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Introducing rural quality of life

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The rural–urban happiness paradox

In 2018 the Danish philanthropic foundation Realdania conducted a survey asking 7,090 people about their satisfaction with life. Confirming prior suspicions, the survey showed that rural dwellers in communities with fewer than 200 inhabitants more frequently reported a high quality of life (82 per cent) than both the national average (76.8 per cent) and even more so when compared to Copenhagen residents (74.7 per cent) (Realdania, 2018). In a bid to explain these results and explore their wider implications, the foundation convened a multidisciplinary group of researchers for a four-year research project. This book is one of the outcomes of that project. Instead of just reporting findings from our research in the Danish countryside, however, we have commissioned chapters from international colleagues in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and Australia. We have taken this step because the general tendency in the survey results just mentioned are far from unique. Similar patterns crop up in a range of related studies conducted in recent years, most notably in the 2020 *World Happiness Report*. In a chapter on rural–urban happiness differentials, the report concludes that rural residents in Northern and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand generally tend to be happier than their urban counterparts (Burger et al., 2020). Similar findings have been reported in country-level studies and broader regional research, especially in Europe (e.g. Sørensen, 2014).

Such findings go against conventional wisdom in the field and represent something of a conundrum to researchers and policymakers alike: the rural–urban happiness paradox. This was the puzzle that our Danish team of researchers set out to solve in 2018. Our results are now ready to enter into critical dialogue with those of international colleagues engaged in answering the same kind of questions. Why are rural dwellers apparently happier than urban dwellers? Have the proponents of urban triumphalism got it all wrong? What *is* rural quality of life and is it the same in all places and for all groups? Can happiness actually be measured, how can it be

done, and should we be doing it at all? What do the results we get mean and is more happiness always a good thing? How do we address situations where one group's happiness is premised on the misery of another? How can planning and policy-making support general well-being in ways that are socially and spatially just? The importance of answering such questions has increased as we find ourselves in times of unprecedented political polarisation, especially across the rural–urban divide, most recently exemplified by the 2020 US election. Moreover, the issues at stake reach far into the ranks of academia, where the countryside continues to be viewed with a predominantly urban gaze which tends to reproduce flawed assumptions about supposedly inherent differences between rural and urban areas and the people who live there. Part of the book's mission is to challenge such assumptions as a prerequisite to coming up with adequate answers to the puzzle posed by the rural–urban happiness paradox. As such, the book makes an important intervention not just in its primary academic fields – rural studies and quality-of-life studies – but also more widely in academia and policy circles. The complexity of the task means that a multidisciplinary outlook is needed. This is reflected in the structure of the book, whose four parts are comprised by cross-cutting perspectives from particular disciplinary vantage points.

Quality of life beyond the rural–urban binary

In most of the studies that form the basis of the rural–urban happiness paradox, place of residence is the variable used for spatial differentiation – sometimes in a simple rural–urban binary and sometimes by way of a more nuanced rural–urban continuum. A continuum does not, however, do away with the binary. It only 'softens' it up by adding a range of intermediary positions between the poles. Hence, the use of a continuum cannot – on its own – be used as a vehicle to take us beyond the rural–urban binary. In other words, whether the measured quality of life of a given individual gets to count as rural or urban is based entirely on a spatial parcelisation which does not necessarily say all that much about the kind of life that person lives. The fact that your current place of residence happens to be located in an area somehow demarcated as rural does not automatically mean that you live a rural life. The same can be said about an urban place of residence: we cannot assume that rural lives are not being lived in the heart of the city. In fact, numerous studies within both urban and rural studies convincingly portray many instances of both urban life in the countryside (e.g. Woods, 2019) and rural life in the city (e.g. Gillen, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2019).

So, we need to be aware that there is no necessary equivalence or correspondence between, on the one hand, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as bases for spatial parcelisation, and on the other, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as designators of different ways of life. Having said this, it would of course make little sense to talk about *rural quality of life* at all if we did not believe that rural and urban had some merit as markers of socio-spatial differentiation. Indeed, we would not be writing this book if we thought these terms should rather be eliminated as meaningful analytical distinctions. They can and do serve meaningful purposes, but only if we can leave behind the binary baggage with which they arrive at the scene. Now, the recent popularisation in critical urban studies of the *planetary urbanisation* thesis would have us believe that the rural ‘has now been thoroughly engulfed within the variegated patterns and pathways of a planetary formation of urbanization’ (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 174). This way of superseding the rural–urban binary has the benefit of highlighting how urbanisation processes reach far beyond the city and cut deeply into the rural fabric to an extent where life in the countryside is being substantially conditioned by urbanisation. As argued by Michael Woods (2019, p. 626), however, it also ‘downplays the enduring cultural significance of rural identity’ and largely disregards ‘the continuation of “ruralisation” as a countervailing dynamic articulated in trends such as back-to-the-land migration, repeasantisation and urban agriculture’.

Even if the urban as a way of life overflows the city, the countryside does not disappear and neither does the rural. What we get instead is a hybridisation, where the rural also overflows the countryside. We may talk about urban countrysides, but then we should also be talking about rural cities (Jazeel, 2018; Gillen, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2019; Mercer, 2017). As argued by Gillen (2016, p. 335), ‘bringing the countryside to the city does not deprive either rural or urban space of their meanings but complicates and transforms established understandings of the rural–urban binary, rural–urban relationality, rural-to-urban migration (im)mobility and urban citizenship’. To avoid reproducing and reinforcing rural–urban binaries it is important that the complications arising from such a hybrid outlook are kept alive rather than simplified or reduced away in the search for neat and operational theoretical frameworks. Rural quality of life cannot be reduced to quality of life in the countryside, nor to quality of life in non-urban places. We must take a more difficult route if we wish to make any real advances. The rural–urban happiness paradox tells us about a spatial differentiation in quality of life that mainstream social science cannot readily explain – in fact it tends to expect the opposite. But in responding, we need to always be ready to question the spatial differentiation that forms the basis of the paradox: the rural–urban binary itself. Binary thinking tends to

entrench debate in camps based on false opposites. Perhaps this is to blame for the recent debacle unfolding between Edward Glaeser's claims about the triumph of the city and Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn's counterclaims about the triumph of the countryside (see the framing essay in Part IV for a full account of this debate).

Quality of life as subjective well-being, life satisfaction and happiness

What we refer to as 'quality of life' covers a range of more specific terms – objective well-being, subjective well-being, life satisfaction happiness, etc. – each carrying its own connotations attached to different research fields, methods and theoretical underpinnings. When we started putting together this book, we were deliberately agnostic about the relative merit of these terms. But this also means that we have some explaining to do in order to enable the reader to make sense of it all. Precise use of the different terms is important, especially when dealing with approaches that try to measure quality of life. The best way of introducing this properly is to give a brief, but far from exhaustive, overview of how the field has evolved.

Traditionally, that is since the development of national accounting systems after the great depression in the 1920s and up through the twentieth century, researchers, policymakers and others used economic measures like GDP and income to compare levels of welfare or quality of life (Faik, 2015). From around the middle of the twentieth century, a pronounced critique of the one-sided economic focus on welfare led to what has been called 'the social indicators' movement' (Land, 2015). Different types of welfare indicators were being measured in order to evaluate and compare countries and other geographical areas. Still, these measures were mostly objectively assessed factors like the size of people's homes in square meters, having a toilet, a bath, a television, a washing machine, a job and so on. However, gradually policymakers and researchers began to focus also on subjectively assessed measures of quality of life (see, for instance, Easterlin, 1995; Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 2017). The subjective measures approach to well-being has the advantage that it is directly related to the agent's evaluation and feelings, and that it is not left to experts alone to decide what goods should be included in the measurements and what weights should be given each of these. The argument is that the conventional economic, or behaviourist, approach where individual choices and preferences are measured, cannot infer the well-being outcome from these choices. At least this is the case when there is only one overall measure of subjective well-being like, for instance, overall happiness. The subjective approach also takes account

of two kinds of bounded rationality: ‘first, individuals may make choices that are not consistent with their goal system in place. Second, their goals and evaluations (“tastes”) may change over time in a way that is unforeseen at the time that their choices will reflect neither their true desires nor their achieved satisfaction’ (Hirschauer et al., 2015, pp. 650–651). The subjective approach tries to measure the outcome directly, thereby overcoming these inherent problems in the objective measures or behaviourist approach.

For decades, researchers have discussed the definition and measuring of the concept of *subjective well-being*. In general, the concept has been understood to consist of two main dimensions, an *emotional* dimension, concerning affects, and a *cognitive, evaluating* dimension. The emotional dimension is also termed the *hedonic* dimension, discussed in Greek philosophy by Aristippus, but often it is associated with the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham and with *utilitarianism*. The aim for the researcher here is to measure the respondent’s mood. In the cognitive, evaluating dimension, one expects that the respondent, before answering the survey question, uses some cognitive effort (Krosnick, 1991) in evaluating his or her life, that is, to ‘review and retrieve all relevant aspects of their lives’ (Yan et al., 2014, p. 101). Survey researchers have measured the emotional and the cognitive dimensions in numerous ways, both with single-item and multiple-item scales (Veenhoven, 2017). However, in most surveys, one measures subjective well-being with just one or two single items, concerning respectively *happiness* and *life satisfaction*. Many researchers consider happiness questions to measure primarily the emotional, hedonic dimension, and life satisfaction questions to measure primarily the cognitive, evaluating dimension, while others look at these questions as more or less interchangeable measures of overall subjective well-being (Gundelach & Kreiner, 2004).

As an alternative to, or in combination with, the above-mentioned two dimensions, some researchers work with a distinction between *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* well-being. Eudaimonic well-being, like hedonic well-being, has its roots in Greek philosophy, where Aristotle’s texts contain a strong critique of striving after hedonic happiness. Instead, one ought to find happiness in self-fulfilment or *virtue*, for instance to be altruistic, to realise one’s potential, to engage in social and political life and to act autonomously. Happiness is in this way seen more as a by-product of virtue (Haybron, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008). One can also combine the distinctions by stating that there are two dimensions of subjective well-being, the hedonic and the cognitive, evaluating dimension, and furthermore we have two routes to the fulfilment of both, as shown in Figure 1.1. With a hedonic lifestyle or personality, one strives directly after the outcome – enjoyment, happiness, etc. With a eudaimonic lifestyle or personality, on the contrary, one strives to act in accordance with one’s inner self, towards what one finds important

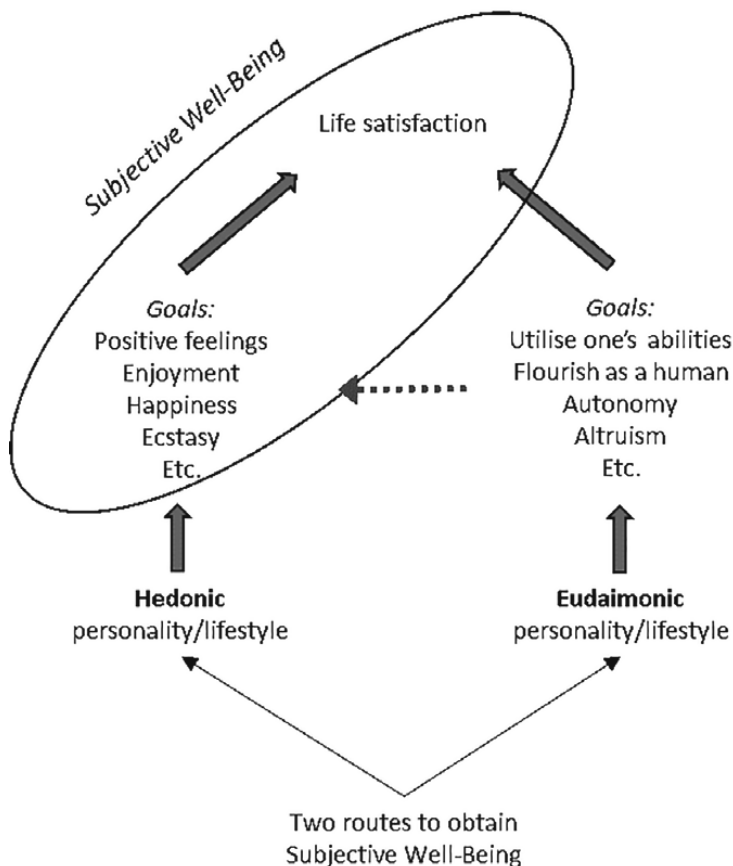


Figure 1.1 The concept subjective well-being and two different routes to this end. (Source: Lolle & Andersen [2019]. With inspiration from, among others, Veenhoven [2015]; Huta & Ryan [2010]).

and morally right, though not in accordance with some specific ethical rule-set like in deontological ethics. In the study of subjective well-being, researchers more and more often take notice of eudaimonia in some way. In quantitative studies, researchers can do this by including measures for eudaimonic personality or eudaimonic goals, like acting autonomously, as either dependent or independent variables.

Of course, most people are not completely either hedonic or eudaimonic in their lifestyle, but rather include aspects of both, and as Figure 1.1 shows, living an altogether eudaimonic lifestyle probably also affects feelings of enjoyment and happiness, not just the satisfaction with one's life. For these

reasons, for most people there will be a significant overlap between feelings of enjoyment, happiness, etc. on the one hand and life satisfaction on the other. Some researchers also consider measures of happiness and life satisfaction to be so closely related that they use them interchangeably.

Structure of the book

Instead of simply continuing along these well-trodden paths, we wanted the book to break new ground by looking at the field in different ways, not only from within but also from without. We start, therefore, by taking a sizeable step back to pose the basic question anew: what is rural quality of life actually about and how is it enabled and hindered? The first three parts (Figure 1.2) attend to these questions from the point of view of different research fields: rural sociology in Part I, rural planning

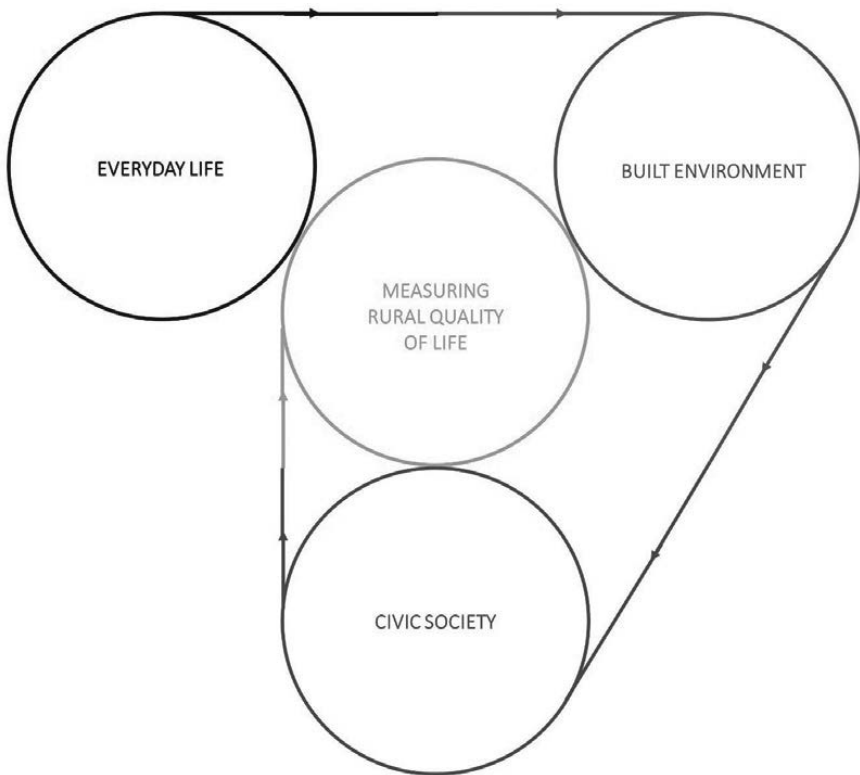


Figure 1.2 Structure and progression of the book.

in Part II and civil society studies in Part III. Only then do we return in Part IV to the field whose basic history was outlined in the section above. The following subsections provide a brief introduction to the four parts. In addition to this, each part opens with a framing essay, providing the reader with the context needed to read the individual chapters as a collected whole. These essays vary in length and structure because each part entails different needs. For instance, the framing essay in Part IV is longer than the others because a much more thorough introduction to the field with which authors engage is needed.

Everyday life

The first part of the book takes nothing for granted and sidesteps the urban gaze by entering everyday rural life itself to ask a basic question: what *is* quality of life in the countryside? Quantitative quality of life indicators do not tell the whole story and are only as reliable as the assumptions that went into making them in the first place. We put such assumptions aside here in order to begin the book by questioning the very foundations of the field. The aim is to reappraise and take seriously the lived experience of rural dwellers in order that we may raise awareness, also among planners and policymakers, about the fact that good-intentioned efforts to improve rural quality of life do not necessarily always align with reality on the ground. Moreover, we want to highlight and come to terms with the unsettling possibility that in some rural places high levels of subjective well-being may be predicated on demographic segregation and the exclusion or absence of specific ‘others’. If this is true, should it be a cause for celebration or concern? How do we deal with the very real danger that such findings may be used to promote and justify racial and cultural segregation and the homogenisation of communities?

These are tough and important questions that can only be answered rigorously by immersing our research endeavours in the messy realities of rural life. We have tasked our contributors and ourselves with doing so. The result is a collection of chapters which generate important insights into the kinds of everyday performances, practices, mechanisms of power and rhythms through which real and imagined notions of a rural lifestyle are maintained, reproduced and reinvented. In-depth knowledge on these matters allows our authors to get closer to properly grounded notions about what rural quality of life is, what it can be, how it is hindered and how it is enabled. It also allows us to critically assess the intricate dynamics involved in the production of winners and losers in terms of human well-being, including how they are gendered and racialised, but also how they relate to questions of class and other axes of difference.

Built environment

In the second part of the book, chapter authors investigate built interventions in rural places made by local communities, planners, architects and policymakers and driven by aims that explicitly emphasise quality of life. Do such interventions actually fulfil their purpose, and if so, how? If not, why do they fail? Under which circumstances do they become counterproductive and why? Chapters also explore how the implications of built interventions are often two-sided, with the physical changes to the material rural fabric comprising only the most obviously visible side.

Often, however, the other side is just as important: the processes and projects through which built interventions come about reach much further into the social fabric of communities. In this sense, the interventions under scrutiny are not merely concerned with the material environment of rural places but also intervene in the goings-on of everyday rural life that comprised the topic in Part I of the book. The combination of findings from parts I and II thus allows us to provide a more informed basis for future rural planning and policy-making. This includes not only questions of *how* to intervene, but also the overlooked question of *when not* to intervene; as disruptions, interventions cannot be assumed to always be beneficial. What we have tasked authors with, then, is to critically scrutinise the ways in which interventions instigate new relationships between people, things and places. A key question that this entails is by and for whom are rural spaces of well-being created, and who is being overlooked or excluded in their production? This, again, harks back to the critical framing of Part I.

Civil society

The third part of the book turns attention to the relation between organised civil society and rural quality of life. In a variety of ways and settings, chapter authors put to the test the assumption that a viable and vigorous civil society with strong local associations tends to be conducive to enhanced quality of life. If rural people are happier, so the argument goes, then it is due to the strong community attachments created by higher levels of civil society participation in rural areas. Is this really true, and if so, what are the underlying mechanisms that make it so? Under which circumstances, and exactly how, is a strong civil society conducive to improving quality of life? What about non-participants and patterns of systematic exclusion from organised civil society? And what should policymakers and other stakeholders learn from all of this?

Now, the conditions for civil society for having viable and strong local associations have changed, and there is no longer any strict interdependence

between working life, public institutions and civil society. Likewise, it would also seem to matter a great deal what kinds of organised civil society tend to be predominant in different areas; for instance, a sports club and a religious association entail different modes of participation and have different implications in the everyday lives of participants. Some associations are largely inward-oriented, with activities that concern only their own members, whereas others attempt to embrace the community at large. This also serves to highlight the issues of exclusion and segregation that were also taken up in parts I and II. These are just as pertinent here. These and other axes of differentiation in organised civil society need to be taken into account if we are to step beyond simplistic explanations which hide more than they reveal about the role of civil society in the production of geographic differences in quality of life.

Measuring rural quality of life

From the perspective of a quantitative research approach, the – often much politicised – debate about quality of life in the countryside vis-à-vis the city has been investigated in myriad ways. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of both the independent variable measuring rural and urban areas and the dependent variable measuring quality of life is not at all straightforward. Findings presented in parts I through III should make it abundantly clear that the task of measuring and mapping quality of life is a very complicated matter. Authors in the fourth and final part of the book nevertheless take up this task and present quantitatively informed studies of differences in quality of life between the city and the countryside, using either international or national data sets. Although previous research is plentiful, important gaps still exist, while a heap of methodological challenges await to be dealt with. Our authors have been tasked with addressing both the gaps and the challenges.

The other task that we take on is to sort out some of the methodological challenges that account for our current cautiousness in arriving at clear conclusions. A host of methods have been developed, including objective and subjective well-being, happiness, positive and negative affect and so forth. Each comes with its own advantages, blind-spots, limitations and methodological challenges. This is one reason that the conclusions have been quite diverse. Another reason is the overall research design of studies. Some focus on differences per se, while others focus more on causal factors or qualities attached to the macro level, i.e. rural or urban area. Yet another reason for the disparate results is that the difference in quality of life is heterogeneous across countries, hence the need for more country-level studies mentioned above. What chapters in this part of the book seek, then, is

(1) to make clear what these methods are actually measuring; (2) to provide a more nuanced picture of current trends in rural–urban quality of life differentials; and (3) to reveal some of the factors that may explain those trends. The chapters deliver new insights into previously understudied areas such as the role of urban–rural and rural–urban migration, age group or life phase differences and in-depth country-level case studies.

Rural well-being for all?

The cross-cutting viewpoints presented in the book make it clear that rural quality of life is no simple matter. Moreover, the problems it raises reach way beyond the subject matter narrowly defined. They connect to some of the most pertinent challenges faced collectively by humanity today, while also raising important questions about the role and agency of academia broadly defined. The rural–urban axis of differentiation has emerged as a key aspect in current processes of polarisation, and we cannot dismiss the concerning possibility that academic practices have been complicit through the ways we construct and reproduce the rural–urban divide. As the very title of the book suggests, we cannot claim innocence in this regard. Nevertheless, we want to use this intervention as an occasion to reflect on such complicity and to take remediating steps. Rurality and urbanity are two sides of the same coin, and as such are better grasped dialectically than dualistically. In an academic community where the urban gaze predominates, the decision to adopt a rural perspective is an act of seeking to balance the scales. Doing so is as much an opportunity to learn something new about the urban as it is about demystifying the rural. We wish the book to be read in this light.

It is easy to call for a future which affords well-being for all, but coming to terms with what this entails, and what it might be taken to mean, is a completely different and immensely more complicated task. A recurring theme in the book is the critical question of whose well-being, whose quality of life gets to count, and whether enhanced well-being for some might come at the cost of deteriorating well-being for others. When we talk about well-being and quality of life in this way, we are actually talking about something more specific: *human* well-being and *human* quality of life. Living through a climate emergency and a major extinction event, it is becoming increasingly obvious that we cannot afford the luxury of restricting ourselves to this narrow view. Non-human well-being and the quality of non-human life have to be seen to matter as well. A rural perspective is instructive in this regard because it serves to centre attention more squarely on human–environment relations. The timeliness of such a perspective is furthermore enhanced by an ongoing shift in policy attention, where well-being is being

pushed as a key policy target, a pivotal component of an alternative ‘bottom line’ against which policy efficacy may be evaluated. GDP is no longer the taken-for-granted proxy for development that it used to be, most notably illustrated by the introduction and widespread adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Putting together an edited volume on quality of life in the year 2020 – when the process started – would seem incomplete and out of touch without addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Several chapters put this topic front and centre by analysing the sudden changes it has wrought on everyday life and on how quality of life is perceived. Something else, however, has been notable as well: cities are ideal places for a virus to spread, thus adding new allure to the possibility of a life in the countryside for urban dwellers. In this sense, the pandemic means that rural quality of life attains renewed attention and perceived attractiveness – at least for a while. It remains to be seen whether this will prompt increased urban–rural migration and renewed efforts to ruralise urban life. On the other hand, many of the countermeasures that governments implemented to contain and halt the spread of the virus were designed primarily with densely populated areas in mind. Nevertheless, they were often rolled out indiscriminately, with the same restrictions being applied in sparsely populated areas, where they sometimes seemed ridiculous and therefore provoked a rural backlash. In this way, the pandemic seems to be simultaneously exacerbating and ameliorating polarisation along the rural–urban axis. In any case, COVID-19 has become an eye-opening disruption that only heightens the timeliness of the discussions in this book.

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