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Re-imagining the rural: From rural idyll to Good Countryside

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ABSTRACT

Rural studies have highlighted a rural idyll as something to which many aspire, perhaps as a vision of a good place to live or as a repository of values. But harking back to an imagined past is recognized as normative and power-infused, often serving the interests of the powerful. How far should this nostalgia for an imagined golden age of indeterminate date inform a vision for a desired future? This paper seeks to begin, and indeed to provoke, discussion of what might constitute visions for rural futures, or our collective imaginaries of rural places into the twenty-first century, of a Good Countryside to work towards. What morality might underpin such imaginaries? And how might we approach such a task? One approach might be to employ utopian thinking as a means of identifying and imagining desired alternative futures, drawing upon Levitas' argument for utopia as a form of anticipatory consciousness - the not yet - in contrast to the essentially backward looking rural idyll. Four registers from urban studies - repair, relatedness, rights, re-enchantment - are then taken as a point of departure for deliberation on what morality might underpin a Good Countryside, and whether this might differ between urban and rural contexts. A discussion ensues on how to proceed in practice, both in eliminating evils and in pursuing collective forward dreaming and anticipatory consciousness, for example through place-shaping or networked rural development. Finally, the discussion reflects on what scholarly and practical roles rural sociologists might play in these processes.

> "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread." (Butler, 2004, 29, quoted by Mackenzie, 2012)
>
> "Sociology is opposed to all those who rely upon the shadow of misrecognition." (Duncan, 1990, 184)

1. Introduction

Rural studies have highlighted rural idylls as something which rural inhabitants and 'armchair urban residents' (Bunce, 1994) aspire to, perhaps as a vision of a good place to live or as a repository of values. Williams (1973), Marx (1964) and Short (2006), amongst others, demonstrated how in many countries rural life has been portrayed for centuries as simple, innocent and virtuous as part of a pastoral myth of a lost Eden, divorced from harsher realities of rural life and masking exploitation and oppression. Such rural idylls are now recognised amongst academics as normative and power-infused, in so far as they seek to construct rurality in certain ways. Indeed, authors such as Halfacree (1993) have argued that the rural idyll is a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture, imposed on rural residents. Such constructions are spatially and historically contingent. While there is nothing wrong with nostalgia per se, studies commonly blame discourses of the rural idyll for exacerbating many aspects of rural poverty and disadvantage in the UK and elsewhere (Shucksmith, 2000a; Milbourne, 2004, 2014, 2016; Lagerqvist, 2014), while others question to what extent such an idyll is (or ever was) attainable. Moreover, does the rural idyll represent nostalgia for an imagined golden age of indeterminate date (Short, 2006), a search for enchanted places with idealised qualities today (Savage, 2010), or a vision for a desired future?

As Ward and Ray (2004, 4) have pointed out, referring to the future and the rural in the same breath may appear to be something of an oxymoron when rural areas are so often "cast as inherently traditional and conservative", lying in the domain of the past. Shucksmith et al. (2012, 297) found that "a view of rural areas as idyllic places of peace, as repositories of national identity and yet also as backward areas in need of modernisation continues to dominate popular perception and policy in both the US and UK." Furthermore, as well as being perceived as rooted in the past, rural areas tend to be seen as passive recipients of modernity despite

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abundant evidence of the endogenous or neo-endogenous[1](Lowe et al., 1995) potential of rural areas and of the agency of rural dwellers.

Amongst a number of formal futures studies in the UK, a few focused specifically on the future of rural areas (eg. Henley Centre, 2001), and it is noteworthy that the drivers of change identified were all exogenous. The agency of people in rural areas went unacknowledged, and instead they were viewed as acted upon, whether by environmentalists, big business or by the Government Chief Scientist's perfect storm of food shortages, scarce water and insufficient energy. This is curious when the policies of successive UK governments have encouraged people to engage in place-shaping, parish planning, community planning, neighbourhood planning and now Community Led Local Development (CLLD), in pursuit of a shared vision of how collectively they would like their place to be in the future – a collective imaginary of (particular) rural.

But what imaginary should this be? A rural idyll? Pre-capitalism? Or some futuristic vision of what might constitute a Good Countryside? The purpose of this paper, then, is both scholarly and practical. It is to begin, and indeed to provoke, discussion of what might constitute appropriate visions for rural futures, of our collective imaginaries of rural places into the twenty-first century. What morality might underpin such imaginaries? And how might we (both scholars and publics) approach such a task? This paper refers mainly to the UK, although it is hoped that the issues raised have broader international relevance.

2. Utopia as method

One approach might be to build upon recent interest in reviving utopian thinking as a means of identifying and imagining desired alternative futures, despite the dominant political and intellectual cultures being anti-utopian. Thus, in Levitas' work (2007; 2012), utopia is seen as both prevalent and necessary, though understood as a method rather than as a goal, and accompanied by a recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure.

Levitas' (2007, 290) starting point is that utopia may be understood, following Bloch (1986), as "the expression of the desire for a better way of being." In his book, The Principle of Hope, Bloch talks of utopia as a form of anticipatory consciousness – the not yet – which we may contrast with the essentially nostalgic, backward looking, has been, rural idyll (paradise lost). "For Bloch, utopia as forward dreaming is not an esoteric byway of culture nor a distraction from class struggle, but an indispensable element in the production of future" (Levitas, 2007, 291).

Utopian thinking has been widely critiqued, largely on the grounds that it is unachievable and diversionary, or for its supposed anti-democratic (or totalitarian, socialist or elitist) tendencies. For example, in relation to spatial planning, Gunder and Hillier (2009) warn of a dominance of professional elites relying on expert knowledge and technique, supposedly free of ideological bias; and even where citizens are themselves enlisted through community planning approaches, the discursive power of elites and citizens' misrecognition may mean that participation is self-serving and self-deluding. Thus, "utopias are unachievable ideal objects that stimulate and tease us with their desirability, yet seldom if ever, materially or otherwise, successfully deliver" (Ibid, 43), "serving mainly to suffocate immanence and stifle a potential for moving forward" (Ibid, 50).

On the contrary, Levitas (2007, 298) argues that it is anti-utopianism which serves the interests of powerful elites, not utopianism. The rejection of utopianism as unrealistic, she argues, is a means of neoliberalism (and neo-conservatism) asserting that there is no alternative to their implicit and hegemonic utopias of market and elite power. "All political positions have embedded in them ideas of the good life, and consequently the good society and the principles on which it should be based," and therefore the right's anti-utopian call to pragmatism serves clandestinely to reject all "challenges and alternatives as 'utopian', while placing the ideological/utopian claims of one's own position beyond scrutiny" (Ibid, 298). Instead, engaging in utopian thinking "enables the content of different utopian visions to be brought within the sphere of democratic debate, in a manner that anti-utopian utopianism blocks. Contemporary politics is less utopian than it should be, since it represses and obscures images of the good society and removes them from the realm of public debate and imagination" (Ibid, 299–300).

It is a central argument of this paper that challenging the neoliberal hegemony and encouraging the collective imagining of alternatives is especially necessary during the current crisis of neoliberalism. Antipathy to utopian thinking serves to reinforce the status quo, while a strategy of deliberatively imagining the Good Countryside could help to dislodge that status quo. This is a challenge both for rural studies and for those who live in, or care about, rural places.

It is also important to note that Levitas is not arguing for utopia as goal, but as method, which she terms the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS). Her intention is to imagine the world otherwise, as a means of informing actions and priorities today: there is an intention to change the real world, but with no specific expectation of realising an ideal end-state. "The recognition of necessary failure leads us to the insistence on the provisionality of utopia. It is a method of considering the future, not the stipulation of a goal" (Ibid, 303). To an extent this embraces Gunder and Hillier's call to foster immanence and the potential for moving forward (indeed in later work Hillier argues for a form of strategic navigator), but it is Levitas' argument that this can be assisted by utopia as method (as distinct from utopia as goal). "The advantage of utopian thinking is that it enables us to think about where we want to get to, and how to get there from here …" (Levitas, 2007, 300). While recognising the argument that the piecemeal approach might be safer, she maintains that utopianism assists more radical thinking, allowing us to escape from mere extrapolation, and also promotes more holistic, joined-up thinking. Moreover, utopianism implies a political commitment to transformation.

Amin (2006, 1010) also suggests that utopian thinking may be transformative, enabling us to "look at the contradictions and possibilities of our times as the material of a politics of well-being and emancipation that is neither totalising nor teleological. Such an approach accepts that utopia is not a dream of the attainable, but an impossible place following Foucault, expressing a 'hope in the not-yet'" (ibid) through "an anticipation of alternative possibilities or potentialities" (Anderson, 2005, 11).

The method of IROS has two modes. "Its first, archaeological mode involves reconstructing from fragments the implicit good society embedded in political positions, and thus facilitating critique, engagement and dialogue about these implicit utopias. In its second, architectural, mode, it involves the construction of alternative models of how society might be" (Ibid, 300). As a method for the collective construction of a "provisional hypothesis of a transformed future world, [this] entails a demand for wider

[1] Endogenous implies development from within, often referred to as 'bottom-up' and sometimes as self-help. Neo-endogenous development, or networked development (Shucksmith, 2012), differs in recognising the importance also of external networked actors (notably an enabling state) in enhancing the capacity of local actors to control development and to mobilise assets both within and outside the locality. The significance of this is discussed further below.

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