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The Politics of Rurality – Editorial – Krystallia Kamvasinou and Ben Stringer

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Introduction

Rurality, and the rural landscape more specifically, has always been characterised by ambiguity. For some, the rural can be defined in opposition to the urban, but for others it represents civilization's answer to wilderness through the means of cultivation, farming, or rural housing. If landscape, as Wylie (2007) put it, is 'tension', then rurality is landscape's balancing act between culture and nature; a quality and a blight; a fact and a myth.

The selected essays for this volume have originated from a two-day international conference on Reimagining Rurality held at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the University of Westminster, London, in February 2015. The conference brought together academics and practitioners from a range of disciplines such as rural studies, art, architecture, landscape architecture, planning, geography, and territorial development.

The themed issue sets out to interrogate contemporary and historical representations and designs of rural space in relation to real experiences. It poses questions of location, meaning and value of the rural, and considers emerging physical and cultural manifestations of rurality. At the same time, it questions the mythical dimensions of rurality to critically reassess its appropriation by different groups with diverse agendas. By doing this, it aims to expose the politics of rurality that contest the assumed 'innocence' of the rural. If rurality now signifies change as much as tradition and stability, uncovering the politics of rurality is vital to our understanding not only of planning and design decisions effecting change, but also larger societal and environmental debates.

The Politics of Rurality

The special issue showcases both micro- and macro-politics of rurality. It sets out to add complexity to our understanding of the rural and deconstruct simplified understandings/definitions. Following on the steps of the three-fold model of rural space defined by Halfacree (2006) as rural localities, formal representations of the local, and the everyday lives of the rural, or else Lefebvre's (1991) tripartite notion of space as conceived, perceived and lived, the politics of rurality is used as a productive lens through which emerging counter-discourses and practices of the rural are revealed: those may go

against the grain of dominant policy interpretations and assumed place values and community identities, to question controversial planning decisions or romanticised notions of 'wilderness' and 'naturalness', and open up diametrically opposite views of conflict landscapes and territorial disputes.

In opening the issue, Deirdre McMenemy and Dougal Sheridan examine the relationship between utilitarian built form and the agency of human-made landscape in the vernacular environments of Ireland. They offer a counter-reading to the picturesque understanding of vernacular architecture's relationship to landscape that underpins official rural policy making in Ireland.

David H Llewellyn et al discuss the identity negotiations around the environmental transformation of a physically scarred ex-coal production area in the South Wales Valleys in the UK, characterised by deprivation and socio-economic problems. The paper examines ways that re-ruralisation can be more than just beautification and truly aid the reconnection of communities and their memories of the past with their natural environment - a deeply political issue.

Even in areas that are not directly facing the dramatic effects of deindustrialisation, global issues such as food security can manifest themselves as the ruralisation of the local urban landscape. Recently, a body of literature explores this interest in the city as a food producing arena, and its effects on the cityscape (see, for example, Viljoen and Bohn 2015, Steel 2008). Drawing on this context, Daniel Keech and Matt Reed unearth the social and symbolic dimensions of urban foodscapes in Bristol, UK, as the nexus of organised online networks, often supported by initiatives from local governments, but equally often set against a background of political controversy.

The affective dimensions of rurality, and wilderness more particularly, as mobilised politically by advocacy groups with largely conservative agendas in Britain and the Netherlands, take centre stage in Esther Peeren's piece. Continuing on the theme of diverging political agendas, Peeren seeks to critique the often taken-for-granted affective association of the rural with the peripheral as marginalized, and hence legitimately "wild", and to expose the politics behind it.

Investigating the historical legacy of a politics of rurality, Jessica Lee uncovers historical battles between local campaigners and land managers on London's Hampstead Heath over maintaining its look of 'naturalness' in transitioning from working agricultural land to public space for leisure and aesthetic appreciation; a 'naturalness' that had in fact been shaped by agricultural labour.

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The politics of rurality are taken to the extreme in the last three papers. Tracing a different history, Elissa Rosenberg looks at the “new green landscape” of the kibbutz in Israel, a totally constructed form of communal rurality. While Rosenberg points to the historical debates regarding native versus non-native planting in the kibbutz and their role in the reinvention of the Israeli rural landscape, Yara Sharif opens up the counterpoint of ‘greening’ as a strategy of control and the opposing Palestinian narrative of resistance as developing in the present through informal strategies and landscape interventions. Last, Bernardo Mançano Fernandes and Clifford Andrew Welch attest to the global dimensions of the politics of rurality as represented through the territorial struggles between the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), traditional landowners and agribusiness corporations in Brazil.

Redefining Rurality

What is actually meant by rurality today? The notion of rurality has multiple definitions, perhaps not surprisingly given it’s been the object of immense shifts over time. Rurality as the condition of being rural has undergone a process of aesthetization that has its origins in the picturesque but is promoted through the marketing of second homes to an urban elite, which removes or conceals rurality’s original association with hardship and utilitarian pursuits (as McMenamin and Sheridan suggest in this volume). We are now at a critical point where more pragmatic conceptualisations of rurality, going beyond the visual and understanding the landscape as a productive agent in the development of social, cultural and ecological aspects of rural settlements, are gaining ground (see Stevens 2007).

The visual is also a concern in processes of environmental ‘greening’ of damaged post-industrial landscapes that often hover between the rural and the urban, as Llewellyn et al suggest. Re-ruralisation is not just an empty aesthetic approach but needs to be accompanied by new opportunities for activating places and communities in decline, such as sustainable tourism, renewable energy production and local food growing (Frantal and Martinat, 2013) otherwise it may divide and disconnect communities from a new reality that does not engage with local memories and current needs.

Such division does not play out only in physical space but also in cyberspace. However, here rurality bridges division through ‘hybridity’, as Keech and Reed propose, becoming a social and symbolic point of convergence for diverse urban groups involved with urban agricultural projects and organised through social media and internet networks. This hybridity questions the traditional rural/urban

dichotomy in favour of an information age version of rurality: [a](#)“A spatial inversion of earlier rural discourses of the environmental movement” [as Keech and Reed suggest \(see also Pepper, 1984\)](#)

Beyond the social and symbolic, the affective dimension of rurality makes certain feelings and values stick to the rural, influencing how it can be mobilised politically, as Peeren suggests. But these values are not stable: rurality as wildness can be seen as precarious and threatening, backward and unruly (Woods, 2011, p. 18) or can be idealised and romanticised as “an escape from the pressures of globalisation” says Peeren. Further, rurality’s definition as wildness cannot be uncritically accepted as it ignores, first, agriculture as a social, spatial and environmental practice, and, second, that what is perceived as ‘wildness’ is often, as in the case of re-wilding, man-made too.

Such perceptions of rurality can be traced in the case of contemporary recreational sites in big cities that are the result of years of transition from previous uses. The case of Hampstead Heath in London, for example, currently a public open space, brings to the fore the tensions inherent in definitions of rurality that have to do with the passage of time, the change of use (“from agricultural or mineral use into a primarily recreational site” as Lee confirms) and the diverging agendas and viewpoints of active agents, from conservationists to local government representatives. Which definition of rurality is the most appropriate to preserve on a site that has undergone so much change and why? And how close is that to the authentic experience of rurality it is trying to preserve?

Last, how is rurality defined in areas of territorial conflict around national boundaries and land ownership? “The kibbutz, the Zionist collective agricultural settlement that developed in Mandate Palestine in the early twentieth century, has become a potent symbol of Israeli rurality”, an “iconic ‘green landscape’ ... emblematic of a newly constructed rurality that stood in sharp contrast to its semi-arid Mediterranean context” asserts Rosenberg. It did away with nostalgic village imagery or capitalist urban and suburban expressions, to put landscape, and specifically the garden, at its core. This was not without debate, however, over “native” versus “non-native” plants, the symbolic dimensions of which cannot be overlooked. Rurality hence is not necessarily inherent in landscape but can be constructed and assimilated over time.

In the process of constructing a new rurality, what other ruralities are being erased? Describing how “[t]he land is overlaid by endless lines of division and artefacts of occupation that circumvent Palestinian villages, towns and cities to create voids and marginal spaces”, Sharif speculates on the

danger lying in the Israeli greening strategies that take over the rural Palestinian landscape. Rurality here assumes the dimension of contestation against 'spacio-cide' (Hanafi 2006) and is part of the Palestinian narrative of identity, threatened with erasure through a process of 'cutting and pasting' that applies to both people and vegetation.

As Fernandes and Welch put it, rurality has a social definition that relates to "natural resources, goods, services, cultural values, and social categories like class". Hence, the diversity of landscapes produced by different ruralities is understood as the product of territorial disputes between different models of development, advocated by different actors; that is probably a conclusion that applies to all papers in the issue but its manifestation has nowhere been as vividly obvious as in the study of imagery, satellite and eye level, from the Brazilian landscapes created by disputes among agrarian reform supporters like MST peasants, cattle ranchers and sugarcane agribusinesses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rurality is not a stable category; it is characterised by tension, changes over time and the agency of competing actors. It is subject to politics, counter-politics and diverse agendas, as well as social, ecological, affective, and symbolic interpretations. Such multiplicity requires a plurality of methodological approaches, from action-research and case studies, to historical research in archival documentation, and to internet discourse analysis, as demonstrated by the papers included in this volume. Rethinking the politics of rurality in association with landscape offers much potential for understanding the real-world contested nature of the rural and informing broader discourses about territorial, environmental, social, cultural, economic and governance dimensions embedded in rurality.

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