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New Directions in Rural Studies

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ISBN 978-981-96-3923-6 ISBN 978-981-96-3924-3 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-3924-3>

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For Barbara Figura (1930–2023) and Jim Beckford (1942–2022)

Acknowledgements

The project discussed in Chap. 5 was instigated and undertaken by a team at the Lincoln International Institute for Rural Health (LIIRH) led by Mark Gussy, alongside David Nelson and Jo Blackwell. My thanks to the funders, research participants and Edwin Bacon of the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln, UK, for their **support**.

Friends and colleagues have provided much food for thought, including Maggie O'Neill, Julia Stafford Allen, Mike Ward and—especially—Graham Crow. I work alongside an excellent and supportive team of young sociologists at Lincoln, my thanks to them. The ideas for the second chapter benefitted from the discussions held in a finalists' workshop on the module Contemporary Social Theory and Approaches. Marion Duval at Palgrave has been exemplary in her support and advice from the get-go. Her reviewers were also supportive and constructive.

On the issue of reviewers, I have long been grateful to the reviewer of my first text on rural matters. Without their (anonymous to this day) considerable patience, a third book on rural issues simply would not have happened.

Finally, the book is dedicated to the memories of Barbara and also Jim. Barbara, my neighbour and friend. Jim who was long ago my seminar tutor for social theory. Both, in their different ways, have shaped the arguments that follow.

SH, Norfolk. January 2025.

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1

Introduction

Abstract The introduction offers a summary of the book and its approach. It highlights that a key, reoccurring theme is an analysis of myths that surround the rural—noting that these are not always useful or helpful. The focus of the case study chapters is briefly stated and a sense of the theoretical interests pursued is offered. Whilst the chapters might be read individually, the chapters collectively develop as sense of where new directions in rural studies may lie.

Keywords Rural • Myths • Social construction

The field of rural studies is all the stronger for having a plurality of approaches [...] [both in the] items allowed onto the research agenda and the analytical perspectives adopted in research. (Crow, 1996, p. 362)

One never eats entirely on one's own. (Derrida, 1995, p. 282)

The variety of views in here mean that we will all alight on things [...] that we like, and some others that we dislike. And we will tend to believe the

things that we like and not believe the things that we don't like – that's what people do. But in nature conservation, as in all other areas of human life that depend on doing things, you do need to insert some facts, firm facts, and some analysis, to find the effective way forward. (Avery, 2022, unpaginated)

Rural areas continue to enchant and intrigue. The myths and stereotypes that surround rural areas were targeted and heavily critiqued by Howard Newby (1987) on the grounds that they disguise enduring inequalities and poverty. Forty years on, both the bucolic idyll imagery and acute poverty remain. Country life is the focus of this book and, inspired by Newby, some of its mythic elements are taken to task. Moreover, in doing so the book recognises that how we feel and think about rural places is now far more important than Newby's agrarian-facing analysis permitted.

The approach applied here to unlock both the imagery and lived realities of country life is two-fold. First, to apply the latest academic thinking on rurality. More expressly, useful theoretical ideas in rural studies of recent years are outlined and discussed in the opening chapter. Some leading commentators have identified significant dilemmas and outright concerns but others have viewed there has been much innovation. The cases for optimism and pessimism will be considered. Second, the chapters that follow explore specific activities and/or case studies. All of these are emerging or contentious present-day rural issues but no attempt is made to generalise or to offer a rounded picture of rural life. What the case studies do provide is a mechanism for grounding the more abstract opening discussion and allow theoretical ideas and case study issues/examples to mutually inform one another where possible. Theoretical ideas can help us to see beyond the common sense or everyday point-of-view, to see the metaphorical forest for the trees (no pun intended). So, therefore, some of the theoretical ideas of the opening chapter will be put to work in the later chapters and substantive issues and challenges they discuss. In that sense, the case study chapters in turn become a platform or vehicle for testing or advancing the working theoretical ideas of the former chapters. To paraphrase Kurt Lewin, there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

The book's exact structure is as follows. The first chapter tries to capture key moves in the rural studies literature by expressly focusing on social theory. For commentaries on the field as a whole, other texts are available. The generation of scholars who have reshaped the rural social science research landscape after Newby need acknowledgement. The legacies, impact and ideas of the late Phillip Lowe, Henry Buller, Paul Cloke and Graham Cox are omnipresent across the field. Indeed, the very establishment of rural scholarship has been due to their intellectual leadership. I want also to discuss Bourdieu's conception of field and to what extent it could be material (i.e. be geographic, rather than just abstract/an abstract force field). Emerging here is a wider interest in the corporeal and in the agency of space (or place) itself. The terminology has also subtly shifted in the literature but with some slipperiness. The chapter will conclude by taking stock of the vibrancy of the field vis-à-vis recent decades. To use the language of the UK's much cherished radio Shipping Forecast in its centenary year, the outlook is good and no longer becoming cyclonic.

The chapters that follow discuss substantive fields or fieldwork findings. Newby's *Country Life* (1987) offered breadth (without claim to comprehensive coverage), and in the past I looked to headline issues of the day (Hillyard, 2007). A different tack is taken here, of neither breadth nor rural crises. Indeed, the focus of one chapter is so benign it has yet to be taken as research field meriting serious attention. So, one chapter is emerging and another is niche but polarising. The final substantive chapter offers a more traditional fieldwork report into a rural coastal town experiencing acute rural deprivation but that is increasingly demanding national attention.

Chapter 3, to now be clear, discusses gardening. Gardening has long been with us, yet the global pandemic brought into sharp relief how much we value our green spaces and planting. The chapter will explore how gardening has been approached by the limited existing social science literature. It will then ask what we do know, what we do not and what might be new avenues to investigate? The corporeal—becoming a gardener—begins to emerge as meriting particular comment.

A fourth chapter continues this embodied, experiential theme and discusses the country sport of game shooting (specifically live quarry shooting). Fox hunting has now long been banned without repeal. There has

been no imposition of a ban on shooting but much has changed in recent years. This includes caveats around land use and practices and, too, the physical materials involved (e.g. lead shot in shotgun cartridges). Avian flu has also shone a more intense light on where gamebirds originate from and issues of biosecurity and animal welfare. In those senses, game shooting's future is under question more now than ever but not from the direction it had anticipated twenty years ago. Graham Cox's work and knowledge (both academic and specialist publications) inform my thinking here and his foresight steers the conclusion. This conclusion is less a manifesto for the future of shooting than a realistic assessment of the basis on which shooting may continue.

Leisure activities and use of the countryside provide an indirect segue into the fifth and final chapter. This takes the form of a more traditional report of exploratory pilot fieldwork conducted in one, rural coastal town. The focus was upon healthcare provision but it was the complexities of the town that offered a challenge for rural studies. That is, can the theoretical ideas discussed in previous chapters unlock such special circumstances and its space? The case study town was that of Mablethorpe, on the coast of the eastern county of Lincolnshire in the UK. Characterised by acute levels of rural deprivation and issues of multi-morbidity within an ageing demographic, it also possessed wonderful beaches and skies making it a long-standing tourist destination. The complexities of Mablethorpe test the relevance and applicability of theoretical ideas in rural studies. A brief conclusion pulls these strands together, the commonality being they all feature myths.

Myths and expectations have long swirled around the rural. Newby (1987), as we know, found them particularly unhelpful. Pahl (1984) devoted an entire chapter to exploding the myths and realities of his and his team's six-year case study of Sheppey. Myth, that the isle has long had a stagnant genetic pool and reality, that the local work ethic holds priority over mainland strikes. The tenacity—and variability—of myths makes them noteworthy not least because they are real in their consequences. That is, people hold them to be true and then act on that basis. As early Chicago sociologist W.I. Thomas phrased it, if people define their situation as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Definitions of the situation then on gain momentum—it

is irrelevant if they are right or wrong, it is the moment when they are acted on or applied in everyday practice that counts.

This approach first found in the work of the aforementioned Thomas and informs social constructivism and my own work (Hillyard, 2020). An attempt is made to trace what is a slippery idea and its bearing upon rural studies in the second chapter. A full intellectual exposition is beyond the space permitted here, other than to note two things that I feel are relevant. One, in 1927 Thomas mentions his own rural upbringing (hours spent hunting in the woods with his rifle and dog) (Baker, 1973). Abbott and Egloff (2008) much later go as far to say “the core story of *The Polish Peasant*¹—the disintegration of the rural household and the rise of individualistic personalities in the children who leave it—was the story of William Isaac Thomas himself” (Abbott & Egloff, 2008, p. 253). Second, Thomas’ career was later hit by a scandal in 1918 that mean for a time he was unable to publish under his own name (he later became President of the American Sociological Association). Connected to this is that one of the most influential subsequent scholars to apply the idea, Goffman, was not always so clear on his own influences and sources (Hillyard, 2022). Pahl and Newby both read Goffman.

The myths taken to task in the later chapters appeal to Thomas’ idea.² On gardening, that you have to go to the countryside to find nature. Green spaces are not confined to nature or rural locales. Plus, to begin to question that what is considered nature is itself a social construction that people have to learn to appreciate—what we think of as ‘a garden’ is shaped by more things than our personal proclivities. Myths and realities abound as to what are native species and good practice. No-mow May, home composting and no-dig gardening are all recent trends that belay an understanding gardening as static, neutral or benign.

The social construction of native flora and fauna is also a theme of the next chapter on game shooting. Here, political questions are writ larger but the myth of total social cohesion in rural communities is dispelled. The debate is also enfolded into nostalgia, ritual and also personal

¹Thomas and Znaniecki (1996) [1918–1920, 5 volumes]. Thomas’ most famous work and collaboration.

²It has also been termed the Thomas theorem. Dorothy Swaine Thomas later attributed the term to her husband alone (see Merton, 1995).

identity (Cox et al., 1994; Hillyard, 2016). Yet it is not country dwellers revolting against new urbanite arrivistes but more nuanced. That myth and nostalgia have emotive, personal registers is a commonality to all chapters. The fourth chapter on Mablethorpe adds a passion for place to this affective register. Like Pahl's (1984) Sheppey, there is a sense of boundedness (us and them) but the lived reality of who actually lives and works there is more complex. In the case of Mablethorpe, the big myth is that to be beside the seaside is universally great and that coastal communities (and arguably towns) share many characteristics with rural spaces.

The pivot book format is ideal for these purposes. Pahl (1984) exposed Sheppey's myths only through understanding work and employment on the isle in context. The following chapters unpack and explore contrasting rural issues to do likewise. Those with a less theoretical disposition may therefore wish to look to only an individual chapter. Yet, the intention and outcome have been that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

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2

Country Life and Current Rural Scholarship: What's Wrong with Rural Studies?

Abstract The chapter provides a theoretical framework for the book as a whole. Focusing upon the last two decades, the chapter expressly looks at recent theoretical developments in rural studies. Particular attention is paid to the recent analyses and commentaries of Woods, Phillips and Halfacree. Social constructivism emerges as a consistent and emerging strand, although the current discipline is both cross-disciplinary and multi-paradigm.

Keywords Social theory • Constructivism • Paradigm

In a keynote address delivered in 2022, rural geographer Martin Phillips¹ argued that whereas once rural geography had been a leader in theoretical development, this was no longer the case. The late Paul Cloke had likewise held that rural studies' exporting of ideas was a marker of the field's maturity. Phillips was not alone in making this observation. One task of

¹ Phillips' own contribution and his substantive argument in that address will be summarised later in this chapter.