

What Kind of Place is Ord: Rural, Urban, Periurban?

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While *urban* and *rural* are seemingly well accepted terms for most people they are in fact both ambiguous and insufficient for understanding a place like Ord for reasons we will discuss. One possibility for Ord is to think about it as *periurban*, a term long used in international scientific and applied literature to reference places that share both urban and rural characteristics. For reasons we will also discuss it too is insufficient for our purposes. We have chosen to use a new term, *nanopolitan* or *nanotropolis*, to describe our phenomenon of interest, Ord/Valley County.

The Census

The American classification of built-up places like Ord is not particularly useful for understanding how and why they work. Such classifications fail on several fronts. First, Ord itself is a small built-environment with just over 2000 residents. As such, it does not meet the requirements for even the most minimal Census classification of *micropolitan* (a minimum population of 10,000). It is incorporated but this gives no indication of its integration and reach over a much larger geographic region. Geographers have long used the concept of *central place* in the theoretical tradition by the same name to underscore the relationship between built up places and their surrounding rural region, one that has generally been assumed to be largely predatory. However, operationalizing the concept has been left to the Census Bureau wherein population size (e.g., 2,500, 10,000 or 50,000 residents), population density, and geographic boundary (e.g., county lines) are the chief determinants for assuming the dominance or integration of a built-up place with its surrounding region.

Much closer to our needs here are census definitions such as urbanized areas (UAs) or urban clusters (UCs). Yet as their definitions below demonstrate, they too fall short of our needs.

“The Census Bureau’s urban-rural classification is fundamentally a delineation of geographical areas, identifying both individual urban areas and the rural areas of the nation. The Census

Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses.

For the 2010 Census, an urban area will comprise a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas:

- Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people;
- Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people.

'Rural' encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html>)

Thus, rural is a residual category based on whatever is not defined as urban. Further, it varies by country and within countries over time (e.g., see the proposed changes for the 2020 U.S. Census at <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/02/19/2021-03412/urban-areas-for-the-2020-census-proposed-criteria>). Always looking to improve its classification system the U.S. Census Bureau again proposing the reclassification of all built up places greater than 2,500 as Urban Areas. Under the proposed 2020 criteria for urban areas they will,

“Cease Distinguishing Different Types of Urban Areas. Any area that meets the new requirements would fall under a single definition of “urban area.” Census-defined urban areas are currently either considered “urban places” with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 or “urbanized areas” with populations greater than 50,000.” (<https://centralina.org/the-latest/census-bureau-proposed-criteria-for-urban-areas>) (<https://centralina.org/the-latest/census-bureau-proposed-criteria-for-urban-areas/>)

While useful classifications of place for many purposes, especially aggregate planning and policy making, they are woefully inadequate to capturing the realities of small places such as Ord that don't meet the official classification thresholds. This isn't just a problem of naming, *per se*. First, these classifications disguise the dynamic nature of life in places like Ord. Second, as we have argued elsewhere, naming a phenomenon both denotes the parameters of the phenomenon and connotes valuative assessments that invoke stereotypes and previous subjective characterizations about the place. This is an axiomatic principle of labelling theory for which much evidence exists (e.g., see "Neighboring, Abundance Mindset, Intentionality and Reconciliation in Ord/Valley County").

Thus, labeling Ord *rural* has both potentially negative public relations consequences in terms of development and perceived vitality and simultaneously potentially undermines local attitudes about their own possibilities or effective individual and community agency. The label prefigures thought and can thereby circumscribe motivation and action. On one hand *rural* invokes bucolic images, friendly neighbors, and a slower pace of life, but on the other hand *rural* invokes a backward, closed-minded consciousness, lack of amenities and services and a stagnant even stifling culture. While the positive image might appeal as a lifestyle choice for some, the negative image is an impediment to attracting growth from an entrepreneurship perspective. Importantly, Ord has capitalized on its self-image by emphasizing the former and eschewing the latter. This has not come easily. It has taken patience, commitment and agency over an extended period. It has required face-to-face communication and allocation of resources by several individuals. The point here is that Ord sees itself as embracing the positive connotations of *rural* in terms of lifestyle but the dynamic connotations of *urban*. Thus, Ord falls into the realm of *periurban*, but there are still problems.

Periurban

As stated above, periurban identifies places that share both urban and rural characteristics, and is a concept widely used in international development literature. Unfortunately, as we have written elsewhere (see Iaquinata and Drescher, 1999) periurban is also an ambiguous term that does an inadequate job of defining rural-like built-up regional trade centers.

- First, it is a double residual category based ultimately on whatever urban definition is used (i.e., *rural* is whatever is NOT defined as urban and periurban is whatever is NOT either exclusively urban or rural).
- Second, periurban is often assumed to be a kind of place only at the fringe of a large urban area which has been shown to be far too limited a definition.
- Third, periurban is not a singular “thing” it is rather something akin to a lumpy continuum where different types of periurban exist in a rural geographic matrix. (Mathematicians would call it a locally dense continuum, but we prefer the metaphor *lumpy oatmeal*.)
- Finally, even when the periurban space is divided typologically into five types of periurban that do a good job of describing the characteristics of divergent periurban places in developing countries, it doesn’t fit well when applied to places like contemporary Ord.

Nanopolitan

Using the periurban typology developed by Iaquineta and Drescher (1999) at the United Nations, we would classify the Ord of 30 years ago as a *village periurban* place. However, today Ord has transformed its culture and identity such that while still small in population, it is something rather different, much more dynamic, open to change, solution-directed, cohesive and open to meeting needs by embracing diversification. It has defined its highest interests beyond the scope of its geographic boundary in mutually beneficial ways. We embrace the terms *nanopolitan* and *nanotropolis* to capture this emergent form. Ord serves as an important hub in several ways for a considerably larger region expanding even beyond Valley County (e.g., consider the role of the Valley County Health Care System which extends beyond both Ord and Valley County) even though it’s population is well below the threshold for micropolitan or urban area status according to the U.S. Census Bureau. We also favor the term *nanopolitan* due to the impact of electronic communication and improved transportation that have significantly reduced the downside of geographic distance in terms of commerce and labor supply while increasing the upside of lifestyle choice due to geographic distance from large urban centers and proximity to environmental amenities. Further as a concept, *nanopolitan* is far more consistent with central tenet of both core-based census designations and older central place theory: the city and the outlying region are intertwined economically, socially and culturally. The city of Ord is an important

regional trade center for the Valley County region not just the city. This characteristic and linkage are not just an accident or a predatory relationship. In Ord as it was in Tupelo, it has been the result of intentional and strategic cooperative action.

One additional point needs highlighting regarding the term *nanopolitan*. The term first entered the “soft” literature in 2014 in a conference working paper by Liesl Eathington at the Iowa State University, wherein she classified:

- *nanopolitan* as a Core-based area containing a city of 5,000 to 9,999 residents,
- *picopolitan* as areas containing a city of 2,500 to 4,999 residents, and
- *non-core* as areas below 2,500, or as she said “even smaller areas” (presumably some variation of rural).

While the introduction of *nanopolitan* as a concept is important, it is unfortunate that Eathington’s thresholds perpetuate the problem of under-acknowledging the important role of regional trade centers like Ord. More recently, *nanopolitan* has entered the blogosphere. The only one germane to our needs is the editorial think piece by Becky McCray (May 2021), publisher of *Small Biz Survival*. Here she suggests thresholds of 1,000 to 10,000 for *nanopolitan* and less than 1,000 for *picopolitan*.

We find McCray’s suggested lower threshold to be a far better basis for designating *nanopolitan* areas since it supports our own observations for the economic vitality we witness in Ord. Clearly, there is a need for the concept *nanopolitan* even though the population threshold for such a designation remains an open question. Equally clear is the recognition that small places like Ord are far more than *non-core* and that being *nanopolitan* has much more to do with the vitality of the regional trade center than simple population level. What Ord teaches us is that definitions applied from the 30,000-foot level by the Census Bureau and geographers may be useful for large scale planning, but they often obscure the reality experienced on the ground by residents of small places who define their circumstances in quite different and human terms yet have significant economic consequences for them. There is a strong social-psychological aspect of community self-definition involved in the opportunities presented by such a definition. As W.I. Thomas has said, “If men (sic) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). Therefore, we subscribe the lower threshold of 1,000

residents as one component basis for defining *nanopolitan* when it is accompanied by significant economic, social and cultural links to the surrounding low-density region.