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**Editorial introduction: Counter-urbanisation in contemporary  
Australia: a review of current issues and events**

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## **Editorial introduction: Counter-urbanisation in contemporary Australia: a review of current issues and events**

‘Counter-urbanisation’ has attracted international attention for decades, as an elusive concept that runs against the overwhelming trend of an urbanising world. In Australia, interest in counter-urbanisation waned after the peak interest from the 1970s until the early 2000s, however a recent resurgence of interest has grown due to anecdotal evidence of rising migration out of major cities. Advances in the ability to telecommute, the impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns in major cities, and the impact of climate change on migration movements are some contemporary changes prompting the need for a renewed critical and theoretical analysis of counter-urbanisation. This editorial introduces the special issue that offers renewed insights to counter-urbanisation in Australia. We present three arguments to ground the elusive concept of ‘counter-urbanisation’ that underpin this special issue. We argue (1) **that the contemporary examples of counter-urbanisation we are witnessing presently in Australia involve migration from urban to regional;** (2) counter-urbanisation is determined by geographical context, in this case Australia and places within, and (3) Australian counter-urban movements are strongly linked to amenity and lifestyle migration. This editorial then introduces the special issue papers which together define and challenge the concept of counter-urbanisation within the Australian context.

Keywords: counter-urbanisation; Australia; urban-rural migration; regional; COVID-19;

### **Introduction**

This special issue seeks to interrogate the idea of counter-urbanisation in Australia prior to, and the following, the nation-wide lockdowns and state border closures due to COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. On the heels of the pandemic, there are renewed efforts to understand ‘counter-urban migration’ especially in the European setting (Sandow and Lundholm, 2020, 277; Eimermann, 2015; Hoey, 2014). **The ongoing interest in this**

space especially from the media sparks discussions about rural and regional towns and the lifestyles that they offer (Regional Australia Institute, 2021a; Borsellino et al., this issue). As more stories of ex-city dwellers who shift for a better life out of the urban emerges in the public space here in Australia, there is an increased excitement about the possibilities of regional Australian population revival (Salt, 2022).

Historically, the identification of a 'population turnaround' in Australia in the 1970s (Hugo and Smailes, 1985; Smailes & Hugo, 1985; Hugo 1994; Burnley & Murphy, 2002) described greater population growth outside of major cities than within. The identification of this trend was followed by the publication of *Sea Change* by Burnley and Murphy (2004), creative interest through the TV Drama of the same name and reality television shows of the same ilk, and the establishment of the National Seachange Taskforce (now Australian Coastal Councils Association) which dealt with the characterisation and management of counter-urban movements. However, over time the interest in counter-urbanisation via migration has deteriorated, with most migration scholarship focussing on international immigration/emigration and border control. Statistically speaking, it did appear as though the country had begun moving away from the population turnaround of regional areas identified by Burnley and Murphy (2002, 2004). Australia's two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, continue to grow (despite Sydney declining for some time in net internal population – bolstered by international migration), and Brisbane (the third largest) continues to attract significant growth from interstate (Bernard et al. 2020). In the meantime, rural and outer regional populations of Australia continue to decline long-term as young people leave, resulting in rapidly ageing towns and creating concerns for population sustainability (Bernard et al. 2020). Due to the continued dominance of urbanisation processes, scholarly interest with counter-urban trends in Australia waned but for a few exceptions.

Leading up to the pandemic, the growth of select regional areas, such as Tasmania, garnered some scholarly attention (Osbaldiston, Denny and Picken, 2020). Technological advancements and favourable economic conditions facilitated the ability for former city dwellers to make their way to smaller regional locations (Glover, Lewis and Waters-Lynch, 2022; Guaralda et al., 2020). **When COVID-19 hit the shores, and lockdowns of cities, especially Melbourne, made urban life difficult, narratives in the public domain turned towards anti-urban sentiments.** Lobby groups, developers, real-estate agencies and regional politicians claimed this as a new age for regional Australia, a place where urban residents were seeking refuge and initiating a regional revival (Salt, 2022; Regional Australia Institute, 2021b; Bearup 2020). The suggestion of a new pandemic-induced counter-urbanisation trend garnered widespread attention.

This renewed spark for urban to regional movement insights caught the attention of the special editors of this journal, creating a need to gather researchers in Australia together for two workshops held in 2021<sup>1</sup>. Based in part on these workshop discussions, this special issue interrogates the current situation in relation to out-migration into regional Australia from urban spaces, while also examining the validity of these claims, the facilitators of movement, the motivations for ex-urban migration and any associated potential future issues. The special issue draws on expertise from geography, demography, and sociology, and includes discussions around theories related to counter-urbanisation, examining current trends in Australia of movement and settlement, digital divides/opportunities and the potential for future trends, including

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<sup>1</sup> Counter-urbanisation workshops held via zoom at James Cook University/University of Sydney in January, 2021 and the Institute of Australian Geographers/New Zealand Geographical Society joint conference in July, 2021)

climate-induced movement. The papers contained herein provide a thorough examination of counter-urbanisation in Australia and reveal the fertile ground for further research in light of the contemporary challenges facing Australia and the globe.

While the depth and breadth of work highlights the interest in the topic, common to each paper is how elusive the concept of counter-urbanisation remains, and how difficult it is to grasp empirically and theoretically (Argent, Smailes and Griffin, 2007; Argent, Tonts, Jones and Holmes, 2014; Halfacree, 1994, 2001, 2008; Mitchell, 2004). Indeed, the difficulties with the concept are partly why it fell into relative obscurity following its heyday of the 1970s through to the 90s (Halfacree, 2008). We seek here to provide an overview of the contributions for the issue and summarise some of the key arguments brought forward by this work. To provide context for these contributions, this introduction will provide a brief overview of some of the conceptual/theoretical ideas scaffolding the concept of counter-urbanisation and emphasise some of the difficulties that exist when applying these ideas uncritically to Australia's unique geography and demography.

### **Contested meanings: interpreting counter-urbanisation in Australia**

As suggested above, the concept of counter-urbanisation is rather elusive (Beale 1976; Berry 1976; Halfacree 2001; McManus this issue; Mitchell 2004). Initially coined in the United States by Berry (1976) to describe a reversal of movement between the rural and urban in population settlement, the term spread broadly across geographies and disciplines and became increasingly difficult to universally define (Cloeke, 1985). Scholars argued the meaning of the term, specifically in North America and the United Kingdom, but also the accuracy of a migratory shift from 'urban' to 'rural' spaces that was suggested as a key mechanism of counter-urbanisation (Mitchell, 2004).

Discussions around what defines 'rural' led to significant disruptions in the binary opposition between city/country that underpinned Raymond Williams' (1973) famous work, *The Country and the City*, and this had flow on effects for defining what is, and what is not, 'counter-urban'.

Geographers and demographers, such as Mitchell (2004), proposed that a strict urban/rural binary no longer worked in this case of counter-urbanisation, as the motivations and structures of the movement were distinct – some people were moving to rural locales for the purposes of a better way of life, but others were shifting for ulterior economic motives due to cost of living, and not for rural attributes or to seek a 'rural idyll' (Mitchell, 2004). Literature in the 1990s rose to describe the outer regions of cities as exopolises or 'peri-metropolitan' regions more accurately in Australia (Burnley and Murphy, 2004), as places that were neither neatly urban nor rural, but which attracted population from inner cities. The towns/regions became popular due to rising standards of transport and technology coupled with lower housing expense and lifestyle attributes (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Dufty-Jones, 2012). While there was still a trend towards outer regional or rural/coastal spaces, a significant attraction to these peri-metropolitan areas complicated the notion of counter-urbanisation towards the rural, and a simplistic view of the migration mechanisms of population moving counter to urban areas.

The difficulties of the concept of counter-urbanisation, in part due to the challenges defining 'urban' and 'rural', are well discussed in the literature and in this special issue (see Argent and Plummer; Dadpour and Law; McManus this issue; Halfacree, 2008; Mitchell, 2004). Therefore, we do not seek to repeat what is already stated herein and elsewhere, but to highlight three points that are important to defining 'counter-urbanisation' in the Australian context. First, that counter-urbanisation is

widely referred to as migration movement in Australia, rather than a cessation of urbanisation processes through other mechanisms. Second, that counter-urban migration in Australia is highly geography-specific, relating the particularities of Australian rurality and urbanity, and importantly 'regionality'. Finally, that counter-urbanisation in Australia has been linked to other associated trends, such as amenity-led and lifestyle migration for key reasons related to this unique geographical context. These three points highlight the specificity of Australian counter-urbanism and provide a background to the use of the concept of 'counter-urbanisation' throughout this special issue.

### ***Counter-urbanisation as a migration movement***

Firstly, we argue that within this country, counter-urbanisation should be considered as a migration movement rather than a process of settlement system change (Mitchell, 2004). In other words, we cannot describe counter-urbanisation as simply a restructure of the major urban areas outwards through a process of urban sprawl, constructions of commuter towns via transport infrastructure, and policies that advocate for decentralisation and reduce stress on urban spaces. While it is important here to recognise that there is a change in the structuring of urban, regional, and rural spaces in Australia (Argent 2002; Burnley and Murphy 2004; Hugo 2002; Lockie 2000; Tonts 2000), population settlement remains heavily metropolitan-centric with capital cities housing substantial percentages of the country's people (Bernard et al. 2020). Based on the 2016 census for instance, it is evident that most Australians live in capital cities. Approximately 65% of New South Wales population lived in Sydney, 77% of Victoria's population lived in Melbourne, 77% of South Australia's population lived in Adelaide and 79% of Western Australia's population lived in Perth. Only Brisbane (Queensland) (49%) and Hobart (Tasmania) (44%) houses smaller percentages of the population compared to the rest of their respective states.



With that in mind, we argue that counter-urbanisation is more rightly a migration movement in the Australian context, where people leave cities for smaller peri-metropolitan or regional, rural, or remote spaces. While motivations may differ at times (Halfacree, 2008), the movement of people from a place such as Sydney to a distal regional town like Coffs Harbour, **represents a significant shift both physically and culturally away from major city living** (Osbaldiston, 2012). This form of migration movement can be differentiated from processes of urban sprawl or targeted decentralisation that are still mechanisms associated with urban dominance and urbanisation. Reflecting this, the contributions of this special issue largely refer to counter-urbanisation in the context of these types of significant physical movements away from major cities.

### ***Counter-urbanisation as geography-specific***

The second argument we propose is that counter-urbanisation as a concept requires specificity in the context of the geography of Australia, and geographies within Australia. As Halfacree (2008: 491) notes, ‘counterurbanisation underpinned by some kind of “rural idyll” seems important to much of northern Europe but may have much less significance’ elsewhere. He continues that the term rural is ‘highly variable, even across Europe’ (491). Unlike the United Kingdom, where a significant amount of work on counter-urbanisation has taken place, Australia is widespread geographically, but small demographically. Australia’s relatively small population is concentrated in the cities, and population outside of the city is spread across a landscape the same size as Europe itself. Due to this geographical context, Australians introduce the terms ‘regional’ and ‘remote’ to circumvent some of the challenges with identifying Australian towns and settlements along a Eurocentric rural/urban binary (Lockie and

Bourke, 2001; Beer, Maude, and Pritchard, 2003). However, as Dadpour and Law (this issue) highlight, attempts to define and make clear lines between major urban, regional, rural, and remote are difficult to sustain with many conflicting, overlapping, and conflated uses, even using statistical resources such as census.

Australia's landscape and development has a very different history to Europe and North America. Covered in desert and semi-arid desert internally with only small pockets of arable land coupled with rich wealth in mining, populating the interior of Australia has proved incredibly difficult (Drozdzewski, 2014; Buckle and Drozdzewski, 2018). For the most part, Australia's development occurred along the coast and former colonial hubs/ports grew to become major metropolitan cities today creating what is known as metropolitan primacy in Australia (for instance Sydney and Melbourne) (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). Approximately 85% of the population lives within 50 kilometres of the coastline. These cities which started as administrative and economic hubs for fledgling colonies in the early Australian colonisation period, have now become significant financial global hubs especially Sydney (Osbaldiston, 2018).

During the modernisation of Australia, port-cities such as Melbourne became hubs of economic, political and social activity, while coastal townships outside of the major colonial outposts became places of refuge and refreshment. For instance, Noosa in the Sunshine Coast of Queensland and now a hotspot for ex-urban residents, became 'popular for day and overnight tourism, entertaining those who sought for escape from the bitter ills of industrial modernity' (Osbaldiston, 2018, 115). Australia's love affair with coastal and beachside lifestyles began here, transforming once small regions like the Gold Coast, into landscapes for escape, adventure, and refuge. Once international tourism caught hold of these places, they became intense urban tourist attractions

founded in some places on a similar model to west and Floridian coasts of the United States (Osbaldiston, 2018).

Most of the population movement out of major cities shifts into what we might term 'regional' places rather than 'rural' (see Argent and Plummer, this issue). These areas are, for the most part, located along the coastlines, mostly on the East Coast, and in locales deemed 'regional' or non-metropolitan (such as the Gold and Sunshine Coasts) **but which are fast becoming major urban centres**. In addition, many regional cities/towns are close enough to major capital cities to be almost described as peri-metropolitan or commuter places, with the exception in Queensland places such as Cairns, Townsville, and Mackay in the North (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). Meanwhile, those areas that would more easily be identified as destinations for counter-urban movements due to greater relative difference to major cities in population size and density, (deemed 'rural' or 'remote' in indexes such as those highlighted by Dadpour and Law in this issue), are significant distances away from major cities creating difficulties in access to services, and consequently most have for some time experienced negative net population growth (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; McManus this issue).

With most of the identified counter-urbanisation occurring in larger regional, coastal spaces, it is important to question how the 'rural idyll', that underpins much of the literature elsewhere, applies to Australia. While it might be attractive to talk of a 'coastal idyll', coastal Australia is diverse both geographically and climatically. Tasmania's landscape and climate is distinct from Northern Queensland for instance, and both areas attract population from major city centres (see Dadpour and Law; Osbaldiston, this issue). Coastlines are a draw card for several areas, but the attractiveness of the amenity therein is distinct for each place requiring careful analysis. Mitchell (2004, 25) suggests, 'in-depth analysis of household motivations' of people

who shift into non-urban spaces is required to allow for better understanding of what might be ‘counter-urban’ about these forms of migration. We would add, this would also allow for a place-based knowledge of what pushes people out of the urban and into non-urban, as each city is distinct and places within them also are unique.

Researchers should avoid essentialising the term counter-urbanisation to avoid problems of translating it into different contexts and places/spaces (Halfacree, 2008, 492). Halfacree (2008, 491) argues that counter-urbanisation as a concept should be less defined and open to contexts, ideas, narratives, and individual/personal motivations. He writes,

Overlying this general opening up of counterurbanisation, therefore, is the suggestion that we should avoid too fixed or narrow an understanding of what ‘counterurbanisation’ entails. More exactly, we need a flexible model of counterurbanisation that resists reduction into a fixed, frozen, saturated ‘population’ (Foucault, 1980), but sees the discursive category ‘counterurbanisation’ liquefied, mobilised and deployed in the manner best suited to the task to hand (Halfacree 2008, 491).

Such thoughts certainly reflect a general malaise towards any attempt to concretise concepts in social science, normalising them in a manner that does not allow for the social constructivism to have a role (cf. Seamon, 2018). This special issue considers a multifaceted concept of counter-urbanisation as migration movement out of major cities across various geographical contexts; both Australia-wide (McManus, this issue, Borsellino et al., this issue), and within smaller Australian geographies; looking at outmigration from Sydney to regional NSW and the rest of Australia (Argent and Plummer, this issue); migration into Cairns (Dadpour and Law, this issue) and the Sunshine Coast in QLD (Buckle, this issue), and the island state of Tasmania (Osbaldiston, this issue). As Dadpour and Law (this issue) show, an anti-essentialist

approach allows for the political and cultural nuances of each place to have a role in how 'urban' and therefore 'counter-urban' are defined. However, an anti-essentialist approach creates some difficulties for the operationalisation of terms in everyday life. For this reason, we propose the inclusion of methodological and theoretical approaches from related scholarly work on amenity and lifestyle migration to better operationalise 'counter-urbanisation' in the following section.

### ***Counter-urbanisation, lifestyle, and amenity migration***

From a purely scholarly level, counter-urbanisation is an empty cup that can be filled with the contents of different places, times, and people. Even the naming of the term deserves some consideration. For *counter*, from the Anglo and Old French of *contre* and Latin *contra*, is defined as contrary, opposite or against. Thus, we could literally consider 'counter-urbanisation' as contrary, opposite or against urbanisation. Research suggests that migration movement which might fit this description is rare in Australia, and it would be less useful for geographers, planners, and demographers to restrict use of the term counter-urbanisation to instances of migration to rural or remote spaces only (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). As Dadpour and Law (this issue) show, a place such as Cairns (Northern Queensland) attracts some in-migrants from places such as Sydney and Melbourne, and this movement could be considered counter-urbanisation due to the relative lack of population and urban density in Cairns, despite Cairns being an urban city with an international airport and some usual amenities you find in a larger capital. It is difficult to argue that migrants to Cairns from major cities hold a *contra* urban mentality, and yet it can still be useful to position them within that shift away from intense city spaces and counter to the broader flow of people to major urban areas. Returning to Halfacree's (2008) thoughts, it requires some consideration of motivations of migrants, as well as the relative differences between the natural, social and built

environments that they are leaving versus those they are moving to. Mitchell (2004, 28) offers a typology that allows some consideration of different ‘types’ of counter-urbanisers that might exist locally. These include ‘ex-urbans’, ‘displaced urbans’ and ‘anti-urbans’ where distinctions exist in motivations (such as what types of amenities desired) through to economic factors (such as labour force characteristics).

Again, difficulties with any typology exist in that they do not necessarily apply universally. In Australia, counter-urbanisation as a theory/concept, has not been as readily appropriated into **scholarly literature investigating internal migration** compared to overseas. Instead, population turnaround of regional locations, especially in the coastal places, has been labelled as ‘seachange’ or ‘treechange’ (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Gurrán, Squires and Blakely, 2006; Osbaldiston, 2012). Initially, this term ‘seachange’ reflected the Shakespearian narrative around a deep, rich transformation from a life urban, to a life refreshed and new amongst areas of high environmental and cultural value (Osbaldiston, 2012, 13). However, following an upswing in public interest in the idea of leaving the city, popularised by the national television drama *Seachange* and reality show *The Real Seachange*, development and real-estate industries caught hold of the phenomenon and made the term literal. Seachange was associated with coastal living while the alternative term ‘treechange’ denoted living in the bush, country, and inland rural setting (Koleth, 2011; Osbaldiston, 2012; Buckle and Drozdowski, 2018). Either way, the term broadly encapsulated a fundamental discontent with city life, and a desire to live in places deemed to be authenticating to the person (Osbaldiston, 2012; Ragusa, 2010).

The concept has roots, it could be argued, in the geographical term ‘amenity migration’ coined initially in 1954 by Ullman and which links neatly with counter-urbanisation literature (see Argent and Plummer, this issue). The amenity approach

emphasises the push/pull features of movement away from major urban centres (Moss, 2006; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). These include a significant importance on the environmental value of areas, such as open space, forests, coasts, and so on. However, included as pull factors are variables such as ‘comfort amenities’, ‘recreation’, ‘economic gain’, ‘housing affordability’ and in recent times ‘climate change’ (Moss and Glorioso, 2014, 13; Osbaldiston, this issue). Push factors, or what Argent and Plummer (this issue) describe as ‘disamenity’, include strains of intense city life, pollution, traffic, work-life balance, community and increasingly, heat (Moss, 2006). However, as Argent and Plummer (this issue) also show, intense urban spaces such as Sydney, are complicated somewhat by increasing movement into the city for opportunities (education, work, housing).

The beauty of the amenity migration concept is that it does not presume an anti-urban sentiment, but rather identifies the locality specific amenities that draw people into a region/rural setting (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Moss, 2006; Moss and Glorioso, 2014; cf. Osbaldiston, 2011, 2012). In addition, it is quantifiable, allowing for an amenity index to be constructed (Argent et al., 2011; Argent and Plummer, this issue) making it useful for planners in both city places and regional/rural places. While much of the literature in this space does focus on the rural, mountain or beachside locales that are largely non-urban spaces, there is scope for amenity migration to explain movement to places that are still urban, but which are perhaps less intensely populated (such as Cairns in Queensland, Hobart in Tasmania). The drawcards of amenity found in these urban spaces, such as tourist infrastructure and services, can be included in an amenity index to identify potential pull factors. In the context of Australia where significant movement occurs into major urban centres now of the Gold and Sunshine Coast

(Buckle, 2021, this issue), it perhaps makes more sense to talk of an amenity-led migration shift internally within Australia, rather than a counter-urban trend.

Counter-urbanisation discussions are also linked to lifestyle migration literature. Migration does not end simply with the shift from one place to another, or one landscape to the next. The amenity (social, environmental, built) that draws people into place, does not always meet with the expectations of migrants. Expectations of what a place offers however, flows beyond its material and physical qualities. This is the fundamental feature of another concept that delves into the question of migration internationally and internally – that of lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Developed via sociology, lifestyle migration literature is founded on a simple principle of understanding how people seek out places that enable a 'better way of life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, 621). Importantly, the imagined lives people hold about other places prior to migration, and then their practiced lifestyles post-migration are examined in detail, usually via ethnographic investigation (Benson, 2011; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Buckle, 2021; O'Reilly, 2010, 2012).

These imaginations, and the ways in which lifestyles are lived thereafter, are structured through socio-economic positions (such as class), cultural backgrounds, gender, and ethnicity (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014). For instance, Benson (2011) identifies in her work of British people living in rural France that a quest for authenticity, and distinction from other migrants, emerges through middle-class habitus and taste, which then influences how they live their new styles of life. The practices of migrants following migration, along with how local communities adapt and adopt practices to accommodate (or not) newcomers are important to analyse as this allows for a greater understanding of these sociological features of the migration experience, and lends evidence to the relative differences, or perception of difference, between the



lifestyle offered in the major city areas versus non-metropolitan locales. The negotiation of new lives, both for individual migrants and communities, provides a deeper analysis of how this migration is experienced.

Importantly for this discussion, lifestyle migration is a rather empty term that allows researchers to unpack what new “style of life” migrants are seeking, and the relationship between individuals and structures. Furthermore, it allows for a greater connection to broader social theories on the changing nature of modernity (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014). The difficulties of lifestyle migration are that it tends to not be quantifiable relying, for the most part, on an inductive approach that privileges interview and ethnographic work (Benson and O’Reilly, 2016; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016). However, due to the rather undefined nature of the concept, it does allow for an opportunity to unpack motivations of migrants who move away from one place to another for a purpose of recapturing something lost or discovering something new in their way of living. The lifestyle offered by places outside major cities is discussed within this special issue by Osbaldiston, who looks at the lifestyle offered in the island of Tasmania, and Buckle, who looks at the perceptions of the lifestyle offered on the Sunshine Coast that draw ex-city residents, and the lived realities of the move (this issue).

Two issues arise from this approach to counter-urbanisation through this lens. Firstly, the framing of this through lifestyle migration tends to lean towards an almost bohemian middle-class movement of people from the city to regional/rural (cf. Osbaldiston, 2012). However, as several show in Australia, welfare-led migration, or those in the lower classes who seek out areas of higher amenity value, has contributed significantly to the ex-urban movement (Murphy et al., 2002; Dufty-Jones, 2012). While focus for some of the papers in this issue lay on the middle-class quest for new

styles of life, it is important to remember that counter-urbanisation is not limited to the privileged classes. Indeed, the opening of the concept of lifestyle migration to cut across class boundaries ought to be considered (see Osbaldiston, 2012).

Secondly, it is worthwhile mentioning that the mobility turn presents yet another option theoretically for the unpacking of the counter-urban trend through movement. An increase in flexible working arrangements, especially in the west, and the rapidly growing capacities of information technology, means that people are now capable of working across geographical spaces. In literature, the mobility turn allows us to consider the 'lifestyle' component further, as people shift perhaps temporarily into less-intense urban space. Specifically, terms like lifestyle mobility (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark, 2015), opens discussions around digital nomadism usually restricted to international destinations, but which could well influence internal movement itself (de Loryn, 2022; Korpela, 2020). However, more research will be required to understand this further.

### **Contemporary issues for counter-urbanisation – introducing the papers**

There are several issues with the concept of counter-urbanisation in Australia, which leads us to argue that the term requires some deeper reflection and refinement, particularly if it is to be employed to describe post-pandemic migration trends. In this special issue, rather than attempt to 'pin down' the term, the contributions together present a range of methods, case studies and disciplinary perspectives that help to highlight the complexity of Australian counter-urbanisation, along with other related contemporary issues and theories. Important for us, as noted earlier, is the impact of COVID-19 on population movement away from the city. The fundamental question of this as a potent sociological event that transforms how we live, work, and value our places, particularly a move away from urban places and lifestyles, remains difficult to

determine. However, the articles presented in this special issue give some insight into how the pandemic may or may not alter future counter-urban trends.

McManus' paper focuses especially on the regional/rural revival discourse occurring in the media during the pandemic. In this paper, McManus argues, as we have above, that counter-urbanisation as a concept fails to 'capture all migration dynamics' and 'emerged at a time when there was arguably more agreement about what is urban and what is rural' (this issue). The difficulties of the counter-urbanisation concept are further exemplified by examining where people have shifted to. As McManus (this issue) shows, there is a tendency for migrants to flock to areas within commuter distance from major capital cities, in smaller to larger coastal urban spaces. However, importantly, he argues that COVID-19 has not changed the dynamics of rural/regional/urban spaces and migrant flows, but simply accelerated or amplified them. People were already leaving the cities of Sydney and Melbourne, for various reasons (housing being one of them), and the pandemic simply allowed space and time for this to be accentuated.

The already established pattern of out-migration from Sydney is the focus of Argent and Plummer's paper (this issue). Drawing on work already established through amenity-led migration (Argent et al., 2014), the authors here attempt to understand the relationship pre-pandemic of amenity and disamenity in movement of people out of Sydney into regional/rural spaces. Using an amenity index based on variables such as 'beach proximity, employment in tourism and related services and median altitude range and slope levels', Argent and Plummer (this issue) are able to show a positive correlation with some rural and coastal places such as Armidale and Ballina, and population in-migration from Sydney from 2011 to 2016. Importantly, the authors also show a 'hint at the operation of two largely disconnected internal migration systems

within the broad Sydney zone' with one associated with settling within the city for purposes of 'housing, education and training and employment' while the other moving to the 'peri-urban fringe and beyond, away from the crush of the city' (this issue). This provides some unique and important work to build on as census data becomes available to ascertain who is leaving Sydney, and who is remaining.

The direct impact of COVID-19 on migration rates internally from urban to regional Australia is the subject of the contribution of Borsellino et al. (this issue). Using provisional internal migration data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics from 2016-2021, these authors discover three key findings of note for this discussion. Firstly, the rising regional population of which the excitement of a 'regional revival' is based (Salt, 2022), is likely not due to incoming counter-urban migration, but rather a slowdown in departures from regional areas. In short, people who usually leave regional areas for major cities were staying during pandemic times. With the lockdown of major capitals ending and the opening of borders between states, the authors project an increase of departures from 'regional New South Wales and Victoria' potentially with people 'returning to the city in the future' (this issue). Lastly, Borsellino et al. argue that the different impacts of distinct changing practices such as remote working, online higher education and housing prices may well maintain desire to stay in regional spaces (this issue). However, this is difficult to predict at this stage and an opportunity for further research.

The argument that we hold above about the different geographies of Australia is articulated within Dadpour and Law's contribution to this special issue. In this paper, the authors analyse the development of indexes in use statistically across Australia to identify what is regional, rural, and urban. As they argue, the idea of 'rural' that is embedded in the framing of counter-urbanisation is highly 'cultural and political' (this

issue). Using Cairns in Northern Queensland as a case study, the authors show how different political constructions of what is 'regional', overlooks various factors including transportation and other amenity. In addition to this, the tendency to lump regional places together is shown to be highly problematic but argued also to be politically orientated. Lobby groups, such as the Regional Australia Institute, can make widespread claims to the increase of migration to regional areas, which ignores that some places such as the Gold Coast (which draws in significant population), are not comparable to places such as Cairns.

In the penultimate contribution to the special issue, Buckle focusses on an often-forgotten area of counter-urbanisation, the home. Using interview data from migrants in her study of the Sunshine Coast, she aims in her work to incorporate 'home-seeking' as a feature of counter-urbanisation. Importantly, seeking a home does not include just the material aspects such as housing, but rather includes an immaterial desire for 'ideal' homes for children, nostalgia for 'childhood', or attempts to find a 'sense of stability' (this issue). These aspects of 'home' parallel some of the anecdotal narratives around counter-urban migration in Australia during the pandemic: seeking safety from the transmission risks of the city, escaping rising house prices of the major cities to afford more suitable homes, and reconnecting with family with an increasing ability to work remotely and foster work/life balance (Terzon, 2021; McAuliffe, 2021). As she concludes, the Sunshine Coast allowed participants to capture the normative ideas of home in their mind 'of a certain rooted, slow lifestyle, of adequate space and housing for children and good schooling, and of community and family' (this issue). While we can certainly critique this perspective of place offered by her participants, there is a sense in Buckle's paper that underpinning counter-urban practices in Australia, pre and possibly post-pandemic, may well be a desire for contentment in everyday life founded

on a sense of home.

Finally, in Osbaldiston's contribution to the special issue, the question of climate is explored in relation to counter-urban trends. Using research in Tasmania on the recent population turnaround in regional areas, he argues that a prevailing and under-analysed feature of counter-urbanisation is climate patterns. He utilises a push/pull dynamic here of climate, wherein life in mainland major cities is increasingly described by migrants to Tasmania as unbearably hot, creating dissatisfied lives and a desire for a temperate climate. The island state of Tasmania is selected by these migrants for not only its cooler weather patterns, but also the seasonality it provides. As he shows, these migrants describe the changing nature of their lifestyles as imposed on them by the changing nature of Tasmania's annual weather, which accentuates their connection to place and their feeling of authenticity. In conclusion, Osbaldiston (this issue) questions how much the urban heat island effect, along with other issues, will contribute to a future desire to leave major urban centres.

## **Conclusion**

There is much work still left to be done in the development of a fuller understanding of counter-urbanisation in Australia prior to and following the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the disruption of economies, and the reintroduction of work-from-home narratives needs to be interrogated further. Movement of flexibly employed people who can take their labour into their homes will need to be understood in line with current movements from urban to regional/rural areas. In particular, the impact of such movement (if indeed there is a link) might result in dramatic fault-lines in local economies especially in housing in smaller towns/cities of high environmental amenity

(Moss, 2006). It is however not clear at this stage what trends the pandemic constructed and the influence of this on settlement patterns.

Furthermore, it is clear from this introduction, and throughout this special issue, that the term counter-urban itself requires some thinking through especially in relation to what role the urban has in relation to the non-urban. Despite the Australian emphasis here in this issue, there are points that impact the discussions on counter-urbanisation beyond to elsewhere. We would argue, along with others such as Argent and Plummer (this issue) and McManus (this issue), that counter-urbanisation generally may need to incorporate other concepts/theories from elsewhere such as amenity-led migration or lifestyle migration and examine the conditions for ex-urban migration, rather than focussing on the cessation of the urban broadly. Doing so will provide conceptual clarity for not only those charged with everyday planning or the statistical modelling of these trends (such as what amenity migration provides), but also more nuance for those engaged in scholarly investigations of motivations for leaving the city and the experiences of migrants thereafter (such as what lifestyle migration provides). Nevertheless, we anticipate that this special issue will provide a platform from which further research can be undertaken and will be a useful source of critical insights to the complex and varied experiences of counter-urbanisation now and in future.

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