

The ties that bind? (Im)mobilities and rural-urban relationships in Ireland

Dr Henrike Rau
School of Political Science and Sociology
NUI, Galway
Ireland

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Introduction

- Recent 'mobility turn' in the social sciences promotes research on social *and* physical (im)mobilities
- BUT: strong focus on urban settings → rural (im)mobilities remain under-explored
- Socio-spatial analysis of mobility-related policy and practice in the Republic of Ireland reveals complex rural-urban relations

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Background

- ConsEnSus project funded by EPA Ireland (2009-2012)
- Focus on sustainable household consumption in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland
- WP3 – transport, mobility and the 'consumption of distance'
- Phase 1: Exploratory theoretical and empirical work
- www.consensus.ie



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The 'Mobility Turn' in the Social Sciences

- Physical mobility → traditional domain of engineers, town planners and natural scientists
- Globalisation debate in the social sciences → focus on flows of people, goods and ideas ('mobility turn')
- Calls for the '**mobilisation**' of social theory and research

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The 'Mobility Turn' in the Social Sciences

- New mobilities paradigm (Urry 2000, 2007)
 - Challenge to conventional notions of society as spatially defined entity
 - Focus on flows of people, goods and ideas
 - Inclusion of non-human actors in sociological analysis
- BUT: **socio-geographical patterns of immobility** require further attention

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The 'Mobility Turn' in the Social Sciences

- Contemporary mobilities approaches influenced by classic social thinkers
 - Simmel – **metropolis**, leisure tourism and the circulation of money
 - Chicago School of Sociology – physical mobility, **spatial form of cities** and social structures
- Strong emphasis on **urban mobility**

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(Im)mobilities and rural-urban relations: Evidence from Ireland

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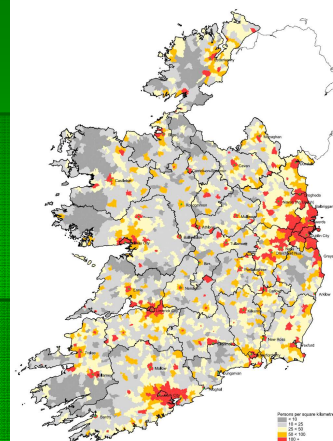
Republic of Ireland - Key facts and figures

- 4.2 m inhabitants (60/km²)
- 26 counties
- Centralised government structures
- Significant rural population

BUT:

- Increasing sprawl and (sub)urbanisation
- Low-density land use patterns
- Rural depopulation in some areas

Source: CSO 2008



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Rural (im)mobilities and rural-urban relationships

- Uneven geographical distribution of social (dis)advantages linked to
 - Physical (im)mobility
 - Transport infrastructure development
- Distinct patterns of rural (im)mobility
 - e.g. greater car dependency; gap between mobile and immobile groups more pronounced
- Urban-centred transport policy
- Analysis of physical *and* social (im)mobility can reveal rural-urban relations

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Rural (im)mobilities and rural-urban relationships

Forms of mobility-related rural-urban relations:

- Urban pressures on (semi-)rural areas
- Power gradients between 'producers' and 'consumers' of the rural landscape
- Rural areas benefiting from their proximity to urban areas
- Growing interconnectedness of rural and urban areas
- Mobility-related disadvantages both in urban *and* rural areas

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Assessing rural and urban (im)mobilities

Key indicators of physical (im)mobility include:

- Distribution of transport infrastructure and mobility opportunities
- Car ownership and use
- Traffic accidents and fatalities
- Workplace accessibility
- Level of spatial isolation

BUT:

- other aspects of (im)mobility also highly relevant
 - e.g. virtual mobility, mobility of goods and ideas, social mobility...

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Transport infrastructure and mobility opportunities

- *Transport 21*
 - €34bn capital investment framework 2006-2015
- Concentration of mobility infrastructure development in Dublin
- Minimal funding for rural public transport

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Conclusions

- Focus on physical (im)mobility reveals multi-directional relationships between rural and urban areas
- Mobility-related (dis)advantages unevenly distributed across urban and rural areas
- Sustainable rural-urban relationships contingent upon sustainable mobility and land use patterns

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