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Contested Spatialities of Lifestyle Migration Public policies, local democracy and global market forces

Gundars Rudzitis

University of Idaho, USA

E-Mail: gundars[at]uidaho.edu

ABSTRACT

Amenity Migration And A Radical Theory Of Place

I begin by discussing the initial formation of the role of amenities and associated migration as a counterpoint to development models, whether neoclassical or Marxist, that are rooted within a framework privileging economic materialism and consumerism. The amenities countermovement began in a small number of universities in the USA and was initially treated with skepticism. However, now it is widely accepted though not in the way it was originally intended.

I argue, using examples from the American West, that the original aims of the amenity approach as a transformative and liberating theoretical framework has been co-opted. The amenity approach has been incorporated into the neoclassical economic growth-is-good consumerist approach to development, one that is not sustainable and increases spatial inequalities. Mainline economists especially have taken the amenity argument and adapted it to their utilitarian framework.

The significance of the original amenity/quality-of-life approach was that it broke out of a reductionistic, algorithmic and economic view of life. It aimed at providing an alternative to our increasingly economic way of viewing life. The quality-of-life approach points towards place, community, and, as importantly, democracy rooted in people living in real places.

My focus has been on the American West, which accounts for the bulk of the USA amenities literature from the 1970s to the present. I, and my colleagues have over the last twenty years surveyed over 15,000 persons in high amenity regions of the US. This survey data provides the empirical and modeling context for my argument.

The findings and lessons learned from the US are relevant to other geographic contexts, especially given the global nature of the changes taking place in the American West and elsewhere around the world. Amenity migration involves the interplay between macro-scale forces associated with global trade liberalization and the actions of individual human agents in search of idyllic spaces within which to live and recreate. I will also, for comparative purposes draw upon recent fieldwork in Costa Rica, Latvia and New Zealand.

The amenities/quality-of-life approach can be the start of a movement towards a place-based approach that recognizes a geography-of-limits, specific to places and regions. I outline how this can be part of a radical approach that has different assumptions and an approach that can result in vital rather than parasitic communities, as unfortunately, many

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*Centre of Human and Social Sciences, Spanish National Research Council
Department of Political Science & International Relations, Autonomous University of Madrid*



of the amenity based communities are, or are in danger of becoming.

I discuss why and how we have to experiment with new institutions to develop alternatives to current trends. There are not many alternatives out there now, but there are some. There are examples of alternative spaces outside of, or transformative of, global capitalistic networks of production and consumption. Scholars and others can add new dimensions of theoretical inquiry that will provide new insights on the diverse forms amenity migration can take.