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SURVEY ARTICLE

Urban–rural justice

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I | INTRODUCTION

In the public discourse of Western democracies,¹ the axis of “urban” versus “rural” has reappeared.² Often discussed in the context of right-wing populism and its successes among rural voters, commentators have discussed the “Big Sort,”³ the contrast between “Anywheres” and “Somewheres,”⁴ and the lifeworlds of “hillbillies.”⁵ Scholars in the social sciences have attempted to understand what it feels like to live in rural places, using ethnographic methods,⁶ or how to understand the resentment against urbanites expressed in farmers’ protests.⁷ In studies of electoral politics, the differences between urban and rural voting behavior have long been an issue.⁸ One political scientist, Jonathan A. Rodden, claims, with regard to the US, that “The Democrats, quite simply, have evolved into a diverse collection of urban interest groups, and the Republicans into an assemblage of exurban and rural interests.”⁹

¹Similar dynamics may take place in other societies. My focus will be on Western societies for lack of knowledge about other countries, but some arguments may also apply elsewhere, *mutatis mutandis*.

²E.g. Woods 2022, p. 27.

³Bishop 2008.

⁴Goodhart 2017.

⁵Vance 2016.

⁶Kefalas and Carr 2010; Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016; Wuthnow 2018.

⁷On the UK, see Woods 2022; on the Netherlands, see Bosma and Peeren 2022; on France, see Guilluy 2019.

⁸E.g. Rodden 2019; Damore et al. 2021.

⁹Rodden 2019, p. 9.

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In philosophical discussions about justice, in contrast, one finds hardly any mention of the urban–rural divide.¹⁰ Geography plays a role in discussions about global justice, but not in discussions about justice within societies. Several reasons might explain this gap (apart from a possible sociological explanation: namely, that philosophers tend to be urbanites). One is the assumption that all questions about these geographical differences can be subsumed under other dimensions of justice. For example, if rural populations are poorer, on average, this is a matter of distributive justice; if they do not have good schools, this is a matter of equality of opportunity, and so on. This argument is hard to reject if one operates at a high level of abstraction and discusses the formulation and justification of different principles of justice. However, political philosophy might also want to address issues that are closer to concrete real-life issues, whether one describes this as “non-ideal” theory¹¹ or “problem-driven” political philosophy.¹² For such approaches, it seems relevant to ask what considerations of justice might apply to the urban–rural divide that social scientists have diagnosed.

Another reason why philosophers might have hesitated to address this topic, however, is that it may, in certain ways, involve treading on landmines. In many countries, right-wing populists play on an alleged contrast between authentic “normal people” in the countryside and morally corrupt urban elites. As the editors of a recent volume on “rural authenticity” put it:

From the Trump administration in the USA through Le Pen in France, Orbán in Hungary and Kaczynski in Poland, political leaders have been conjuring images of the authentic rural folk, frequently contrasted with the urban elites, and painting themselves as champions of the rural people.¹³

¹⁰A recent exception, in the history of ideas, is Nathan (2022), who discusses the urban–rural divide in Athenian democracy. In critical geography studies, the terms “regional justice” or “spatial justice” are sometimes used; see e.g. Pirie 1983; Marcuse 2009; Soja 2010; Rocco n.d.. Van Vulpen and Bock (2020) provide a recent overview of this discussion; as they note, however, the focus is often on dynamics *within* urban areas (e.g. Soja 2010, on Los Angeles) and the philosophical underpinnings are often left unexplored (whereas these authors draw on Nancy Fraser’s work for a scoping review of relevant empirical literature). Another thing to note is that geography has moved away from a physical understanding of space, emphasizing, instead, its social dimensions; as Massey explains, for example, space is “a product of interrelations,” a “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity,” and it is “always in the process of becoming”; Massey 1999, pp. 28–9. Such an understanding of space is helpful for the current topic in underlining the way in which space enables (or disables) actions and social relations, but it may not be optimal for keeping in view the basic fact of geographical distances that underlies many of the problems of rural areas (I thank Jörg Gertel for a helpful exchange on this topic).

¹¹Valentini 2012.

¹²Robyens 2022.

¹³Fuglestad et al. 2022, p. 6.

A focus on the concerns of rural communities is also sometimes coupled with nationalist tendencies, even within scholarship.¹⁴ It is understandable not to want to be associated with such voices.

Nonetheless, if political philosophy is interested in the matters that mar our societies, it seems at least worth asking *whether there might be any issues of justice at all* with regard to the urban–rural divide. The aim of this article is to ask what theories of justice might have to say about this topic. I take a relational-egalitarian perspective, which focuses on the relations that should hold between the citizens of a just society,¹⁵ but also discuss the applicability of some luck-egalitarian arguments.¹⁶ Overall, the article provides a survey of the various dimensions of the question: what (if anything) would a just society, whose citizens relate to each other as equals, do about the differences between urban and rural life? While the answers to concrete policy questions about the urban–rural divide have to be given within the specific contexts of different societies, or even with regard to specific regions, it is possible to identify some key issues of concern.

I first delve into the empirical literature on the urban–rural divide (Section II). Then I approach the question of justice with regard to this divide by focusing on three topics. The first concerns the distribution of educational opportunities, with a key question being how all children from rural areas can get the necessary support both for leaving and for staying (Section III). The second issue is the provision of public services and economic opportunities. Here I also discuss the luck-egalitarian objection that individuals choose the place in which they live for themselves, and are therefore themselves responsible if they have less access to certain opportunities in their region. Against this view, I argue that certain basic and civic services are owed to citizens in all regions, even if this comes at a higher cost to the public than the provision in urban areas.

The third frame concerns cultural recognition, which has some overlap with economic issues, but also raises separate questions.¹⁷ I argue that the framework of multiculturalism, which has traditionally been applied to migrant communities, can also be applied to certain differences between the lifeworlds and cultural values of urban and rural communities.¹⁸ I conclude by summarizing the policy proposals that follow from these arguments, and by briefly reflecting on the ways in which temporal and geographical considerations are intertwined when it comes to justice for individuals in “backward” regions.

¹⁴E.g. Guilluy 2019, ch. 2, on the “Americanization” of France.

¹⁵E.g. Anderson 1999; Fourie et al. 2015; Schemmel 2021.

¹⁶E.g. Dworkin 2000.

¹⁷E.g. Honneth 1992; Honneth and Fraser 2003; for an overview, see Iser 2019.

¹⁸I do not discuss issues of democratic representation as a separate frame, because, as the research by Rodden (2019) shows, there is no democratic underrepresentation of rural constituencies. In countries with proportional representation, there is no systematic distortion either in favor or against rural constituencies; in many countries with first-past-the-post-systems, however, there is an *over*representation of rural areas, which vote more conservatively than cities, in the sense that the numbers of conservative seats in parliaments are typically larger than the shares of conservative votes. However, discussing the issues of justice that this situation raises is beyond the scope of this article. The same holds for questions about questions of property rights in land in urban and rural areas, which raise many issues of justice on their own.

II | URBAN-RURAL DYNAMICS IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

Although it has recently achieved new salience in public discourse, the social realities and the imaginaries that contrast urban and rural life are anything but new. In a recent article, Charles Nathan describes how this contrast played out in ancient Athenian democracy, which encompassed not only the city of Athens, but also a rural hinterland that was “less dynamic, less commercial, less cosmopolitan and less democratic.”¹⁹ The topic of urbanites mocking their rural compatriots, who in turn fear the erosion of their way of life, already appears in ancient Greek plays.²⁰ Visions of “the city” versus “the countryside” also played an important role in nineteenth-century nation building.²¹ In the 1920s and 1930s, conservative and fascist thinking had a strong anti-urban strand.²² In 1940, historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote about the growing differences in lifestyles between cities and the countryside in the US.²³

As noted in the Introduction, in recent years the topic has made a comeback in public discourse and scholars have also returned to it. Reading the social scientific literature quickly makes clear, however, that one needs to beware of simple dichotomies. The size of towns and cities comes on a spectrum; even areas that are officially classified as “metropolitan” can include thinly populated regions that look and feel rather “rural.”²⁴ The idea of “industry” having its place in urban hubs and “agriculture” in rural areas is also highly misleading. Many traditional industries have shut down their operations in Western countries; many smaller industrial companies operate in mid-size towns or in the outskirts of large metropolises; and agriculture has become industrialized and requires only small numbers of employees.²⁵ Not all rural areas vote conservative, as the cliché would have it; in the 2016 Brexit referendum, for example, some rural areas voted “remain” even though they had a history of intense farmer protests.²⁶ Some of the attitudes and lifestyles that one might associate with “ruralness” can also be found in post-industrial cities, with similar narratives about the loss of good jobs and a sense of being “left behind.”²⁷

There are obviously also differences between countries. A first thing to note is the sheer difference in size, which translates into differences in distances: what counts as “far from the next city” in Belgium, for example, is far less, in kilometers or miles, than in the Mid-West of the US. Greater distances make certain

¹⁹Nathan 2022, p. 1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 1, 9.

²¹Hearn 2022.

²²See e.g. Dietz 2008, on the UK and Germany.

²³Schlesinger 1940, quoted in Damore et al. 2021, p. 31.

²⁴Lichter et al. 2021. Differences in categorizations and measurements also make cross-country comparisons difficult.

²⁵E.g. Hearn 2022, p. 16.

²⁶Woods 2022, p. 22; on the US, see Wuthnow 2018, p. 5.

²⁷Monnat and Brown 2017, p. 232, on the US; Guilluy 2019, pp. 61–2, on France.

problems—for example, access to educational institutions within commutable distance—more urgent. In some countries, notably the US, religious communities play a strong role in rural areas,²⁸ whereas in Europe this holds only for specific regions. Suburbia—as the transition zone between “urban” and “rural”—is also a different phenomenon in different countries, for example with regard to access to public transport and public services, but also in its socio-economic composition. Some developments that have been particularly harmful to rural communities are specific to certain countries, such as the methamphetamine pandemic in the US.²⁹

What, then, can one say *in general* about the urban–rural divide, that will allow one to think through considerations of justice at a level of reasonable generality? In contrast to densely populated urban areas, thinly populated rural areas typically differ with regard to three central, related areas: access to educational opportunities, the availability of (certain kinds of) economic opportunities, and, to some extent, the predominant culture or lifestyle. Of course, all these differences comes as tendencies, which take on different forms in different regions and their concrete conditions.

For young people in rural areas, *access to higher education* and to professional opportunities is often more difficult: not only are universities often in urban areas,³⁰ informal “pathways of opportunity,” such as social networks, internships, and the cultural capital of an urban lifestyle, are also more difficult to access.³¹ Randall Curren argues that this threatens not only fair opportunities for rural youth with regard to professional life, but also their “civic equality” and their opportunities to develop “civic friendships” with individuals from different walks of life.³² The result can be distinctive disadvantages for children from rural areas, above and beyond other socio-economic factors, when it comes to professional success. Guilluy quotes some numbers for France: “The share of children of manual and nonmanual laborers who have become executives or middle managers varies almost by a factor of two: only 24.7 percent in Indre and Creuse, for example, but 47 percent in Paris.”³³

For the US, however—where the problem is particularly urgent because of its great distances—researchers have uncovered a somewhat different picture: some small-town kids are singled out, at an early age, and are prepared by parents, teachers, and other mentors to go to college, creating high social pressure on them to leave their communities.³⁴ These children are often from families of higher socio-

²⁸E.g. Cramer 2016, pp. 36, 55, 230–2.

²⁹E.g. Wuthnow 2018, pp. 66–7.

³⁰E.g. Guilluy 2019, ch. 1.

³¹Curren forthcoming.

³²Ibid., pp. 1–2.

³³Guilluy 2019, p. 134.

³⁴Kefalas and Carr 2010, ch. 1.

economic status, or who are seen as more “deserving” than other families, and they receive far more attention and support than other children.³⁵ Few of those who go to college (whom Maria J. Kefalas and Parick J. Carr, based on an extended ethnographic study in Iowa, describe as “achievers”)³⁶ later return. Young people with lower grades and less support can often leave only by enlisting in the army, and their likelihood of returning is higher.³⁷

This situation also has to do with the second factor: the *lack of availability of jobs*, especially for college-educated individuals, in many rural areas—a problem not only in the US,³⁸ but also elsewhere. In today’s economies, well-paid jobs in the tertiary sector, especially knowledge-based jobs that require high levels of formal education,³⁹ tend to cluster in bigger cities.⁴⁰ In urban areas, companies benefit from a critical mass of employees, who in turn are attracted to these urban hubs because of the opportunities in terms of jobs, but also in terms of lifestyle: the choice of restaurants, a rich cultural scene, opportunities for civic engagement, and so on. When young people from rural areas are used to an urban lifestyle, returning to their home region would mean giving up many of these economic, civic, and cultural opportunities.⁴¹ As Curren puts it with regard to the US, “For the residents of small rural towns of the ‘Heartland,’ upward mobility is now barely distinguishable from geographic mobility.”⁴²

The resulting “brain drain” contributes to “depleting rural states of talent and tax dollars”;⁴³ it also means a shrinking pool of people who can take on civic and political leadership roles and act as role models for local children. It has an emotional dimension, too, often leading to estrangement between family members and circles of friends. Leavers might come to see their home towns “the way outsiders do: parochial and just a little redneck.”⁴⁴

This leads to a third difference, namely one of *culture* or *lifestyle*. One key dimension here is diversity, or the lack of it. More densely populated areas typically bring together more diverse individuals, whether it is in terms of ethnic background,

³⁵Ibid.; see also Sherman and Sage 2011.

³⁶Kefalas and Carr 2010, ch. 1.

³⁷Ibid., ch. 3.

³⁸Wuthnow 2018, p. 69.

³⁹There may well be artisanal jobs in rural areas that require high levels of skills, even though these may not be treated as “highly skilled” in many contemporary categorizations.

⁴⁰E.g., Rodden 2019, p. 84; Rodríguez-Pose 2018, pp. 190–1, drawing on Glaeser 2011.

⁴¹Kefalas and Carr 2010; Sherman and Sage 2011. An additional factor—on which I could not find any empirical data—might be the “two body problem” for highly educated couples, in the sense that they are looking not for one, but for two jobs when deciding where to live (as well as appropriate childcare facilities, etc.). This might contribute to keeping highly educated couples in urban areas.

⁴²Curren forthcoming, p. 5; see also Hektner 1995, for a survey study on rural youth experiencing a stronger conflict between staying near family and friends or moving for educational and work opportunities.

⁴³Wuthnow 2018, p. 56, see also Cramer 2016, pp. 101–2.

⁴⁴Kefalas and Carr 2010, p. 29.

sexual orientation, or worldviews, whereas in rural areas there is often less exposure to such diversity⁴⁵ (although rural areas with sizeable minority populations do also exist).⁴⁶ This fact is often cited as an explanation for a pattern that is quite stable across countries, namely that rural areas—often together with post-industrial towns—show more conservative voting behaviors than metropolitan areas. The US shows a clear statistical correlation between population density and Democratic voting at various levels of the political system.⁴⁷

The flipside of the lack of diversity, in many (though not all) rural areas, is what one might call a “lifestyle of familiarity,” with people knowing and supporting each other. As Kefalas and Carr put it, “Small-town people rejoice in the fact that if you get in trouble, your neighbors will close ranks and reach out with aid.”⁴⁸ Wuthnow’s account similarly emphasizes the self-understanding of rural communities as “moral communities” in which “people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being.”⁴⁹ He points out that there are more voluntary associations in smaller communities than in larger ones,⁵⁰ but also emphasizes that these communities are, to a large extent, “imagined.”⁵¹ The inhabitants of small towns see no need to lock their doors, and kids can roam unsupervised, because everyone knows everyone, or at least this is what it feels like.⁵² In addition, a strong emphasis is put on hard work and perseverance, and community members admire those among their fellow citizens who have a strong work ethic.⁵³

Katherine Cramer, drawing on her research in rural Wisconsin, summarizes these value orientations as “rural consciousness,” which, however, also includes “a multifaceted resentment against cities.”⁵⁴ Widespread perceptions among the rural populations she studied were:

- (1) a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, including policy makers,
- (2) a perception that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and
- (3) a sense that rural folks have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks.⁵⁵

⁴⁵Damore et al. 2021, p. 389.

⁴⁶See e.g. Wuthnow 2018, ch. 6.

⁴⁷Rodden 2019, p. 52; Damore et al. 2021, chs 1–2.

⁴⁸Kefalas and Carr 2010, p. 16.

⁴⁹Wuthnow 2018, p. 4.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 82.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 32.

⁵²Kefalas and Carr 2010, pp. 81–3.

⁵³Cramer 2016, pp. 72–7; Wuthnow 2018, p. 36; Britton-Purdy 2019.

⁵⁴Cramer 2016, p. 6.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 12.

Cramer shows that the claim of unfair treatment, when translated into taxation and public support for different constituencies, is incorrect, but she argues that the costs for maintaining infrastructure and public services in rural communities are often higher, which may justify the perception of disadvantage.⁵⁶

It is helpful here to draw a distinction between those rural communities which, although disadvantaged in certain ways, are stable for the foreseeable future, and those that are not.⁵⁷ To be sure, in terms of long-term population trends, rural areas are thinning out; for example, as Wuthnow reports, the percentage of the US population living in rural areas shifted from 95 percent in 1810, to 55 percent in 1910, to 20 percent in 2010.⁵⁸ The global trend is towards urbanization, with 55 percent of the world population already living in cities in 2017.⁵⁹ But population dynamics are not the same everywhere.⁶⁰ Some rural areas have enough local jobs and fruitful relations with larger conglomerations to remain stable. Others, however, see jobs moving away and populations shrinking. If too many young people leave for good, fewer children are born, which can lead to the closure of local schools, a painful symbol of decline.⁶¹ In other words, for some communities, there seems to be no way to maintain civic and economic viability in the long run, and their inhabitants may feel “the almost inexpressible concern that their way of life is eroding, shifting imperceptibly under their feet, and being discredited and attacked from the outside.”⁶²

How, then, should a society guided by an ideal of relational equality react to such differences? In the next sections, I discuss how relational egalitarians can approach the issues of access to education, availability of public services and economic opportunities, and cultural difference.

III | EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

A first area of justice concerns children growing up in rural areas and their opportunities to access education. Children have not chosen to grow up in rural areas; relational egalitarians and those with luck egalitarian intuitions—to which I come back below—can agree that they should not suffer disadvantages caused by unchosen circumstances. As described above, accessing higher education typically means that these young people must leave their home regions, which carries a high cost in terms of being separated from family and friends, and having to

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, ch. 4.

⁵⁷I thank a referee for suggesting this distinction.

⁵⁸Wuthnow 2018, p. 45.

⁵⁹Our World in Data 2019.

⁶⁰See also Wuthnow 2018, ch. 2.

⁶¹Kefalas and Carr 2010, p. 2; Cramer 2016, p. 101; on the importance of rural schools, see also Tieken 2014.

⁶²Wuthnow 2018, p. 79; see similarly, for Norwegian fishing communities, Flø 2022, esp. p. 96.

learn new social and cultural codes that may estrange them from their previous lives.⁶³ At the same time, it is clear that from a perspective of equal opportunity, they need to be given the chance to leave; their chances to access leadership roles in all areas of society must not be systematically lower than those of children from urban areas.⁶⁴ This means that they need to have access to additional financial support—even compared to disadvantaged children in urban areas—for living away from their families in order to attend educational institutions or realize opportunities such as internships.

Importantly, the necessary formal (for example, stipends) and informal (for example, mentorship and peer mentoring) support needs to be offered to *all* children who show an interest in leaving a rural community, instead of focusing such efforts disproportionately on some high-achieving “good treasures” that a community picks based on family backgrounds.⁶⁵ At the same time, those who want to stay in, or close to, their home region also need to receive adequate support, for example by matching local educational offers to local economic opportunities, in renewable energy projects, for instance. As Kefalas and Carr emphasize, local policies should not only try to get a few “achievers” to return, but should also focus on “boomerang” types who want to return or “stayers” who never leave.⁶⁶

To better do justice to all children, two additional directions for educational policy are worth considering. The first is to focus not only on education for young people, but also on opportunities for (re-)training and education throughout the course of one's life. This is particularly relevant for young people in rural areas who decide to leave school and take on full-time jobs at an early age, but then realize that they are stuck at the same low wage level for years to come.⁶⁷ The second—which can be related to the first—is to not think about “education” exclusively in a theoretical, “academic” sense. The experiences of countries (for example, Germany and Switzerland) with vocational tracks show that these can offer good financial prospects and fulfilling jobs in practical fields.⁶⁸ This may be particularly relevant for rural areas in which there are more job opportunities for individuals with such skills. But, of course, this must not lead to a new kind of segregation in which rural children are automatically channeled towards vocational rather than academic training.

⁶³Morton 2019; Curren forthcoming, p. 10.

⁶⁴As Anderson (2007) emphasizes, from a democratic perspective, it is desirable that a country's elites be drawn from a wide range of social backgrounds (and that they are educated together and learn to interact respectfully), so that the interests and perspectives of all groups are represented in decision-making processes.

⁶⁵Sherman and Sage 2011, p. 12; see also Kefalas and Carr 2010, p. 163. It is particularly problematic if, for some children, joining the army is the only “way out” (Kefalas and Carr, ch. 3), because this raises complex questions about voluntariness, military policies, etc. For reasons of space, I cannot discuss them here.

⁶⁶Kefalas and Carr 2010, esp. pp. 136, 148–9, 163.

⁶⁷Kefalas and Carr (2010, pp. 62–72) show that this is a typical pattern in many rural areas, though it may not be exclusive to them.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166; Goodhart 2017, ch. 6; Curren forthcoming, p. 8.

Lastly, a specifically US problem is worth briefly mentioning: the high percentage of school funding that comes from local tax revenue. This obviously creates challenges for poor school districts—in the city and the country—and can be particularly challenging for rural areas with declining populations.⁶⁹ It is all the more problematic given that, as described above, the most talented and energetic children from rural areas often end up in metropolises, which benefit from their influx. From a perspective of educational justice, education should be funded on the national level, with adequate provisions to compensate for disadvantages of along various lines, including the disadvantages that come from living at great distance from institutions of higher education and other educational opportunities.

IV | PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

A second set of questions of justice, and ensuing policy questions, turns around the provision of public services and economic opportunities, whether in the form of individualized or collective provision. This leads to the question of *where* individuals are owed certain things: can they claim them wherever they live, or could they justifiably only be provided in certain locations, with individuals themselves being responsible for getting them there? A resource-based approach, understood in purely financial terms, can avoid this problem: from this perspective, one can simply provide financial means to individuals and leave it to themselves where they use them. When translating these resources into opportunities, it is up to individuals how they manage the geographies of their lives. If certain things are more expensive for those living in rural areas, for example because they face higher travel costs, they can decide to move elsewhere—or so this argument would go.

This line of reasoning presents a luck-egalitarian intuition that many individuals might have about the urban–rural divide, and that might amount to an objection to relational-egalitarian approaches: aren't grown-up individuals responsible for their own choices, including the choice of staying put in a rural area?⁷⁰ From this perspective, one might describe the decision to live in a certain region as a matter of choosing one value—rootedness, as one might call it—over other values.⁷¹ And if this comes at a cost in terms of less access to certain public services and fewer economic

⁶⁹See also Curren forthcoming, p. 15; see Seelig (2017) and Parks (2021) for case studies.

⁷⁰Such a view is also in line with the paradigms about development that have reined in economic policy in recent years. As Rodriguez-Pose (2018, p. 192) points out, the World Bank long recommended policies of “mov[ing] people to places where there are opportunities, not opportunities to declining areas,” because the latter was seen as an inefficient way of supporting poor individuals. As Guilluy (2019, p. 129) notes, this argument is often brought forward with “a hint of blame,” “for implicitly these workers [who lost their jobs] are being told that it is their refusal to be mobile that landed them in this predicament in the first place.”

⁷¹Rootedness is not, per se, a problematic value, for example in the sense that it would require harming other individuals. This makes it a suitable candidate for such a value choice.

opportunities, is that really a problem? If someone can enjoy stunningly beautiful nature in a remote area, they may not need a public library nearby, and they should accept a somewhat longer drive to get to a hospital. It would, after all, be extremely costly for societies to try to provide the same level of public services in remote, thinly populated areas as in metropolises—or so this argument goes.

But from a relational-egalitarian perspective, this conclusion is too quick, even if one assumes that individual choice can play *some* role in the distribution of goods and services. A first thing to note is that rootedness is, in many cases, not just an “expensive taste,” but a matter of social connections and attachments to an area that shapes people’s whole lives.⁷² With regard to international migration, theorists have argued for a “right to stay”⁷³ or a “right to occupancy.”⁷⁴ Kieran Oberman argues that such a right is grounded in three types of arguments: freedom of movement (which must also include the freedom *not* to move), “cultural membership,” and “territorial attachment.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Anna Stilz uses the notion of “located life-plans” to describe the ways in which people’s fundamental projects can be tied to certain localities in which they live together with others and participate in various economic, social, and cultural practices.⁷⁶

Now, these discussions concern international migration and questions of violent removal, in which the loss that individuals suffer when they are forced to leave, and also the costs of “mastering a new social organization and cultural environment,”⁷⁷ are much greater. Nonetheless, the argument that rootedness can be a core commitment can also apply to different regions within a country. For example, individuals may have local family businesses—for example, farms—that they feel obliged to continue.⁷⁸ Hochschild describes numerous cases of individuals who do not want to leave their communities, even though there are no good jobs and the environment suffers from massive industrial pollution that also creates health risks.⁷⁹ Sometimes individuals try to leave, but realize that they feel too homesick and lonely, and therefore return.⁸⁰

Thus, the importance of rootedness for many people’s lives suggests that treating it as a mere “expensive taste” that would justify certain disadvantages does not do justice to the way in which it is connected to other central elements of people’s

⁷²The sheer numbers seem to confirm the importance of rootedness for many individuals: Goodhart (2017, p. vi) mentions that about 60% of Britons live no more than 20 miles from where they lived at age 14, though the numbers are much lower for individuals with elite higher education; similar figures hold for France; Guilluy 2019, p. 132.

⁷³Oberman 2011.

⁷⁴Stilz 2013.

⁷⁵Oberman 2011, pp. 258–9.

⁷⁶Stilz 2013, pp. 336–41.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 340.

⁷⁸Wuthnow 2018, p. 29.

⁷⁹Hochschild 2016, e.g. pp. 94, 105.

⁸⁰Kefalas and Carr 2010, pp. 107–8.

lifeplans, especially the connection to certain communities. A second argument also pushes against the luck-egalitarian intuition. For individual choice to justify disadvantage, the choice needs to be made from a fairly structured set of options.⁸¹ The bundles of options that come with an “urban” and a “rural” lifestyle may have some differences (for example, anonymity versus familiarity, enjoyment of nature versus cultural diversity, and so on), but they must not diverge so much from each other that those who may end up opting for a rural lifestyle are disadvantaged by this very fact.⁸² Whether or not this is the case differs with regard to different rural areas, across countries, but also within them. In long-term stable rural areas with a just provision of public services—on which I say more below—it may well be justifiable that certain kinds of high-paying jobs are not locally available and that the choice of restaurants is limited. But in many declining areas, in which the provision of public services is often inadequate, the set of opportunities cannot be described as fairly structured.

What, then, are the public services that need to be provided to all rural areas? Some services are non-negotiable from a relational-egalitarian perspective, even if the costs for society are high. Just as we have a moral obligation to offer medical help to a reckless motorcyclist who has a self-inflicted accident,⁸³ we have a moral obligation to offer medical services to fellow citizens who decide to live in very remote areas. Unless very extraordinary circumstances hold, basic life-sustaining services need to be offered, even if the costs are considerable (for example, helicopter services to take patients to hospital in health emergencies). Rural residents also need access to regular health checks⁸⁴ and help for mental health issues.⁸⁵

Beyond that, from a liberal-egalitarian perspective, individuals in rural areas also require services that secure at least a minimum of civic participation. This can, for example, involve public library services, which offer not only information (books, newspapers, and so on), but also access to computers. There also need to be spaces for public gatherings with suitable facilities for, say, public debates, to ensure that the right of free assembly can be assured. As part of civic life, subsidies should also be available for certain forms of cultural expression—such as drama and music—for example towards the travel costs that such activities involve in thinly populated areas.

⁸¹See e.g. Stemplowska 2009.

⁸²Some countries explicitly commit to equal opportunities independently of geography; for example, in the German legal system “equivalent conditions of life” are a widely accepted principle; see e.g. Kahl 2016.

⁸³Cf. Anderson 1999.

⁸⁴This might bring “costs” also in another sense, namely in the sense of limiting the freedoms of other individuals. Stanczyk (2012) has argued that the general right to adequate health care implies that it can be legitimate to compel medical staff to work, at least for a certain time, in rural areas that would otherwise be underserved. I agree that this is the logical consequence of the claim that all fellow citizens are owed certain basic services, but of course a lot hinges on how such a policy is implemented. For example, by offering better educational opportunities, especially for jobs in essential services such as health, in rural areas in the first place, it might be possible to train enough medical staff from rural areas who prefer living in their home region anyway, so that compulsory measures can be avoided.

⁸⁵See Davidson 1996, p. 98, on the problems of accessing mental health services in rural America.

All these arguments, however, leave one big issue unaddressed: the availability of economic opportunities. Should public policy also try to create jobs in rural areas, to make sure that people can *actually* stay there? Interestingly, Stilz, in her discussion of occupancy rights, explicitly denies that her arguments would “extend ... to a duty to subsidize others against economic and social change.”⁸⁶ She bases this claim on two arguments: that “located life-plans are typically less drastically affected by economic restructuring than by territorial removal,” at least if alternative jobs are available, and that society as a whole benefits from “a market economy that affords them significant benefits—including dynamic innovation, lower consumer prices, and greater opportunities.”⁸⁷

This assumption, however, seems too quick. In certain rural areas, there simply are no alternative jobs available, and it is unrealistic for people to continue to realize “located life-plans” once, say, a factory has closed down in a community. But at the same time, it is also too simple to speak of “a market economy” without asking further questions about the form that this market economy takes.⁸⁸ By setting the rules of the economic game, through taxes and subsidies, but also through instruments such as anti-trust law and by providing public infrastructure (roads, railway lines, internet connections, and so on), governments can, to a certain extent, influence the character of the economic system. For example, policies can favor transnational corporations or family-owned companies, mainstream or organic farming, and so on, and this also has an impact on the kinds of jobs that are available in rural areas.⁸⁹

The problem with policies of job creation—which relational egalitarians can and should endorse in principle—is more that, for one thing, it is not so clear what works, and, for another, it is hard to generalize what might work in specific regions. Attempts to “bring jobs” to rural areas through development strategies have decidedly mixed results, often incurring huge costs, yet without the desired effects.⁹⁰ In some places, publicly supported tourism initiatives have offered new economic opportunities. But this is not always welcomed by locals; it means, after all, an influx of “city people” and a change in the character of the community.⁹¹ Other opportunities may come from the transition towards sustainable energy: for renewable energy projects, many investments in rural communities will be needed.⁹² But such policies can also introduce new inequalities between different rural communities, because some locations offer better conditions for renewable energy projects than others. Therefore, it

⁸⁶Stilz 2013, p. 344.

⁸⁷Ibid. In a footnote, she acknowledges that “societies may have other duties to cushion dislocation caused by economic change.”

⁸⁸See e.g. the classic research on “varieties of capitalism”; see Hall and Soskice 2001.

⁸⁹See also Kefalas and Carr 2010. Conclusion, on the pros and cons of trying to attract large companies or smaller enterprises run by the “creative class” to rural areas.

⁹⁰Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 2002.

⁹¹For an example from Estonia, see Plüschke-Altorf and Annist 2022; from Norway, see Flø 2022, pp. 105–7; from the US (Wisconsin), see Cramer 2016, pp. 82, 100–4.

⁹²Davies 2018, p. 216.

remains a question of principle—rather than one that could conveniently be answered by finding win-win opportunities—how societies deal with those rural communities in which no new opportunities come up.

In cases in which job creation is unsuccessful, individuals will often have to rely on welfare payments. This leads to another policy question, at least for welfare regimes that make payment of public support conditional on the willingness to accept a job, as is the case in many European countries: how far do they expect individuals to commute for a job, or do they even expect them to move to a different region? Given the value of rootedness discussed above, this seems an overly harsh request. Individuals should get individualized advice and support (for example, for the costs of moving) if they *want* to leave, but if they do not, they should not be forced.

There is some hope that in the future, and after the experiences of the covid-19 lockdowns, remote work will offer new opportunities. But this is only a realistic option if there are stable and reliable high-speed internet connections. Providing these (whether through public services or by creating a market for providers and ensuring its functionality) is an important public task, not least because many forms of cultural participation rely on online formats as well, a point to which I come back below.⁹³ At the same time, not all jobs that one can digitally access—for example, platform work—are attractive in terms of remuneration and other features (development of skills, variety of tasks, and so on).⁹⁴ This is a matter of justice that society should address for many reasons, but one such reason is that these jobs might be taken on, to a great extent, by individuals in rural areas who are already disadvantaged in other respects.

V | CULTURAL RECOGNITION

A third frame for understanding the relation between citizens in urban and rural contexts concerns the mutual recognition and respect that the citizens of a country owe to each other.⁹⁵ As I have described above (Section II), life in rural areas often comes with its own culture, habits, and traditions. In a context in which cities are typically seen as “progressive” and rural areas as “backward,” many commentators have called for more respect for individuals who live in the countryside. Cramer, for example, notes that “[m]any rural residents believed that city dwellers thought they were just ‘a bunch of rednecks,’”⁹⁶ and emphasizes that many rural individuals feel that their voice is not being heard in the political discussions that take place in cities. Hochschild depicts the way in which public discourse and popular culture

⁹³See also Kefalas and Carr 2010, p. 145.

⁹⁴See e.g. Gray and Suri 2019, on the experiences of “Turkers” (individuals working on Amazon’s “Mechanical Turk” platform).

⁹⁵Honneth 1992; Honneth and Fraser 2003; for an overview, see Iser 2019. Such forms of recognition and respect differ from questions about formal representation and concern the wider culture in a society, not just the parliamentary realm (see n. 17 above on rural areas typically not being underrepresented in terms of representative weight).

⁹⁶Wuthnow 2018, p. 66.

perpetuate stereotype about rural dwellers as stupid, backward, and not worthy of respect.⁹⁷ Some authors explicitly exhort their readers, who they assume are mostly city-dwellers, to show more respect for fellow citizens in rural communities.⁹⁸

Now, a first thing to note is that if the provision of educational opportunities, public services, and perhaps policies to create economic opportunities, as discussed above, were successfully implemented, this would probably do much to combat stereotypes and prejudices, simply because rural areas would no longer be so “backward.” The lack of respect for rural communities may have a lot to do with an assumption that individuals who live there are not economically successful, maybe combined with a meritocratic ideology that misinterprets economic success as a result of personal virtue.⁹⁹ In this sense, it may not be different from misguided prejudices against other socio-economically disadvantaged groups. But perhaps it is particularly painful for members of rural communities, because, as mentioned above, hard work *is* indeed a value held by many of them, and many rural jobs do in fact require extremely hard work, but do not result in high incomes.

But even in a situation in which the *economic* dimensions of stereotypes and prejudices were absent, there might still be cultural differences; as discussed above, rural lifestyles *are* often different from urban ones and in certain regions, for example in Europe, one also finds an attachment to traditions (annual fairs, costumes in traditional styles, and so on) that is quite foreign to urbanites. Such differences, and the question of how to react to them, can be captured by applying the lens of multiculturalism.

Interestingly, respect for rural communities has, to the best of my knowledge, not been part of the debate about multiculturalism, which has long dealt with questions about mutual respect between different cultural communities.¹⁰⁰ This is understandable from a historical perspective: rural lifestyles had once been dominant, and probably continue to be seen as a core part of the national identity in many countries (not least by rural communities themselves). It was new cultural communities of immigrants that fought for recognition. But today it seems not too far-fetched to integrate respect for rural communities into a picture of a multicultural society in which individuals with different lifestyles need to find ways of organizing their political life around a set of shared values—which John Rawls famously conceptualized as “overlapping consensus”¹⁰¹—all while being tolerant towards different sets of values beyond this consensus. The decision to live in a rural community (even if it is a “non-decision” in the sense that individuals stay put where their families have always lived) can, in this sense, be seen as a decision for a certain lifestyle that fellow citizens

⁹⁷Hochschild 2016, pp. 143–4.

⁹⁸E.g. Goodhart 2017, pp. 11–2, 233; Wuthnow 2018, p. 160; Flø 2022, p. 107; Curren forthcoming.

⁹⁹Young 1958; Sandel 2020.

¹⁰⁰See e.g. Song 2020, for an overview.

¹⁰¹Rawls 1987.

should respect. *Ceteris paribus*, having more rather than fewer lifestyles in a society means more choice for individuals and, as such, is to be welcomed.¹⁰²

Subsuming the question of recognition and respect under a framework of multiculturalism also makes clear that serious problems of “minorities within minorities”¹⁰³ can arise with regard to rural communities. What about, say, the young girl from a rural family who wants to study astrophysics rather than become a homemaker?¹⁰⁴ What about the non-heterosexual youngster who fears being socially excluded if their sexual orientation becomes known? What about the foreign woman who follows her husband into a rural community and feels “ostracized” there?¹⁰⁵ It seems that from a perspective of relational egalitarianism—and given the non-ideal circumstances that create these problems—these individuals are owed *support against their local environment* in order to lead an autonomous life. Here, however, one runs into a dilemma (also encountered with regard to other cultural communities): insofar as rural communities value strong social cohesion, it comes with the territory that they hold those who cannot or do not want to “fit in” in low esteem. Often, such individuals end up leaving these communities, because they can only find like-minded peers in urban areas. But this means that they are faced with a painful choice between “staying” and “leaving.”¹⁰⁶ They might be owed special support to make this choice more bearable.

More generally speaking, the picture I am drawing here requires rural communities to accept that theirs is one lifestyle among many, not the “one and only” or “truly authentic” way of life of a society—and thus to also respect “city folk” of all backgrounds as equal fellow citizens. This may, in itself, feel like an insult to some members of rural communities, who, for example in the US, “consider their communities the heartland of America.”¹⁰⁷ But this is nonetheless not an unfair request: it is the other side of the coin of requesting recognition for their lifestyle from urban communities, who in turn cannot claim that their lifestyle is the only one that defines the cultural character of their country. Such a mutual recognition could be understood, again, as a kind of social contract between different communities that share an “overlapping consensus” of values, but otherwise need to live with deep value disagreements.

¹⁰²Of course, just as with other communities, respect cannot extend to views that are problematic because they violate the “overlapping consensus” of a society or fail to show respect in turn for *other* individuals and communities—e.g. see Wuthnow (2018, p. 133), who speaks of a “macho culture” that tends to be homophobic, or Bosma and Peeren (2022, p. 115), on how the Dutch farmers’ protests drew on “a particular form of rural masculinity that marked their anger and violence as innate and therefore authentic and justified”; on implicit or explicit racism among rural populations, see e.g. Cramer 2016, p. 85.

¹⁰³E.g. Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005.

¹⁰⁴Goodhart (2017, ch. 8) argues that many “somewhere” want to lead traditional family lives with stay-at-home moms and calls for more political support and recognition for this lifestyle; what he fails to consider, however, is to what extent these are genuinely preferences, or preferences formed as a result of social pressures and lack of meaningful alternatives.

¹⁰⁵Wuthnow 2018, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶See Morton (2019) for an autoethnographic account.

¹⁰⁷Wuthnow 2018, p. 3.

What does this mean for policy? Like many cultural questions, it is difficult to address this issue directly through policy measures (other than reducing unequal access to education and delivering appropriate bundles of opportunities, as described above). Some measures are nonetheless possible. Public support of local and regional media can help bring the issues of rural communities into the spotlight. It can also create outlets for artistic examinations of different urban and rural lifestyles (TV series, documentaries, and so on), which can help create mutual empathy in cases in which hostile stereotypes or other epistemic blockades prevail.¹⁰⁸

A second type of policy concerns the creation of opportunities for urban and rural communities and individuals to encounter each other and thereby to create opportunities for genuine connection and the reduction of prejudices by gaining a deeper understanding of the lifeworlds and values of others. Democratic societies might take inspiration from ancient Athens¹⁰⁹ and think about events that can bring rural and urban communities together, for example, by offering cultural events that speak to both constituencies. It might be particularly effective to create such opportunities for young people, because it holds the potential of sowing the seeds for lifelong friendships. Curren suggests that service programs for young people (including team-building, leadership training, social action projects, and so on) could be held for rural and urban youth together.¹¹⁰ If rural communities have good digital infrastructures, as discussed above, using online communication in order to bring individuals and communities together may be effective.¹¹¹ Of course, the mere possibility of communicating on social media and other platforms does not, in itself, create empathetic discussions and mutual respect. But it can nonetheless be a tool that civic and political associations can use to integrate urban and rural members, and that can help create connections between individuals and groups that would otherwise never encounter each other.

VI | CONCLUSION

In this survey article, I have introduced the urban–rural divide into the discussion about relation egalitarianism that asks what the citizens of a just society owe to each other. I have presented social scientific research about the differences in urban and rural lifestyles, all while emphasizing that the social reality is complex and diverse. Nonetheless, it is worth taking this geographical dimension into account in discussions about social justice, in addition to other dimensions such as race, gender, or class, with which it is intertwined in complex ways. The most important policy areas in which this dimension matters concern access to education,

¹⁰⁸On this role of art for democratic discourse, see Simonitis 2021.

¹⁰⁹Nathan 2022.

¹¹⁰Curren forthcoming, p. 16; on “civic friendship” as an ideal of democratic education, see also Curren 2023.

¹¹¹I here take inspiration from LePoutre’s (2021, pp. 209–12) argument about the potential of online discourse (despite all its problems) to contribute to the integration of fragmented populations.

the provision of public services and economic opportunities, and mutual recognition of different lifestyles.

I have argued that from a relation-egalitarian perspective, great care needs to be taken to ensure that rural youth, both those who want to leave and those who want to stay, do not suffer disadvantages in terms of educational opportunities, and receive subsidies and informal support that can help compensate for the disadvantages caused by physical, but also cultural distance. With regard to public services and economic opportunities, I have discussed, but ultimately rejected, the luck-egalitarian argument that the decision to live in a rural areas is a matter of choice that could justify certain disadvantages. While urban and rural bundles of opportunities do not have to be identical, they all need to include certain basic services (for example, health care), and also opportunities for civic and cultural participation. The greatest practical challenge is that it is difficult to create jobs in certain rural areas, but this does not mean that it should not be tried. With regard to cultural recognition, policies can include support for local media, but also strategies for encouraging encounters between rural and urban communities, both online and offline.

The questions about “urban” and “rural” lifestyles, attitudes, and political behaviors have received a lot of attention because of the way in which right-wing populists have mobilized a narrative of “the people” against “the elite,” framing the latter as an urban phenomenon. But as I have shown, the problem is older and will likely remain with us in the future. There will always be more “central” and more “peripheral” communities, or more economically “progressive” and “backward” areas, even though which these are will shift over time. As long as we accept social, economic, and technological change, some areas will be faster to adapt to new developments than others, so that geographical and temporal questions will often be intertwined. Therefore, while the scope of application will change, the questions will remain. They deserve to be taken seriously as matters of justice, and to be discussed both by philosophers and by the democratic public.

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