

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: SUSTAINABILITY AND RURAL SYSTEMS

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1.1 Change and transition in the countryside

Our contemporary rural places are influenced by a myriad of processes and face multiple challenges. Amongst these processes, two demographic trends are influential, namely rural depopulation and repopulation. Looking first at depopulation, in the early part of the twentieth century, the populations of Western nations made a transition from being rural to being predominantly urban and many rural areas continue to experience population decline. Since the mid-Twentieth Century, the depopulation of the countryside has also been a feature of less developed countries and the urbanisation of their societies is also a significant contemporary process. As people have left rural communities, services have been reduced (Joseph, Chapter 11), businesses have closed, and younger people have migrated to cities in search of better educational and employment prospects, thereby diminishing social capital. In these places, the spiral of decline seems inexorable.

Repopulation of the countryside, a process commonly termed 'counterurbanisation' (Champion 1994; Frey 1995; Hugo and Smailes 1985; Kontuly 1998), is the second demographic trend that is significantly influencing rural places, particularly in Western nations. Urbanites, discontented with city living, have sought out opportunities to live in the countryside. Thus, rural places located within commuting distance of cities have become increasingly populated by the more affluent and mobile professional urbanites striving to reconnect with 'community' and 'nature' (Cloeke *et al.* 1998). On the one hand, the selective migration back to rural places has helped to revitalise small towns, prospectively rescuing them from the population decline widely experienced through the mid-1900s. On the other hand, migration into rural areas has fractured pre-existing social structures and infused new values, priorities and demands into rural places. "With the growing heterogeneity of rural actors in terms of both economic and socio-demographic status, their competing claims and perspectives represent an ever widening spectrum. Indeed, there is great and growing diversity within and between rural areas, with a consequent increase in the number of potential conflicts as to the use of space" (Gorton *et al.* 1998: 231).

Over the last two decades, these socio-demographic trends have been exacerbated by neo-liberal economic policies, which have favoured the market over government intervention, and which have led to the 'hollowing out' and resiting of the state's

responsibilities (Agnew 2000; Gibbs and Jonas 2000; Swyngedouw 1997). Reduced subsidies to agriculture and other forms of primary production, the liberalisation of world trade, the re-direction of government spending to urban infrastructure and development, and cuts in expenditure on services are some elements of the political agenda on restructuring that have had an impact on rural places.

Concurrently, globalisation – broadly the rise of transnational corporations, the development of global financial markets, and the internationalisation of production, consumption and labour – has affected the material social and economic conditions of life in rural areas (Le Heron, Chapter 5; Lewis *et al.*, Chapter 6). Primary producers, in developed and less developed countries alike, must increasingly compete in international markets; consumers exert greater influence over producers; value chains have become more vertically and horizontally integrated; and inputs to production are supplied from around the world. There are many consequences for primary producers and the communities of which they are a part: farmers now have much less control over their production decisions and they are more at the mercy of international commodity price shifts (Troughton, Chapter 7).

Amidst these social and economic transformations, the environment has obtained authority as an issue for rural producers and communities. The influences of the environmental agenda are complex, imposing both threats and presenting new opportunities to rural places. Generally, the rising public interest in the environment has translated into greater societal expectations of farmers and other rural producers, for instance in forestry and mineral extraction. In agriculture there is now a strong consumer interest in food quality and food health, both of which pose constraints on and opportunities for farm production. The environmental agenda is also interwoven with the changing ownership of farming, and particularly the growth of industrial agriculture. In an analysis of the industrial hog (pig) farms in the United States, for example, Furuseth (1997) noted significant impacts on both air and water quality, while Troughton (Chapter 7) suggests that the “reconfiguration of livestock and poultry production into a few large concentrations has exploited local land and labour, with attendant problems of water, soil and air pollution”.

In turn, environmental variabilities and change constitute threats to primary production because of their potential effects on production. Alternating patterns of flood and drought have always been an issue for farmers, but the spectre of climate change constitutes a prospectively greater and longer-term problem for many farmers and other primary producers (Chiotti *et al.* 1997; Baker *et al.* 1993; Parry 1990).

These are but some of the influences operating on rural areas. The outcomes are differentiated – some rural localities are favoured by the processes of change and transition, while others are disadvantaged and are experiencing decline. Within rural localities, some people are faring well, while others are not. Additionally, the web of causality is intricate. Many of the processes that are influencing rural places arise at scales well beyond individual localities and lie outside the control of communities (e.g. market prices). But rural areas are not the passive objects of change – there are processes operating within rural areas that both lead in new directions and represent planned

adjustments to influences operating from beyond (Bryant, Chapter 13). It is in the context of the myriad influences and the many and complex outcomes that the question of rural sustainability is situated.

1.2 Rural systems and sustainability

The title of this book requires us to confront two complex and ambiguous concepts – rurality and sustainability. The literature on both is replete with acknowledgements of the conundrums of definition. In the mid-1980s, Cloke (1985) observed that there have been many different approaches to the definition of ‘rural’ and, importantly, that the respective conceptualisations steer our analysis in different directions. He identified three main approaches:

- Rural as a ‘residual’ of urban studies; in other words ‘rural’ is anything that is not defined as ‘urban’
- Rural as a definition based on measurable attributes (e.g. population density)
- The rural-urban distinction as a ‘socio-cultural’ definition.

Thus, in his paper, Cloke suggested that univariate or multivariate statistical approaches had “been the most successful in sharpening the focus of rural studies” (p. 4). As Halfacree (1993) pointed out, however, these indicator-based descriptive approaches relied on preconceived understandings of what rurality actually is; the analytical task then becomes one of identifying the appropriate parameters to define ‘rural’ and then applying them to demarcate locations accordingly.

Halfacree (1993; see also Halfacree and Boyle 1998) identified ‘socio-cultural’ definitions as an alternative approach to the definition of rurality. This approach rests on the assumptions that there is a correlation between social and spatial attributes, making it possible to distinguish between ‘urbanism’ and ‘ruralism’. Over time, there has been an acknowledgement that there is no hard-edged dichotomy to be drawn and instead there has been reference to the notion of the ‘rural-urban continuum’ (e.g. Duncan and Reiss 1976).

Pahl (1966), however, has criticized the concept of the rural-urban continuum, pointing out that it is possible to find elements of ruralism in urban areas and *vice versa*. More substantively, Halfacree (1993) challenged both the descriptive and socio-cultural approaches on the basis that “they demonstrate an erroneous conceptualisation of the relationship between space and society” (p. 26), namely a spatial determinism that suggests social characteristics and behaviour are conditioned by geographic and environmental factors that are associated with the rural and urban.

In the 1990s, rural studies have increasingly been influenced by post-structuralist theory, which has defined ‘rural’ in terms of production-consumption linkages, food networks

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