment both in terms of its scenery and proximity to nature.

However, there was no equivalent consensus among the interlocutors in terms of the *community-based reasons* for staying that were proposed by those who have remained in Kainuu. In contrast, many of the out-migrants contended that growing up in small-scale rural communities had been detrimental to their personal wellbeing. Instead of caring and close knit; as per the descriptions of those interlocutors who chose to stay, they tended to portray Kainuu's communities as somewhat overbearing, homogenous and dominated by conservatism. Many stated that it was the anonymity of urban life that first gave them the opportunity for self-actualization, without having to fear the judgement and gossip of a small rural community; and that this, in many cases, was one of the central motivations for leaving Kainuu.

A proportion of the male out-migrants, for example, reported that they had struggled with an understanding of rural masculinity that they saw as dominant in Kainuu. This encouraged an interest in hunting or cars, while their personal interests lay in art, literature or music. Other out-migrants characterized the values of Kainuu's small rural communities as too traditional and too different from their own value-orientations for them to be able to ever envisage a permanent return. Thus, in precisely the same manner as the interlocutors who remained in Kainuu spoke about the city, they relied on a rural-urban dichotomy that portrayed the city as open-minded, stimulating and full of opportunities and entertainment. It contrasted sharply with a traditionalist countryside that was unable to offer perspectives and activities to young adults. They stressed that this, particularly, must change; that these communities must become more open-minded and welcoming of difference if Kainuu hoped to attract returnees or, indeed, new, young, in-migrants, who did not possess pre-existing ties to the region.

Naturally, such contrasting narratives that are based upon a rural-urban dichotomy must be treated with some caution. This caveat is not meant to dispute the perspectives and the personal experiences that were shared by the interlocutors in any way. However, as pointed out in much rural ethnography, contemporary rural life is more diverse (and mundane) than representations of it as either a near idyll or a 'boondocks'. These types of narratives, for instance, can easily elide the reality that discrimination and narrow-mindedness is found in urban environments, too, and should

not be viewed as exclusively 'rural'. They also obscure the fact that contemporary rural spaces are not inhabited exclusively by traditional communities. For example, globally mobile agricultural workers, professionals in fields like medicine or nursing, refugees, the owners of second homes, national and international tourists, and returnees resettling after living and working in the city are a part of the ecosystem. Indeed, in the shadow of the 'typical' rural narrative exists a great diversity of lifestyles, opinions and biographies.

Regarding the introductory question: what makes the countryside an attractive living environment today, there are some indications that point towards a renewed interest in rural living. Understandably, the multiple crises that have defined recent years, ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to the increasing impact of climate change, have encouraged rural relocation. The rise of remote working, as a consequence of the pandemic, might make it possible for some of the *potential returnees*, who thought previously that it would be impossible, to return to rural life and to pursue hitherto city-based professions. However, despite this beginning to occur, not everyone will return.

It is to be expected that in the future many out-migrants from remote rural municipalities will continue to have some ties to their home regions despite not returning fulltime. Potentially, for instance, they will retain their parents' homesteads as second homes. In respect of remote working, more affordable property prices in rural places, coupled with rising living costs in cities, is another factor that might make the countryside more attractive. Finally, the looming ecological catastrophe of climate change may contribute to the wishes of some young adults to live closer to nature and become more self-sufficient. This would also make relocation to the countryside appealing. Accordingly, it is perhaps no coincidence that some remote municipalities in rural Kainuu have recently, and for the first time in a long time, noted population gains.

References

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