

The paradox of New Highlanders

A critical approach to the urban-rural linkage established by multilocal knowledge workers

In this critical response paper, I will discuss the role of digitalisation in the growth of the divide between cities and mountain areas. I will base my argumentation on Prof. Heike Mayer and Dr. Reto Bürgin's lecture "Zwischen Stadt und Berg: Chancen und Gefahren der digitalen Multilokalität für die Regionalentwicklung".

First, I will summarise Prof. Meyer's lecture. The focus laid on the digital development of rural mountainous regions of Switzerland and how it brings metropolises and peripheries closer. The lecturers discussed the roles of New Highlanders as the personal incarnation of this newly formed digital link between urban and rural areas. New Highlanders, or multilocal workers, are knowledge workers who work in an urban area, but who temporarily work digitally from their second home in a rural area. A cycle therefore emerges from this lifestyle in which the workers alternate between their place of employment and of main residence, which they link to "creativity, information exchange, decision-making and spontaneity" (Bürgin et al. 2021: 94) and their second home in the periphery, associated with "work-life balance, protection from distraction and change of scenery" (ibid.). This cycle is only possible as a result of the installation of digital infrastructures in the rural regions and assuming that the workload can be tackled from a peripheral place.

The focus of the following paper will be the role of New Highlanders in the re/production of social inequalities in rural regions of Switzerland¹. I will research the impact these multilocal workers have on the local population of the rural regions they reside in when working digitally from an economic and environmental perspective. I forward the thesis that New Highlanders have a detrimental impact rather than a positive impact on urban-rural linkages. I will structure my argumentation in three parts. I will begin by discussing the meaning of the urban-rural linkages created by multilocal knowledge workers. Then, I will examine the relation the New Highlanders create with the populations of the rural areas their second homes are situated in. Finally, I will point out the ecological impact of the migrations which the workers undertake.

First, I argue that the urban-rural linkage created by New Highlanders is only illusory. Bürgin et al. argue that multilocal knowledge workers "create temporary proximity through rural to urban digital communication activities" (2022: 123). However, I forward the argumentation

¹ I am using the definition provided by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2019).

that the link is not between the two places but within the multilocal knowledge workers. An urban-rural linkage of the sort, for instance, relies on technological infrastructure in the rural area (Bürgin et al. 2022: 121). Therefore, the workers rely on pre-existing information and communication technologies (ICT) and do not bring new infrastructure to the rural areas. In addition, the economic and social relations created through such urban-rural linkages are only beneficial to the New Highlanders (and the companies they work for), as they are paid for work that has no link to the rural area. Furthermore, the relations they build with people in their first, urban, place of residence are very strong, both from a work and free-time perspective (ibid: 123). Though the multilocal knowledge workers certainly spend some money in the rural areas, both in shops and in taxes, most of their income is spent when they live in the urban areas, as they live there most of the time. Therefore, one could say that New Highlanders have a low positive impact on the rural communities' link to the urban from this perspective.

Second, research has shown that there is no economic benefit resulting from New Highlanders in rural areas (Bürgin et al. 2022: 126; lecture at: 01:12:38). Therefore, instead of creating new opportunities for rural populations, multilocal knowledge workers re/produce pre-existing economic structures and inequalities. Indeed, in order to be a New Highlander, one needs predispositions, namely a second home in a rural area and a job which offers the option of working off-centre. This option is often only available to knowledge workers, and not agricultural or artisan workers of rural areas (Mancinelli 2020: 418). The money earned by New Highlanders then goes directly to them, and not to the rural communities, and therefore reproduces existing structures in the rural communities. Since the main place of residence of New Highlanders remains urban, one can conclude that the digital infrastructure present in the rural areas is more profitable to New Highlanders than to the locals. One could go further and say that the companies in the urban areas therefore profit more from the rural infrastructure than the rural areas themselves.

In addition, a certain dependency on the aforementioned cycle which New Highlanders go through arises. Mayer declares that such a dependency can lead to a further "peripheralization of the periphery" (lecture at 01:12:25). Indeed, decisions are made in the centre, not in the periphery, so the periphery remains a place separate from the centre. The dichotomy between both places therefore persists and the urban-rural divide is accentuated by the work of New Highlanders. In conclusion, the New Highlanders do not help with the linkage of the urban and the rural and, instead, worsen it by excluding the rural communities even more from the urban.

Finally, New Highlanders add a lot to the ecological impact of rural communities for three reasons. First, according to the research led by Mayer and Bürgin presented in the lecture, the distances travelled by multilocal knowledge workers increase when at their rural residence, as the working, home, and free time areas are farther apart. In addition, public transportation networks are not as dense or regular as in cities, meaning most New Highlanders probably use cars as their mean of transportation. Second, and more trivially, the constant migration between their first and second residencies means New Highlanders have an increased ecological footprint due to their mobility in comparison to people working only from one place. Finally, a prerequisite for multilocal knowledge workers is a secondary residence. In an ever-growing society, the ecological cost of living is partly linked to the living surface one populates, thus, by owning two homes, New Highlanders have worse impacts on the environment. The ecological footprint of New Highlanders is, however, detrimental to the whole population, not only to rural communities. Nevertheless, it is mostly agricultural workers, living in rural areas, who notice and suffer from the direct effects of climate change (EPA 2022).

I have argued in this paper that the urban-rural linkages are only positive for New Highlanders, who can profit from the change of scenery and of quality of life offered by the ICT available in rural regions. Indeed, it has been proven that they barely bring any economic benefits to communities who live in the rural areas they retreat to. In addition, they emit more CO₂ due to their multilocal lifestyle, affecting all communities, but mostly rural, agricultural people. To summarise, though there seems to be a new urban-rural linkage through the New Highlander's connection, the linkage is only superficial, as it only takes place within the multilocal knowledge workers. This process then further leads to an increased peripheralization of the periphery and a growth of the divide between cities and mountain areas.

Bibliography

Bürgin, R., Mayer, H., Kashev, A. and Haug, S. (2021). Digital multilocality: New modes of working between center and periphery in Switzerland. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 88, pp.83-96.

Bürgin, R., Mayer, H., Kashev, A. and Haug, S. (2022). Far away and yet so close: urban–rural linkages in the context of multilocal work arrangements. *Regional studies, regional science*, 9(1), pp.110-131.

Bürgin, R., Mayer, H. (2022). Zwischen Stadt und Berg: Chancen und Gefahren der digitalen Multilokalität für die Regional-entwicklung. Lecture, 08.12.2022. Bern: University of Bern.

EPA (2022). Agriculture and Climate. Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/agriculture/agriculture-and-climate>. Accessed on:15.12.2022

Kohler, F., von Siebenthal, D. (2019). Niveaux géographiques de la Suisse: Une nouvelle définition statistique des régions de montagne. In: OFS (eds.) Statistique de la Suisse.

Mancinelli, F. (2020). Digital nomads: freedom, responsibility and the neoliberal order. *Information Technology & Tourism*, 22(3), pp.417-437.