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'You can get away with loads because there's no one here': Discourses of regulation and non-regulation in English rural spaces ☆

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Abstract

Using qualitative data from a research project investigating contemporary rural identities in England this paper examines the apparently contradictory discursive claims that are made on rural spaces. It looks in particular at the ways in which these are narrated – through the notions of rural space as a site of safety, orderliness and community on the one hand and as a site of freedom, anti-order and non-regulation on the other. While the former is a familiar, entrenched and critiqued representation of rurality, the latter narrative has a more marginal and ambivalent place in the dominant rural imaginary. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of panopticism and heterotopia the paper demonstrates the ways in which the rural is a highly labile concept and emphasises its continual 'unfinishedness'. However, alongside this, the paper suggests that the tensions and contradictions of the orderly and anti-orderly discourses are underpinned by a particular coherency that is driven by senses of community, belonging and self-regulation. While these do not resolve the contradictions of the discursive claims the potency of such drivers are sufficient to produce a particular inclusive spatiality which is able to accommodate and incorporate the different discursive positions and the practices that are associated with each.

Keywords: Rurality; Regulation; Community; Non-regulation; Freedom

1. Introduction

The idea of the English countryside as a picturesque place of safety and neighbourly community is of course a familiar and well-established metanarrative of the rural. It is this narrative that has occupied a particular and entrenched place in the broader national imaginary (Williams, 1979; Sibley, 1995; Bunce, 1994, 2003; Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Bell, 1997; Matless, 1998; Neal, 2002; Cloke, 2004; Neal and Agyeman, 2006). However, whilst far less entrenched, the rural has also been interpreted as a site of freedom and as space in which there is an absence of social intervention and regulation. Despite a body of academic work which has focussed on such interpretations of rurality (Jones, 1997; Valentine, 1997, and the geographies of childhood; Hetherington, 2000, and New Age Travellers for example) this is a less widely commented on, less acknowledged and less valorised cultural narrative of the rural. This paper, using data from a recent research project[1] conducted in three diverse areas of rural England, analyses how these two different and seemingly contradictory purchases on English rural spaces were articulated by the project's respondents. It argues these different interpretations can be understood as evidencing the 'unfinishedness' of the concept of English rurality. Despite the discursive tensions

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between idyllised, regulated, neighbourly rural spaces and 'freer', non-regulated rural spaces where people can 'get away with loads', the paper suggests that these two positions are more entangled than the contradictory status of each would appear to indicate. In our scrutiny of these tensions, and what we argue are their strange moments of coherency, we find Foucault's concepts of panopticism (1977) and heterotopia (1986) useful in unpacking the dynamics and ambivalences involved in the process of belonging to rural spaces.

The paper is data driven. It briefly details the qualitative, focus group based research project from which the data are drawn and then looks at the familiar metanarrative of the rural community. It argues that at the heart of the notion of a rural community are processes of regulation, neighbour knowledge and surveillance. By using the concept of the panoptic we stress the place that social order occupies in the rural community metanarrative and in the regulatory everyday practices involved in the maintenance of that order. The second part of the paper focuses on the linkages between rurality and notions of freedom. Arguing that a particular space can simultaneously contain within it a range of 'extra' spaces, we examine the idea of the heterotopic rural, i.e. as a multiple of spaces in which various notions of freedom are either practised or desired. Although the focus group interviews revealed some generational differences in their interpretations of rural spaces, these differences were not completely fixed or always easily delineated.

2. The research project

In 1992 Philo urged rural geographers to rethink the relationship between the rural and its marginalised, subFSordinated and invisibilised others (Philo, 1992). The debate that followed has been a key shaper in the theoretical and empirical directions of rural studies during the 1990s and 2000s (see for example, Cloke and Little, 1997; Cloke, 2003). However, in their response to Philo, Murdoch and Pratt warned against any simplistic re-focusing of the analytical gaze on 'hidden others' in rural spaces and posed the question 'should we not attempt to reveal the ways of the powerful, exploring the means by which they make and sustain their domination?' (1994, p. 85). Cloke (1997) too has warned against a fetishtic or fashionable gaze on rural Others that fails to address and scrutinise the 'mainstream' and the 'ordinary'. With this debate in mind our research project has been concerned with examining the nature of the relationship between the contemporary English countryside, dominant formations of ethnicity and the 'rurally included'. It mobilises the concepts of community, social change and belonging as ways of unlocking the complexities and entanglements of this relationship. We use the term 'rurally included' to refer to those rural populations who can appear to make a confident, dominant and a seemingly uncontested claim to rural belonging. The project sought to access such 'mainstream' rural populations through the local membership of two key rural social organisations – Women's Institutes and Young Farmers' Clubs. The project involved thirty recorded (and fully transcribed) focus group interviews with members of local Institutes and Clubs which were randomly sampled from across three areas of rural England – Hertfordshire, North Devon and Northumberland. It is important to stress here that the members of the focus groups were voicing their own perspectives and experiences and were not taking part in the research in any official or formal position regarding these two social organisations.

Clearly, it was not the intention of the project to sample a representative rural population, but rather to 'get to' the specific positions taken up by those who 'easily' or 'traditionally' appear, or are *accounted for,* in dominant narratives of the rural.[2] The two organisations have significant differences in their membership particularly in relation to generation and gender. Women, and usually women in the upper end of the age spectrum, present the typical profile of Women's Institute (WI) members. Members of Young Farmers' Clubs (YFC) are aged between 10 and 24 and attract a gender mix. Despite the name of the organisation, members are drawn not just from farming backgrounds. It also attracts young people who have grown up in a rural area but who may have only indirect agricultural connections. However, both the Women's Institutes and the Young Farmers' Clubs contain a number of similarities: they are *the* rural organisations most heavily associated with mainstream English rural culture; they are both intensely local but also have national profiles and while they are both leisure organisations, they both carry a sense of community responsibility, of being at the heart of rural well-being and concerned with rural policy development. These differences and similarities are present, at various moments and in various ways, in the data that we draw on in the paper.

3. The rural as a panoptic site: regulated (and regulating) space

3.1. Rurality and social order

We noted earlier how the notion of a pastoral England is one that lies at the heart of particular imaginings of nation and is predicated partly on 'natural' picturesque landscapes and partly on 'social' community villagescapes. As Bell comments "in Britain the rural idyll is a settled landscape mapping out a social order across a picturesque terrain – especially its construction as 'village England'" (1997, p. 95). Much of the appeal of the rural in contemporary England, as a place of residence and a place to visit recreationally, exists through an inverse relation to the urban. Notions of tranquillity and beauty are integral to the

[2] We have detailed our methodology and fieldwork encounters elsewhere (Neal and Walters, 2006).