PERGAMON

Geoforum 32 (2001) 271–283

GEOFORUM

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Rural industrialisation in a declining coalfield region: the case of north Warwickshire

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Received 3 September 1999; in revised form 17 May 2000

Abstract

In recent years considerable research has been conducted on the phenomenon of rural industrialisation. Within this area of study the growth and performance of small and medium sized manufacturing enterprises (SMEs) have received particular attention. Competing schools of thought have sought to explain both the development and the competitive strategies of such enterprises in terms of the geographical context, industrial milieu and the labour market which companies experience. Nevertheless, this paper contends that some important questions remain unanswered. For instance, little parity exists between the types of rural area examined in recent theoretical contributions, whilst the highly generalised explanations which have been advanced are unable to accommodate either the complex causes of growth or the varied production strategies adopted by small rural manufacturing establishments. On the basis of empirical research in north Warwickshire, this paper suggests that a greater insight into the location and operational strategies of manufacturing companies may be obtained by considering individual establishments within the context of their particular supply chain niche. The study area, an old industrial (accessible) rural area, formerly associated with coal mining, also represents an important departure, contrasting with the new spaces of production which have been the focus of much recent research. Clearly a movement away from extended generalisation has an important implication for the way in which future research on rural manufacturing SMEs is conducted; and for the implementation of rural industrial policy, which needs to address the unique challenges faced by individual enterprises rather than 'manufacturers' in general. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: North Warwickshire; Rural coalfields; Rural industrialisation; Manufacturing SMEs; Enterprising behaviour

1. Studying rural industrialisation: a lengthening agenda

Since the late 1960s, the most significant trend in the location of manufacturing activity has been a relative displacement of firms, output and employment from large urban centres to small towns and rural areas. Against the backdrop of a tide of deindustrialisation, rural local economies have consistently outperformed their urban counterparts, especially when measured in terms of manufacturing employment change. Indeed, a remarkably consistent pattern of change has become established in which a strong inverse relationship appears to exist between industrial performance and urban size (see Fig. 1). This urban–rural manufacturing shift was first identified in the UK by Keeble (1980) and Fothergill and Gudgin (1982) using analyses of aggregated employment change data. But its effects have also been felt in other developed market economies, including much of mainline Europe and North America (see, for example, Keeble et al., 1983; Estall, 1983). In the UK context, the widespread recognition of this powerful trend has placed the issue of rural industrialisation centre stage in debates about the future rural economy and the heightened vulnerability of traditional urban centres. And, as a result, considerable research has been devoted to attempting to understand its nature and causes (see North, 1998).

At least four principal features of the urban–rural shift have been identified by this research. First, it has become clear that much of the 'shift' can be accounted for by geographical variations in in situ manufacturing performance (Fothergill et al., 1985a; North, 1998). Put simply, the urban–rural shift has been shown to reflect spatial differences in the competitive performance of indigenous firms considerably more than it has the geography of industrial movement. This relative shift has also been affected by geographical variations in business births and deaths/closures. Keeble et al. (1993), for ex-

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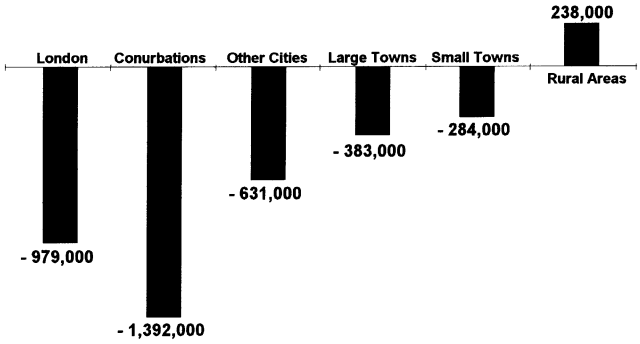

Fig. 1. Manufacturing employment change in Great Britain by urban–rural category, 1960–1991 [*Source*: North, 1998, p. 166].

ample, found that rural and semi-rural counties in central and peripheral parts of the UK demonstrated the highest propensity to generate new firms, whilst the conurbations (except London) and urban-industrial counties had the lowest. Second, the urban–rural shift has been remarkable for its sheer persistence, both over time and over space (Hodge and Monk, 1987; Townsend, 1993; North and Smallbone, 1996). For instance, it has accompanied all of the economic downturns and recoveries of the last three decades. It has also affected most parts of the UK space economy, including both accessible and inaccessible rural areas; although existing research has tended to concentrate on, what might be termed, 'new industrial spaces' in the countryside[1] at the expense of those 'older' rural localities saddled with declining industries such as mineral extraction (see later). Third, although some empirical studies have highlighted the role played by 'big business' in the urban–rural shift (Potter, 1993, 1995; Massey, 1995), the vast majority have concluded that small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) have contributed most to carving out the steep gradient of relative employment change that currently exists between UK urban and rural areas (Mason, 1991; Keeble et al., 1992; Curran and Storey, 1993; North and Smallbone, 1995). Finally, research has indicated that a wide range of economic activities have been implicated in the urban–rural shift (including some services). Nevertheless, it is clear that the shift has been spearheaded by manufacturing, and especially by those high-technology industries included under this broad heading (Keeble and Tyler, 1995; North, 1998).

The challenge facing research workers trying to explain the urban–rural shift has been to develop a theoretical framework which accommodates all of these features. Indeed, most commentators now agree that "...for a number of reasons, some rural areas once thought of as quintessential backwaters of economic activity have come to be seen as investment frontiers" (Marsden et al., 1993, p. 2). However, there is rather less agreement as to how this might be explained. During the 1980s, several tenable theories of the urban–rural shift were put forward (Healey and Ilbery, 1985). By far the most documented of these were: Fothergill et al.'s (1985b) *constrained location hypothesis* (which emphasised the paucity of quality industrial floorspace in large urban centres compared with small towns and rural areas); Tyler et al.'s (1988) *production cost theory* (which drew attention to urban/rural disparities in operating costs); Massey's (1995) *capital restructuring thesis* (which focused on the ways in which large enterprises could adjust their activities over space so as to benefit from a cheaper, less militant and predominantly female rural labourforce); and Shutt and Whittington's (1987) *fragmentation thesis* (which cited the disintegration of large companies and the devolvement of responsibilities to smaller specialist firms using cheaper 'secondary' labour). Yet, despite providing some valuable insights, these initial theories offered only a partial view of rural industrialisation which appeared to be at variance with much of the empirical evidence. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, urban/rural contrasts in production costs, and in the nature and availability of industrial floorspace, were rather less pronounced than the theories appeared to suggest. For example, during the 1970s, the city of Coventry in the English Midlands experienced rates of deindustrialisation which far exceeded the national average. Yet this period of severe urban industrial decline, which saw the number of manufacturing jobs in the city fall by almost half between 1974 and 1982, was not accompanied by any significant shortage of local industrial floorspace (Healey and Dunham, 1994). Moreover, and as Keeble and Tyler (1995) point out, most of these initial theories of rural industrialisation dealt exclusively with manufacturing industry; they were unable to shed light on the increasing involvement of certain services in the urban–rural shift.

Partly in response to these criticisms, the 1990s witnessed the development of a new wave of theories which attempted to provide a more holistic view of the nature and causes of rural industrialisation. These focused particularly on the significant contribution made by SMEs and had the advantage of being applicable to services as well as to manufacturing industries. Probably the best examples of these new theories are those developed by Keeble and Tyler (1995) and North and Smallbone (1995, 1996). Keeble and Tyler (1995) formulated a theory of 'enterprising behaviour' to account for the superior employment performance of rural SMEs compared with their urban rivals. This theory is based upon two key premises. First, it suggests that rural areas (and especially accessible rural areas) enjoy a

[1] Those UK rural areas left relatively untouched by rounds of manufacturing investment prior to the current (post-1970s) phase of rural industrialisation.

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