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Migration and commuting: local and regional development links

Mike Coombes and Tony Champion

INTRODUCTION

At the outset it is not unreasonable to ask the rationale for exploring links between migration and commuting in the context of local and regional development. A simple answer is that they are both ways in which people are spatially mobile, with both these forms of mobility having potentially important implications for the places that act as origins and destinations and also – especially in the case of commuting – impacts on the places in between and on the environment more generally. Moreover the salience of this answer has grown steadily as mobility has become an ever more important feature of modern societies. In more recent years this growing mobility has attracted increasing academic interest, to a degree which has even led to some talk of a “mobility turn” across a range of the social sciences (Urry 2008). There is also a less obvious reason for examining links between commuting and migration, and this is that these links are far more complex and multi-faceted than they may seem at first sight. It is this reason which motivates much of the discussion here.

Although it is an oversimplification, it can be argued that in earlier work migration and commuting were often posed as corollaries. In daily life, people were seen to decide their home location by choosing between migrating to be nearer their workplace or commuting from where they currently live. At the broader scale of cities and labor markets, much regional science and associated policy debates distinguished sharply between a labor supply available within daily commuting distance – which might adjust rapidly to changing labor demand – and that which might be gained or lost through the slower adjustment of migration. Commuting analyses have accordingly been largely restricted to a sub-regional scale, whereas migration research extends from the global to the very local. In keeping with the view of commuting as displacing migration – in fact commuting has been referred to as “daily migration” – a frequent distinction is made between local and non-local migration, with this spatial distinction depending on whether the move was further than most people are likely to be prepared to commute. In fact this same separation of local from non-local migration also appears in studies of migration by the many population groups outside the labor force, despite commuting patterns being irrelevant to them, as reflected in the demographer’s distinction between “residential mobility” (address changing within a place that does not alter its overall population) and “migration” (between places).

A few stylized facts serve to illustrate ways in which diverse recent trends have eroded this apparently straightforward distinction between migration and commuting.

- More households have more than one earner, and in many multi-earner households more than one member has a job whose location and pay supports longer-distance commuting, so household migration decisions involve difficult trade-offs that may lead to one or more persons still commuting a long distance.
- More people have complex working patterns like “weekly commuting” which may be associated with temporary contract positions or with life-style and life-chance decisions which might involve preference for family upbringing in a more rural location or in a place with better access to high-ranking schools.
- More work is IT-enabled and this can foster “teleworking” which may appear to negate commuting but there is often still repeated travel, in some cases to the previous workplace: thus the stereotyped migration from metropolis to countryside enabled by teleworking with the same employer is linked to longer-distance but more occasional journeys to the same workplace.

At the same time, migration patterns include the moves of distinct groups such as people who are approaching retirement and who may accept long commuting flows for a relatively short

period between the place they are retiring to and the work they will retire from. This longitudinal perspective can find other possible links through time, such as people who initially accept long distance commuting as part of a move to a more remote location they aspire to live in, but then weary of the commuting and change their job – perhaps “downshifting” – so as to remain in the area they have chosen as home.

At this point it is necessary to acknowledge that the above examples of links between migration and commuting had to be presented as stylized facts, or anecdotal life histories, because the hard empirical evidence on these links between aspects of mobility is very patchy. The reasons are not hard to find as far as the more longitudinal links are concerned: longitudinal datasets are scarce and few cover both migration and commuting behavior. To make matters worse, in any one year relatively few people migrate, so migrants are a small minority of most survey samples, and in fact in some surveys any migrants disappear due to the survey method being based on repeat contact at the same address. Without going too far into the data minutiae – especially as the detail varies between datasets and indeed countries – both migration and commuting measures are strongly affected by the rising problems for surveys in representing modern life-styles and behavior. In particular, measures of migration and commuting depend on identifying the “home” location for each person. That concept is based on traditional norms of a single settled address in a defined household, norms which cannot cope with the more transitory behavior of growing numbers of people especially young adults and international labor migrants.

The discussion so far has centered on individuals and households, but the decisions made at this micro scale have significant ramifications at neighborhood and wider scales. This means there are key local, regional and even national policies that could benefit from a better understanding of the ways in which migration and commuting patterns are linked (Rees et al 2004). The final part of this introductory section outlines the way in which commuting and migration are linked in different ways at different scales, and it then uses these differences to break down the remainder of this chapter into two broad sections.

Given the emphasis here on local and regional development policy issues, it is important to stress the need for clarity on the limits of – and the distinction between – the local and regional categories. The *local* category is clearly a scale above that of the individuals and households who make the migration and commuting decisions, and here it is distinguished from wider scales such as the labor market area. As such there is a substantial focus on the neighborhood level of policy, but similar issues arise for whole small settlements such as the towns and villages that form part of the labor market areas of larger cities. The ways that migration behavior links with commuting to pose policy issues at this neighborhood scale are dealt with in the last section of this chapter. In the current British policy lexicon, the issues at this scale mostly fall into the “places” agenda centered on areas’ relative attractiveness to potential residents, and their appeal to employers too where relevant. More specifically, both commuting and migration patterns are influenced by the extent of locally available jobs appropriate to the types of residents attracted by the distinctive mix of housing and other conditions in that area. One example of the policy questions at this scale is the challenge of creating new residential areas that can help toward a lower carbon future by fostering local working and hence in-migration by people who will then not commute very far.

The *regional* scale is probably best termed the city region nowadays, for reasons that we set out below. Policy issues at this scale tend to privilege economic concerns and migration is increasingly central to such debates, particularly in seeking to attract and retain the people who will be most valuable to the city region economy. In fact, very similar issues are increasingly part of national policy debates, so that legislation over international immigration is often designed to maximize national economic gain. One way by which the national and city regional scales differ is, of course, that at this sub-national scale policy options are strictly limited. In most countries

the city region scale is the focus of only limited policy leverage in general, with no leverage whatsoever over migration and commuting flows. Despite this, many city regions responsible for economic development have identified changing the balance of inflows and outflows across their boundaries as critical in growing their city region's economic strength. We look first at these city region issues before going on to examine the more local scale.

THE CITY REGION SCALE

It is only recently that the city region has emerged internationally as a dominant spatial framework for sub-national economic analysis and development planning. Earlier policies used macro economic regions distinguished by their industrial structure, such as the USA's agricultural "corn and hog belt" or the Ruhr coal-and-steel region. Policy to address industrial decline and restructuring initially took the form of special arrangements by central government, such as the 1930s examples of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the USA and the Special Areas in the UK. Later there was a widespread development of "regional planning" to combat widening core-periphery disparities – such as the polarization between the Paris region and the rest of France (*le désert français*), or between north and south Italy – but this was delivered through agencies for broad administrative regions or the provinces of federal countries. With the recent acceleration of globalization, rather smaller-scale functionally-defined entities have come to the fore. In the words of Scott (2001: 1-4), "The new regionalism [is] rooted in a series of dense nodes of human labor and community life. ... Such entities are becoming the focal points of ... a new global-city capitalism. ... City regions are coming to function as the basic motors of the global economy." This worldwide development has major implications for regional economic development policy,(see for example, Neuman and Hull 2009).

The sustained growth of international migration flows is one aspect of the globalization that has led to this shift of spatial focus in development planning. Once again there are data limitations here related to the "loss" of migrants who leave, but the broad picture is one of increasing movement affecting most areas. The point made above about city regions having little or no leverage to influence arrivals or departures was starkly illustrated by the consequences for English sub-regions of the European Union (EU) decision to incorporate 8 Central and Eastern Europe countries as member states ("the A8 countries") in 2004. Stenning et al (2006) showed inflows across England which were unprecedented in their volume and geographical spread and for which no policy response had been prepared. As shown in Figure X.1, whereas immigration from traditional non-A8 sources was still heavily concentrated on the global city region of London, migration from the A8 countries was much less focused on this international "gateway city" and more strongly represented in smaller – and even rural – labor markets that had little experience of accommodating immigrants (see also Coombes et al, 2007). The subsequent global "credit crunch" economic downturn may have shrunk these inflows so much that the balance may have turned to net outflow (datasets on out-migration are too weak for this hypothesis to be tested). The link with commuting arises here too because these international labor migrants may use one area to live in even though their work (largely gained via agencies) is in a rather distant part of the country. In short, a city region policy-maker may aspire to alter the balance of the labor force through the cumulative effect of net international migration flows, but few city regions have the powers to influence either the number or the composition of these inflows and outflows.

For most city regions in most times, its migration exchanges with other parts of its own country are likely to be larger than its international migration flows. In fact most city regions have little more control over these intra-national flows, just as there are few countries that have policy leverage over the *commuting* flows across their city region borders. Even in the case of China where policy regimes exist to control intra-national migration and limit where people can work, people move but remain unrecorded. While these flows are largely beyond city region policy influence, they are by no means random in their patterns. In particular, across the world there is

a well-established tendency for the key/capital city regions to gain younger adults from other parts of their countries but then lose people more established in their careers to other favored city regions and amenity-rich areas (Fielding, 2007). Mature economies tend to have few city regions that suddenly experience very large net migrant gains; instead the net inflows tend to impact through their cumulative effect over time. This cumulative impact works primarily through the labor market and thus again interacts with commuting patterns.

The increasing economic development policy interest in longer-distance migration stems from the observation that migration's impact on a city region's skills base is often highly selective (Champion et al 2007). Continuing loss of highly-skilled and better-paid people can progressively reduce the regeneration potential of a city region economy through its negative impacts on entrepreneurship and the availability of the skills mobile employers seek, as well as having indirect effects on the municipal tax base and private-sector confidence. While the "knowledge economy" idea may have been overplayed recently, knowledge-rich sectors have tended to accelerate urban and regional growth (Pike et al 2006), prompting city region policies to attract talented/skilled/creative migrants who are relatively scarce, as recommended by Richard Florida in his work on the rise of the creative class in the USA and in his advice to people choosing where to live (Florida, 2008). Thus many policies centered on migration focus on those people in the labor force whose scarcity makes them among the best paid, a fact which makes them more likely to commute longer distances. In fact, even if the appropriate jobs are attracted to the city region, the people whose rare skills make them the most sought-after sometimes use their labor market power to avoid moving to the area, instead becoming "occasional commuters" (Green et al 1999). At a more mundane level, commuting can act to more locally diffuse growth which otherwise might have required net in-migration to balance the labor market. Gordon (2002) outlined the way in which a succession of shifts in the balance of net commuting between neighboring areas can help to satisfy new labor demand without any major in-migration to the city region. This absorption of new job opportunities by commuters is in fact all too familiar in the policy field where job creation targeted at areas with many workless people finds many new jobs taken by people commuting in from elsewhere, as recognized by Gordon's notion of the "leaky bucket" in his 1999 paper arguing the case against localized employment creation..

The extent to which commuting flows are contained within an area is measured by calculating the area's self-containment (Goodman 1970). Returning to the issue mentioned above of providing workers for local jobs, the key measure is demand-side self-containment, defined as the share of work trips ending in the area which start within the area and so do not cross its boundary. The other measure is the supply-side equivalent, which is the proportion of local working residents whose workplaces are within the boundary of the area. Coombes (forthcoming) details the ways in which these measures can be used when analyzing commuting data to identify labor market areas. This focus on commuting patterns as identifying the regions around cities which are closely tied to them dates back to at least the 1940s when the United States first defined its Standard Metropolitan Areas – a practice that is now widespread across countries with modern economies (Cattan 2001). One consequence is that updated commuting data prompts the updating of labor market area definitions: the pervasive trend across modern economies for more long-distance commuting means that more people will cross a previously defined labor market area boundary, so to meet a given level of self-containment the boundary will need to be drawn more widely. Despite the pervasiveness of the growth in longer-distance commuting resulting in declining self-containment, there are relatively few direct empirical demonstrations of the trend. One exception is Pike et al (2006) where 25 of Britain's medium-sized labor market areas (defined on the basis of fixed boundaries) were analyzed over two intercensal decades. Looking at both the demand- and supply-side containment levels, average values fell from around 80% in the commuting data from the 1981 Census to under 75% in 1991 and by 2001 they stood at 70% (demand-side) and just over 65% (supply-side). Put another way, the average area was able to provide local work for around 4

out of 5 of its working residents in 1981 but 20 years later over a third of local working residents were commuting to work outside that area boundary.

The trend towards more dispersed labor market areas is being exacerbated by commuting patterns becoming less heavily centralized on large city centers. Diverse commuting patterns are enabled by growing car use, while also being prompted by declining employment in traditional sectors where local working was common and by job decentralization to city edges. More people working further from their homes also means that – with the distance between settlements remaining constant of course – adjacent towns and cities which previously had been the foci of discrete labor market areas can become parts of the same polycentric labor market area. This process has been illustrated in detail within Denmark by Nielsen & Hovgesen (2005) and by Lambregts et al (2006) for the Randstad area in the Netherlands.

One way that polycentric labor market areas have been conceptualized is that they encompass several sizable settlements between which at least some people can commute and so do not need to migrate. Yet this is to think of migration only as labor migration (viz: residential moves which by definition are prompted by a change of workplace). In fact, far more people change where they live for other reasons, so most migration flows are dominated by people moving for these other reasons. Most of these non-labor migrants do not move far. It is worth recalling here the traditional contrast between commuting flows, which are not expected to cross city region boundaries, and the moves of labor migrants whose crossing of those boundaries *is* expected, precisely because the new workplace is too far away for commuting to be practicable. In the same way, non-labor migrants are mostly expected to stay within city region boundaries, so that their unchanged workplace can still be accessed (although non-work migrants who have retired can be among longer-distance movers).

Indeed the coupling of housing and labor markets, along with other sub-regional geographies, features increasingly prominently in the contemporary economic development policy discourse on city regions (eg. OECD 2007). Here defining functional economic areas is a necessary preliminary to avoid policy-related analyses misreading the geography over which the relevant market processes operate (eg. Coombes 2009).

THE LOCAL SCALE

The evolving polycentric areas mentioned above represent a situation where a blurring is occurring in the traditional distinction between the regional and the local. Turning now to the scale of the settlements and neighborhoods found within city regions, the links between migration and commuting are more complex and so it should not be expected that areas which are relatively self-contained in terms of one of these types of mobility are also likely to have few cross-boundary flows of the other type. For example, more deprived areas tend to have few local jobs so that those residents who are in work probably have to commute out, meaning the area has low self-containment of its commuting flows, but the fact that the area will not be very attractive to many residents of other areas is likely to mean that it has few migration connections with other parts of the city region and so is highly self-contained in migration terms.

At this scale, residential preference is a key driver of different areas' prospects, and this has a feedback through the characteristics of neighborhoods. In particular, migration patterns can be highly selective so that, even if an area is close to balance between its overall inflows and outflows, this may disguise major net shifts in different groups' movements (eg. the affluent moving out while poorer people move in). Whether the better-off are tending to move in or out will relate to local characteristics such as

- housing types and condition
- reputation of schools, secondary-level ones in particular
- levels of crime or anti-social behavior

- retail and leisure facilities
- access to open space and the quality of the local environment including the public realm.

Unfortunately for less favored areas, there tends to be a cumulative process in which the localities shunned by people with the economic power to choose from a wide set of options can see many of these characteristics get worse as the better-off leave. In the policy field this leaves a harsh dilemma: whether to accept that some areas must be the least favored – the spatial equivalent of “the poor are always with us” – or to spend most regeneration funding on the areas least likely to become favored places to live. The commuting aspect comes into play here through a key area characteristic not mentioned in the list above, job accessibility. Less favored areas include old inner-city neighborhoods, outlying public-sector housing developments (like the outer metropolitan *banlieues* around Paris) and earlier settlements created to serve now-ceased single industries (as in former coalfield areas like the Ruhr). The basic urban economics of rent gradients focused on key employment nodes ensure that the likelihood of new investment is greater in those areas with easier opportunities for commuting. This can involve the gentrification of previously unfavored areas and the transformation of CBD fringes with “loft living” as the iconic form of a completely new population migrating into a job-rich part of the city, as originally demonstrated by Zukin (1988) for New York and more recently by Nathan and Urwin (2005) for London and other UK cities.

Whereas a specific migration stream can rapidly change an area’s character, as with gentrification, by contrast the major change in commuting patterns – the trend towards the greater spatial separation of home and workplace – tends to be gradual but also very generalized. Over a long time span, however, this too can have profound impacts on communities. For example, areas within a city region with middle-income residents will usually be located where there is good access to jobs but, as people become able and willing to commute longer distances, the competition for those jobs will grow because they can be reached by people living further away. If the city region has a lack of employment generally, then the residents of the middle-income areas gain little from the new option of commuting further, while losing some of their “local” jobs to commuters from further away (cf. Coombes & Raybould 2004). This process has been overshadowed by the more acute policy problems caused by major losses of particular types of jobs in distinct parts of city regions, especially due to decentralization from inner urban areas (Renkov & Hoover 2000). Here the link with migration and commuting has prompted debates about “spatial mismatch” (Preston and McLafferty 1999) because the remaining industrial jobs are in peripheral areas and pay wage rates which make it an economic impossibility for inner-city residents to either commute the longer distance to those areas or to migrate to the more expensive housing there.

The challenges of making appropriate job opportunities accessible to each area’s residents are part of a broader policy remit, as in England’s *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003). This framework includes a growing recognition of environmental aspects to sustainability, A key concern is that the growing mobility of people (Echenique 2007) – as highlighted by, but far from limited to, commuting patterns – directly links to growing carbon emissions, with the transport sector a key driver of this growth. The link to migration is less obvious and yet deeply pervasive: the drift of people is away from larger settlements to less densely populated areas where car use is most intense. Analysing UK National Travel Survey data, Banister (1997) shows a clear correlation between increasing settlement size and decreasing commuting distance. Even after allowing for personal characteristics and various aspects of geographical context, Coombes and Raybould (2001) confirm that short-distance commuting is most likely in larger settlements. Champion (2009) found that, even after allowing for the greater propensity for longer-distance commuting among recent in-migrants, car owners and certain other groups, people in more rural areas are still more likely to commute longer-distances than urban residents.

These patterns reveal two limitations to policy advocating “smart growth” or more compact cities to reduce people’s daily travel. Simply restricting the land available for development on the

urban fringe may just lead to “leap-frogging” with migrants choosing more distant settlements from which they can still commute back. Equally those planning policies aiming for a closer spatial matching of housing and employment bring no guarantee that workers will take the jobs made available close to their homes. People make their decisions based on many other factors, such as rising fuel costs or road-use taxes (see Champion, 2001, and Downs, 2005, for further discussion of this conundrum in relation to the UK and USA respectively).

There are also social aspects of sustainability which may be undermined in communities where long-distance commuting is widespread. For example, do long-distance commuters actually gain the well-being they expected from a rural life-style if much of their time is in, or traveling to, a city? English city dwellers continue to state a strong preference for living in a more rural area (Champion & Fisher 2004), but not all who move to areas stereotyped as rural are counterurban migrants and people’s moves may not match with their motivations (Halliday & Coombes 1995).

A CONCLUDING WORD ON POLICY

Returning finally to local and regional policy considerations, a recurring feature of the preceding discussion has been an echo of Cheshire & Magrini (2009) in that key drivers of the trends which are creating uneven outcomes in modern economies are very largely beyond the remit or influence of sub-national governance structures. International scale mega trends like oil prices affect the likelihood of continuing growth in personal mobility, while economic globalization helps to drive international migration. Then there are national (or EU) policies seeking to regulate cross-border migration, and the new recognition of the need for environmental sustainability (although the latter can seem like lip service when the primary political concern is sustained economic growth, without a “green new deal” to achieve both objectives). Whatever the policy outcomes are at these (supra-)national scales, local and regional policy may have the objective of creating sustainable communities but they have few policy levers that can bear down strongly on the decisions people make about their commuting and migration behavior. It should also be admitted that research has yet to provide very clear evidence on some key issues. For example, there is much European policy interest in a polycentric pattern of regional development with greater connectivity between places, aided by more investment in public transport infrastructure. Yet it is unknown whether this would really be a more sustainable scenario, rather than simply abetting the growth in personal mobility which may be inherently unsustainable. The best that local and regional policy-makers and planners can do in these circumstances is to work towards an environment that maximizes the potential for people to reduce their mobility, such as mixing together jobs and housing within city regions and aiming for a better balance between city regions in both the quantity and the quality of employment and other life-chance opportunities.

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c.5300 words (excluding title, authors and further references) BUT only 1 Figure!

FURTHER READING

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Figure X.1 Distribution of England's immigration from A8 and non-A8 countries, 2005-2006, by Travel to Work Area population size groups

Source: calculated from National Insurance Number data provided by the Department for Work and Pensions. Location quotient denotes the relationship to the share expected from the distribution of total population, e.g. a quotient of 3 means three times the expected level.

