

Strategic Elements of Emerging Countryside Community

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Abstract

The countryside is changing into a new socio-cultural and physical “place” that seems neither “rural” or “urban” as these patterings have been usually characterized. Based on analyses and observations principally in western Canada and the USA (but also in western Europe, Australasia and Latin America), it is not a tranquil land, but one now often perceived and explained as increasingly contested as global and local special interests vie for the consumption and conservation of landscapes, habitats and life ways. The common picture has become one of the consumer’s superior force and effect. However, today both the internal dynamic of the countryside and key external forces affecting it, when viewed from a strategic, reflexive perspective suggest that the seemingly dominant consumption model and its neo-capitalist and mobilities vehicles is being challenged by a countervailing one, or rather an emerging or re-emerging one. This “radical” shift suggests an alternative socio-cultural and physical patterning of the countryside, or at least clusters within it.

The emerging condition is in the main still sending weak signals. It is most obvious in: 1) politically astute and scientifically informed back-to-the-land in-migrants, along with the food and water security groupings; 2) amenity migrants principally seeking low-consumption life ways of simplicity, tranquility and/ or spiritual development, along with “cocooning” from big city life, especially focused on passive relationship with the natural environment (part time or more permanently); 3) slow cities, and more generally the slow living movement; and 4) some countryside communities (municipal and regional), typically with high natural and/ or cultural amenities, beginning to seek means to increase the attachment and involvement of particularly their non-permanent residents. Two powerful and integrated global driving forces of change – climate change and new energy sourcing – are increasingly facilitating a countervailing countryside model.

This paper draws especially on quantitative and qualitative research in communities of the intermountain Canadian and American West who have been experiencing rapid socio-cultural and economic transformation, in which a primary trait has been a shift from industrial natural resources extraction and agriculture production to an amenity base. We will discuss this change and how some local government and non-governmental policy and action is responding in ways that indicate decreasing material consumption, more ecologically integrated life ways, with less, not more corporal mobility.

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