Rural Change: Structured Coherence or Unstructured Incoherece?

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In this paper we want to draw on some recent conceptual work on the political economy of rural areas (Clove & Goodwin 1992) and on the application of regulation theory to rural areas (Cloeke and Goodwin 1992) to present some ideas about how change in rural areas might be conceptualized. We do so in the context of recent academic discourse which shows metatheoretical awareness, preferring to deconstruct these constructs such as restructuring, reconstitution and rationality. So the we suggest that the structuring of political, economic, social and cultural relations can result in a form of localized 'structure', which is not just Ury structured and inherent coherence or connectedness seen from different discursive standpoint. We also discuss the change in the context of the seeming universal trends of the internationalization of capital (especially finance), the growth in the frequency and distance of travel, and the insurmountable development of telecommunications. It is now commonly perceived that we are in the age of the global village, with the effects of time-space compression being to make anywhere reachable from anywhere else. Thus rural areas, now being reachable or in 'reach' with more material and symbolic functions, and assumed as having significant potential for new and radically changing functions; no longer marginalized but perhaps even core territories in new economic and social conditions.

We want to suggest if an understanding of these actual and potential changes in the function performed in and by rural areas can be gained from addressing two important questions:

(i) What is causing the different degrees of mobility which are being institutionalized in our changing views of particular spaces?

(ii) What does mobility have within these changes, and what is the nature and scope of intertemporal variations in rural areas?

 Answers to these questions will help unravel the potential future of rural areas as being either new core areas, or like islands which are relatively unachieved by modern trends of time-space compression.

Changing constructs of rurality

Before proceeding to discuss particular concepts for the understanding of rural change, and the potential components of that change, it is important to reflect briefly on the ideas that rurality itself is a notion which is subject to changing perception, social construction and representation. Such changes may be viewed as occurring in four phases. The first phase equates rurality with particular functions. Here, a negative functionalism will regard rural as synonymous with anything that is non-urban in character, for example:

- "as focus of rural planning activity includes all jurisdiction outside the incorporated limits of urban responsibility" (Lassey, 1977: 5-6) and a positive functionalism specifies important elements of a rural identity, for example:
  - rural geography may be defined as the study of rural social, economic, land-use and spatial changes that have taken place in less densely populated areas which are commonly recognized by virtue of their rural components as 'countryside' (Cloke, 1972: 93).

Such functions are also subject to varying perceptions, so an amalgamated definition of this first phase of rurality might suggest three principal criteria: rural areas are dominated (or currently or recently) by extensive land use, such as agriculture and forestry, or large open spaces of underdeveloped land; rural areas contain small, lower-order settlements which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and surrounding extensive landscapes, and which are thought of as rural by most of their residents; and rurality engenders a way of life which is characterized by a cohesive identity based on respect for the environmental and behavioural qualities of living in rural areas as part of extensive landscape (see Cloke and Park 1985).

The second phase in the changing creation of rurality began to place functional definitions with rather more pragmatic conceptions of the rural. What had been previously recognized as functional rural areas were increasingly linked into the dynamics of the national and international political economy with the result that economic and socio-cultural activities were viewed as being organized on a relatively spatial basis. Thus the 'causes' of rural change usually stemmed from outside the rural area concerned. The frontier debate appeared to confirm that although certain places achieved a uniqueness derived from local society within broader processes of rural restructuring, rural places did not represent distinct localities:

- "Although these notions of different, overlapping social divisions of labour, of all localities as sites for the reproduction of labour-power, of vacations to local social spaces etc. - reader problematized the notion that there are distinct 'rural' localities (Shryock 1964, 1985).

There were at least three ways forward from this dilemma. Firstly many rural researchers ignored these challenges from political economic concepts and carried on as before using at least quasi-functional conceptions of rurality. Secondly, the category rural was retained as a pragmatic investigative unit, recognizing that the usefulness of 'urban' and 'rural' was largely as analytically convenient concepts (see Philipps and Willmott 1984). Thirdly, researchers were invited to "do away with rural" as a category (Hoggart 1990) and to seek out sectoral research which spanned areas which were previously conceived of as urban and rural.

Part of the gap between functional definitions of the rural and the pragmatic or 'do away with' view was involved in the changing nature of countryside and urban areas over time. Morrison (1990) heralded a third phase in the construction of the 'rural', when he identified five aspects of the changing relationship between space and society in relation to the countryside:

- the increasing mobility of people and messages, which has eroded the autonomy of local communities;
- the delocalization of economic activity, which renders it impossible to define homogeneous economic zones;
- the new, specialized uses of rural spaces (for tourists, parks, development, etc.) have created new specialized networks in the areas concerned, many of which are no longer localized;
- the people living in "rural" spaces represent a diversity of temporary visitors as well as residents;
- rural spaces now tend to perform functions for non-rural users, and exist independently of the action of rural people.

He concludes that it is no longer possible to conceive of a single rural space. Rather, there is a multiplicity of social spaces which overlap the same geographical space. Accordingly, rurality has become a social construct and the 'rural' represents a world of social, rural and cultural values.

The idea of rurality as a social construct thereby allows 'rural' to become an important research category again, because behaviours and decisions will be influenced by the social construct(s) which indicates that a place is rural. The cultural domain thus becomes a crucial research area, and contemporary rural research has become very interested in the way in which the meanings of rurality are constructed, negotiated and experienced (see Cloke and Milbourne 1992, Mingay, 1989, B. Short 1992; J. Short 1993). It is important to stress, however, that this interest in the
ways in which culture and rurality are mapped out in a social geography or a late capitalist ideology. There are a multiplicity of versions of rurality in policy, everyday and academic discourses and each version will have different forms of social relations naturalised within them. In many ways, the emphasis on rurality as a social construct is in line with current themes in post-modern and post-structural thinking. The post-modern countryside might be deemed as a fourth phase in the changing construction of rurality. Here the emphasis is on deconstructing macro-categories such as 'rural' in understanding the different discourses and representations of rurality. According to Halsey (1993) the emphasis on social constructions of rurality is prompting academic discourses on rurality to be increasingly routed through lay discourses, with a far greater emphasis than before on allowing 'ordinary' people's voices to be heard and to inform academic and policy debates. Again, there is no expectation here that people's constructions of rurality will all fit neatly together into a unitary thing called rural, since people do not hold clear, well-defined and well-structured images of the rural.

Drawing on the work of Boudon, Halsey suggests that there are divergent meanings of 'rural' at three levels. The sign (or rural) is being increasingly detached from the signification (meanings of rurality) as social representations of rurality become more diverse. Equally, sign and signification are also becoming more divorced from their referent (to the rural). Halsey points out that it is a characteristic of post-modern times that symbols are becoming ever more detached from their referential meanings, and therefore that socially constructed rural space is becoming increasingly detached from geographically functional rural space.

These phases reflecting the changing construct of rurality pose key questions for those of us seeking to offer an interpretation of the changing nature of ruralities. Phase 1 suggests that the previously characteristic functions of rural areas are changing in many developed nations (although perhaps more so in a densely populated nation such as the UK than in the Nordic countries). Can the future of these areas, perhaps based on new socio-economic functions, be equated with the previously social category of 'rural'? Phase 2 had rural restructurings to question the category of rurality. Are political-economic interpretations therefore necessary to understand this rurality? Phase 3 reinstated the importance of rurality, but as a social rather than a geographical construct. Is it possible to interconnect these economic restructuring and social reconstitutions with sociologically constructed attitudes and behaviours? Finally Phase 4 suggests as increasing distance between the sign and signification of rurality and their interdependence as a way of thinking about the meta-narratives of (amongst others) political economic concepts, but can some middle ground be explored in which conceptual accounts of rural change can be interwoven with acknowledgements of the significance of the increasing detachment of sign and signification from their rural referent?

In what follows we attempt a small step in this direction of interweaving different strands of constructing rurality, by drawing together elements of political economic theorisation with elements of the symbolic importance of meanings of the rural identity. In so doing we trace some of the characteristics which represent potential components of the future mix which will probably still be called 'rural'.

Conceptualising structured coherence

We have suggested elsewhere that the concept of structured coherence can be a useful way of understanding some of the conceptual changes of the short-term stabilises in rural areas (Cloke and Goodwin 1993). By drawing together the growing use of political economy concepts in rural studies we can both deny that rurality is itself a deterministically causal mechanism, but also that entrepreneurs, residents, leaseholders and the like behave by means of social struggle and opposition will in turn lead to changes in the experience of rural places and landscapes of rural people. We can thus interpret not only changes in rural production but also changes in "the living and thinking and feeling of life" (Gramsci 1971) in rural areas, which occur alongside economic change.

(ii) Societalisation

If so, is there structuralism in the process of regulation suggests some form of pattern. In this paper we use this concept to identify some of the practices which support the regulation of that stability. Societalisation, according to Eisinger (1990) is the process of regulation at a societal level via a complex ensemble of social practices which operate to integrate diverse social structures and to some, some form of cohesion among competing forces. Jessop suggests that the process of societalisation is successful in bringing about temporary stabilisation it is possible to recognise both an heroic bloc and a hegemonic bloc in operation. The idea of a heroic bloc draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of a historically constituted and socially reproduced correspondence between the economic base and the political ideological structures of social formation. A hegemonic bloc suggests a durable alliance of class forces able to exercise political, intellectual and moral leadership. Particular forms of societalisation in rural areas will to some extent influence rural society and politics although it is important to ensure that an understanding of cultural leadership is also added to the portfolio of interest in rural change. We have suggested elsewhere (Cloke and Goodwin 1992) that what we are witnessing in the UK is the appropriation of cultural values from previous historic and hegemonic bloc in order to provide a new commodification of the countryside which itself underpins the emergence of new blocs.

(iii) Structured Coherence

The regulatory practices and procedures associated with mode of regulation and societalisation constitute just some of the processes and relations which together characterise the changing specificity of a particular place. It is however places which represent the essential meeting point of social relations, communications and movement. As Massey (1991) puts it:

"what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular focus...each place is a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations (p. 28-29)."

Given the importance of place in these processes of change, we suggest that Harvey's (1985) idea of structured coherence can help us to look at the interacting modes of regulation and societalisation through particular relations and institutions which apply in particular places at particular times. Any such coherence will be structured not only by the prevailing form of regulation, but also by innovations in standard of living, lifestyles, social hierarchies, and sociological and psychological attitudes towards working, living, enjoying, entertaining and the like.

We are not suggesting here that some form of overarching grand theory can instrumentally dictate the structural conditions under which placel always achieve a recognisable coherence at any particular time... from far it. Rather we believe that despite the many and complex nature of contemporary society and the present propensity to emphasise difference and to decompose 'sameness', rural places may be characterised according to the specificity of place and people without claiming that place and those people from wider sets of changing relations. It is this that this paper hopes to provide for some comment on how Harvey sees as structuring localised coherence. Some areas will of course be more coherent than others, and we need to recognise that struggles over production and consumption will greatly influence the nature of coherence achieved. Equally, place-based communities may lead to..."
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It is possible to make use of these concepts in an historic analysis of rural change in any particular nation. For the UK, in recent years, many parallel processes of change have been analyzing and discussed in the context of these concepts in the UK. However, in this case, the discussion is focused on the development of new coherences in rural areas, with particular emphasis on the role of rural areas and the processes of rural change.

(1) The Area's Attractiveness to Capital Accumulation

In many rural areas developed in the world, there have been major economic changes during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s which have contributed to the breakdown of localised rural coherences centred on primary production in agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Nevertheless, these trends of rural de-industrialisation have been accompanied by changes in the nature of rural areas, particularly in terms of the economic restructuring in rural areas, which has been the subject of this paper. The economic restructuring in rural areas has been the subject of considerable research and discussion, particularly in the context of rural areas, where it has been identified as a major factor in the transformation of rural economies.

A rather more worrying trend in rural areas, and yet an increasingly important aspect of rural capital investment, has been the rising of capital investments in rural areas. In this context, the transformation of rural areas can be seen as a process of rural change, which is in turn related to the development of new coherences in rural areas.

(2) Rural Restructuring and the Mix of Urban and Rural Areas

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have significant impacts on localised cohesions...
of particular rural places, whether they change or remain the same. Therefore, although it is important to stress that the changing functions of rural areas are by no means uniform or predictable and that it is certainly important to avoid overgeneralisation, there do seem to be grounds for suggesting that the idea of a socially constructed rurality need not be incompatible with concepts which locate specific places and people in wider sets of changing relations. Indeed it may be crucial that the contrasts and strategies of capital in shaping institutional forms, networks and norms, the impact of the contesting of change in social-political spheres, and the role of cultural factors as a glue in establishing locally coherent characteristics are brought together in our analyses rather than be regarded as belonging to separate philosophical domains.

The second question is more problematic. The rural referred to in terms of functionally distinct geographical space is fast disappearing in many, but certainly not all, parts of rural Europe. Yet new forms of rural living and lifestyle clearly remain both in terms of space which is socially constructed as rural, and in terms of cultural symbolism, extracted at various distances from its rural roots. The degree to which regulation theory can “connect” with the detached signs and significations of rurality is arguable. There certainly seems to be scope for using, for example, different concepts of commodification to bridge this divide, but we suspect that it comes down to different ways of thinking. Thus while some will continue to interpret structuring and coherence, others will continue to interpret unstructured incoherence.

REFERENCES